



Celestial Shadows (Shadow Guardians #10)

Author: *HP Mallory*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Where Light Meets Darkness

My world is about to become more complicated than I ever imagined.

You might know me as the hybrid queen—part angel, part succubus—who stands at the center of an ancient prophecy.

What you dont know is that Im bound to six powerful men who feed my insatiable hunger.

Baron, the vampire who craves my blood as much as my touch. Theren, the Unseelie prince whose darkness calls to mine. Cambion, the fae king whose light heals my soul. Dragan, the fierce gargoyle whose protective instincts make me feel cherished. Pyre, the enigmatic necromancer who guards my heart. Variant, the fallen angel seeking redemption in my arms.

Together, we stand against Abedon and Elioth, the dark forces threatening to destroy everything weve built. As the armies of shadow grow stronger, I must embrace both sides of my nature—the blazing light and consuming darkness—to save the realms.

My power is growing, changing me in ways I never thought possible. With each man who pledges himself to me, I become stronger, more confident in my abilities. But as our enemies close in, I must ask myself: will my love for these six incredible men be enough to overcome the darkness that threatens to consume us all?

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CAMBION

Mortal Ruins

“Abedon is awake? How the fuck did that happen?!” Baron snaps.

He paces the floor, causing me to rub my temples in frustration. Though they all may appear civilized, they are far from tame.

Pyre stands as though he’s ready to interfere if the climbing tension gets out of hand. I, too, stand ready to fight beside Baron or Dragan even if Pyre decides to be diplomatic. At least until Theren shakes his head when our gazes meet across the table.

Theren can most likely sense our father now that Elioth is no longer in the Chasm. He leans onto his elbows and folds his hands on the table. “Though I’m not to be as vulgar as Baron, I believe his question is still valid. How exactly has Abedon awakened?”

To my surprise, Variant is the one who speaks. “When Eilish stabbed me with the soul-stealing blade, she did away with the spell Morrigan used to corrupt me. I was able to break free of Morrigan’s control to finally seek retribution against the Midnight Queen.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Dragan snarls through his teeth. He’s still holding his shadow blade at the ready and the look in his eyes is murderous.

Variant doesn't seem to notice or, if he does, doesn't appear to care. "It means I killed the Midnight Queen."

"Is that true?" Dragan says as he faces Silvanus.

"It is," Silvanus says with a quick nod.

"As if we can trust you or your word," Baron starts but Variant interrupts.

"Morrigan died by my hand. And that is the truth." Then he tosses a dagger forged from enchanted ice onto the table. I see Baron flinch and have no doubt he's reliving the moment of his own death.

"What is this?" Dragan demands.

Variant faces him. "The blade with which I killed Morrigan," he says.

"No one has responded to the question of why Abedon is awake," Eilish points out.

Variant looks at her then and something passes between the two of them.

Something I struggle to give words to, but it's something deep, all the same.

"When I killed Morrigan, her death weakened the spells holding Abedon captive. The only thing holding him within those walls now is Silvanus's spells. "

"Abedon has already begun awakening his disciples," Silvanus adds.

Then he steps in front of Eilish, only to be blocked by Dragan and his gargoyle companion.

The illusive god isn't fettered by this and speaks to Eilish by simply ignoring their presence.

"What Variant says is true. Morrigan has been slain and the prophecies are obsolete." Silvanus waves his hand and casts an illusion in the room.

Suddenly we stand at the heart of Variant's throne room, watching as Variant and Morrigan battle for power.

I look to Variant.

He is my nemesis. He's the bane of my existence and yet I can't find the strength to hate him as I once did.

My entire being is shaken to its core. I face my brother and he appears weak, pale to the point of worry.

As the illusion breaks, I push myself beneath Theren's arm and help him from the room while the others are distracted.

Theren groans in pain as we hobble to his temporary quarters.

None of us have real rooms just yet as the Vindication struggles to find resources.

I lay Theren on his bare bones cot and sit beside him.

My magic probes along his body, searching for wounds or signs of lingering hexes.

Theren shivers. His eyes open and his golden gaze is shocking in the pale light coming through the window.

Theren has the same shade of hair as our father, but his locks are cut short where Elioth wears his in a long braid.

If not for the faint features of our mother, Theren would be the spitting image of the former Unseelie King.

But as Theren shares Elioth's appearance and aptitude for forbidden magics, I am the one who inherited our father's pride and temper.

"What's on your mind, brother?" Theren croaks.

"We once believed the gods were jesting when the courts appointed us to our destined thrones. You were humble and adventurous, always kind in your actions. I often wondered why you hadn't been given the gift of light, why I'd become the King of Nature when I could hardly stand being in the forest. I much preferred the palace where I could read my books in the library."

"And I, the forsaken son of our dark lord, was the one who climbed trees and fell in love with an angel who dwelled in the sacred glade," my brother chuckles in response. "Though I was the elder, I envied you, Cambion."

Guilt settles in the gaping wound in my heart.

"I swear I was unaware of what Elioth put you through. You were so good at hiding it. All I saw was naive arrogance and youthful rebellion. You endured the weight of his wrath and protected me at every turn. And, in my ignorance, I tattled to father whenever you snuck out of the castle."

"Maybe so. But if not for your tattling, I would never have met Eilish." A smile appears on Theren's face as I work to heal him. "I took one look at her and felt the pull of fate."

“I wish I could say it was the same for me,” I reply hesitantly. “When Eilish came to me, in hopes of sparing you the trouble of protecting her family, I was... not myself and I saw her as an opportunity more than a person.”

“Go on.”

“I didn’t treat Eilish with respect. I fucked her under the guise of promises I was unsure I could honor. The blood of her mother and sister are on my hands. I don’t know how she ever forgave me.”

Theren sucks in a mouthful of air as his injuries knit themselves back together. He sighs in exhaustion and collapses against the cot. “You tried to protect them, Cambion. You went back to the Glade to defend it. It’s not your fault you were too late.”

“True, but it is my fault that I took her memories.”

Theren shakes his head. “Eilish knows you took her memory to spare her the pain of such a great loss. Your plan was misguided, but your intentions were pure.”

“Partly. I also took her memories so she wouldn’t realize I was the reason...

why she lost her family.” I sigh deeply.

“I can only hope to make amends with her and the others, but also you,” I reply honestly.

“There are many things in our pasts I can’t make right, but I hope to one day earn your forgiveness.”

Theren lays flat on the cot, staring up into the rafters.

“You will always have my forgiveness, Cambion. The road ahead will be difficult for us to navigate for obvious reasons.” He grows quiet for a few seconds.

“Elioth carefully bred two sons to ascend the thrones of the fae courts so he would never be without power. Turning against him twice may require everything within me.”

“What happened that day?” I ask, because it was never clear to me what had taken place.

“I am... too weak to delve into it now,” he says. I understand.

“Dragan and Baron seem keen on protecting Eilish as fiercely as I would,” he says suddenly, changing the subject. “I admit it’s... surprising.”

“Why?”

“I’ve loved Eilish for a long time and I never imagined others would live up to my standards of care.”

“We... all love her... though I’m not sure each of us has admitted it,” I say. “For myself, the timing just never seems right.”

“So, you do love her?”

I stand and walk over to the window that overlooks the courtyard. “Yes.”

“I know it isn’t quite in your nature to love. Aima was an exception and you didn’t love again after her... until Eilish.”

“I feel... that you and Silvanus have a claim on Eilish because you were the first to

love her. But I fear if you were to ask me to honor that claim and shun my feelings for her, I wouldn't be able to.

"I turn to look at him then. "Our bond as brothers means the world to me, Theren, but there isn't a thing I wouldn't do for her. "

Theren sits up and props his back against the wall as he smiles.

A tendril of hair falls over his brow. For a moment, I see no pain in his eyes, only childlike humor and I'm thrilled for him.

Theren deserves whatever happiness he can find within this darkness.

He shakes his head and shrugs as he says, "Such selfish love she inspires."

"I believe we've earned a bit of selfishness, don't you?"

"Whether we've earned it or not, I intend to bask in hedonistic debauchery."

BARON

Mortal Ruins

The dagger slips between my fingers before I can catch myself. The blade goes right for Variant's head, but Pyre's magic stops it midair. I turn to the necromancer with disappointment in my gaze. Whether the others are beginning to accept Variant for killing Morrigan has nothing to do with me.

I want him dead.

I want him on the floor writhing in pain until every fiber of his being screams for it all to end in a bloody surge of violence to rival the wrath of the gods.

But it's the anger in Eilish's gaze that clears the red haze in my vision.

"Enough," she hisses, glaring at me until I return to my seat.

Silvanus stands before us with a surprising amount of composure.

Fuck him.

He's just as useless to me as Variant. Silvanus gestures for Variant to take a seat as well. The False King does so without taking his eyes off Eilish. I bare my fangs at him in warning. A voice in my head begins to whisper.

If you don't control yourself, The Veil will become restless.

Pyre... how the fuck are you in my head?!

My gaze flickers over to where he sits beside me and the fucker just smirks.

The bond. I realize.

He nods slowly and I focus on containing my rage against Variant and Silvanus long enough to hear what they have to say.

"When Abedon and Elioth drew on the Chasm and summoned the Singularity, it nearly destroyed the realms and everything in them. They led an army of black riders and creatures of untold darkness into the home of the gods," Silvanus explains.

"I was there. I watched as Abedon slaughtered them with his power and thirst for

vengeance. When Abedon sat on the throne, I heard a prophecy. One that spoke of the rise of a new god, a supreme deity, and I knew he had to be stopped.”

“So you went to Morrigan?” Dragan’s lip curls in disgust.

“Yes, for she had been with me the day of my ascension. Though she loved Abedon, she knew she could never rise to her full potential with him in power.” Silvanus glances around the room, looking at each of us as though he can’t fathom why we’d been chosen.

“I wrote the spells. I crafted the oath that brought you together. Morrigan simply had to choose those who would maintain the balance.”

“She chose wrong,” I say.

Silvanus shakes his head. “No, I don’t believe so.”

Dragan stands with a huff. “Look around you, asshole. The worlds are in ruins because of Morrigan and Variant. At least Theren’s manipulation was a result of him wanting to protect Eilish. Variant went to Morrigan willingly. He sought her council because he thought...”

Variant stands, meeting the furious gargoyle head on.

“I went to Morrigan because I was suspicious. While you, Cambion, and Baron were happy to sit on your thrones and rule your kingdoms, I smelled the wickedness brewing beneath our noses. Morrigan was weakening us and all of you failed to see it.” He looks over at Eilish and slides back into his seat, never once breaking the connection between them.

It infuriates me that there’s a connection between them at all.

“The people were starving,” Variant continues. “Disease spread through the lands, running rampant and killing thousands. Crops died, children were born without heartbeats, and fires burned down the forests. Where is the balance in that? Where is the peace we were promised?”

Silvanus raises his hand to stave off Variant’s rant. “You failed the realms, that much is true. However, when I look at you, I don’t see broken kings of lost realms, I still see warriors willing to fight so evil in these worlds will be contained once more.”

This time it’s Eilish who contradicts him. “Destroyed. When we fight Abedon, we won’t be containing him again. They may have failed as kings, but you failed as a god and Morrigan failed in her duties as a teacher.”

That knocks some of Silvanus’s confidence a little and I couldn’t be more pleased with Eilish.

“I was named Queen by people who strive to live peacefully within these walls, which means the responsibility of keeping them alive falls to my shoulders,” she says with a swell of pride. “There are others within the realms who will also look to me for answers once word spreads.”

Silvanus bows his head. “Then we will follow your order, Queen Eilish.”

“Abedon and Elioth must be destroyed if we’re to have any hope of a prosperous future,” she says, facing each of us in turn.

I reach over and take her hand. Variant eyes the interaction with a look of distaste. Good. I hope it burns him up inside.

“Though I may be the voice of the people, that doesn’t mean I won’t need help. I value all of your opinions and seek the knowledge of your experiences,” she

continues.

I press a kiss to her knuckles as Aima sits stiffly beside Variant.

Aima leans against Kolvar to put as much space between her and the false king as possible.

I envy her her anger and a mate who reflects the same anger.

If I want to remain by Eilish's side, I must at least tolerate Variant.

It will take all of my patience and, even then, I'm not sure I'll ever be cordial with the man who murdered me.

"I've dealt with Elioth before," Eilish announces. "He's a cruel and powerful sorcerer." Eilish squeezes my hand. "Silvanus, you've fought Abedon."

"Yes," he says with a nod.

"You say Abedon and Elioth will rise, that they're already reaching out to their followers," Eilish continues. "How should we prepare?"

Silvanus winces. "It pains me to admit that I do not know."

I... feel for him. I understand what it feels like to be uncertain, to question oneself to the point of paranoia. Before Pyre, I didn't trust anyone. Now I even find myself trusting Theren.

Perhaps I'll prove myself wrong again. Perhaps I'll pity them and learn to see beyond Silvanus and Variant's mistakes... or perhaps cows will rain down from the heavens. The latter seems more likely, I must admit.

Interesting visual, Pyre whispers in my mind.

Shut up.

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DRAGAN

Mortal Ruins

My instincts cause me to stir when I sense the sun rising.

But it's Myerdoth's presence that forces me to awaken.

The gargoyle shouldn't be moving at sunrise.

For a moment, I fear we may be under attack and that he's come to warn me.

But my panic subsides when I see the cuff around his wrist. A cuff which allows Myerdoth to freely walk in the sunshine.

I smile at him. "Tell me, how does it feel to walk in daylight?"

Myerdoth scowls down at the runed metal. "It hurts my eyes."

I bite my tongue to withhold my laughter. "Yes, it does."

"I thought to watch the coming of dawn, but my vision blurred."

"You will get used to it."

He nods. "I've come to tell you your presence is requested in the war room," Myerdoth announces. I take in a big breath and nod, moving to follow him.

DRAGAN

Mortal Ruins

“I need Zir’s assistance if our artificer isn’t needed by Cambion,” I announce as Variant is shackled and escorted out of the war room.

I suspect it takes a great deal of restraint for the powerful being to allow himself to be restrained after just gaining his freedom.

But we must be sure he won’t be a danger to the people in our care.

The people who have lost everything due to Morrigan’s hold on Variant.

We won’t allow his actions to go unpunished.

If we’re lenient, they may see us as weak and unable to protect them.

The last thing I want is for them to question Eilish’s judgement so soon after naming her their leader.

Where I failed as a king, Eilish has the strength to succeed.

Eilish releases Baron and allows him to leave with Pyre and the others.

She gives me a look that causes my cock to twitch.

I lean over to Myerdoth. “I must consult with our queen on matters of the ritual. Rest this morning and meet with me in the courtyard tonight.” Ever the loyal companion,

Myerdoth doesn't question me.

He leaves with the others, closing the door on his way out.

It shuts with a bang that echoes through the room.

I lick my lips as Eilish turns to face me, lust festering in her gaze.

"I've missed you, Dragan," she purrs, causing me to swell in the confines of my trousers.

"And you've accomplished your mission to obtain the Grimoire.

Don't you think you deserve something...

special? Perhaps a gift from your queen? "

"I believe I deserve exactly that," I respond.

She climbs into my lap and trails her tongue along the curve of my ear. Then she nips the tip and runs her hands down my chest. Those tantalizing fingers tease the throbbing length of my member through the fabric.

A low growl emits from my lips before I pull her in for a kiss.

Her wicked tongue swipes against my teeth before swirling with mine.

I tangle my fingers in her hair and taste the sweetness of her mouth.

She sucks my tongue and I yank her back.

I inhale sharply as her deft hands release me from the chafing cloth.

Long, elegant fingers wrap around my length and stroke from the base of my cock to the leaking tip.

She moans at the sight of my seed and I know she hungers for me.

“No,” I whisper. “Perhaps tonight I will let you taste me, but not now.”

She shivers at the dark tone of my voice as I slip my hand inside her pants. Strong thighs tremble at my touch and I tease the tip of my finger against her entrance. Eilish’s eyes flutter shut.

“Look at me.”

I thrust up into her hands. She releases me, lifting up to push her pants down.

I stare at the glistening folds of her sex as she bares herself to my gaze.

She climbs back into my lap and I hiss as her heat brushes against my erection.

She bites down on her lip as I hold her hips and slowly lower her onto my cock.

I feel the way her muscles stretch to accommodate my invasion, swelling and convulsing as I slide against her walls.

Eilish’s breath hitches and she begins to ride me. Her hands move to my shoulders, using them as leverage as she bounces and grinds. “You feel so good,” she moans against my cheek. “And I’ve missed you. I’ve missed... this.”

When her rhythm falters, I lift her higher before yanking her back down. I thrust up to

meet her descent and rock my pelvis. Her back arches. I release her hips and tear open the front of her tunic. Succulent breasts bob within her corset. I lean forward and suck the beads of sweat from her flesh.

The pull of her hunger leeches the strength from my body even as her magic fills me with renewed energy.

I stand and press her chest against the table.

Eilish gasps as I enter her from behind.

My palm rests at the center of her back, holding her steady as I pound into her with relentless thrusts.

She reaches beneath the table and I feel her fingers prodding between her folds.

I lean forward and bite the back of her neck.

Brutal slaps fill the air. My wings open, spanning the length of the war room as I brace my boot against the table and sink deeper inside my woman.

Eilish screams and I feel the rush of her climax.

With a rapturous growl, I follow her into oblivion.

My softening cock slips free from her clenching channel and Eilish cleans us with a few muttered spells.

She tucks me back into my trousers and kisses me before I leave her.

DRAGAN

Mortal Ruins

I enter the courtyard as the sun disappears behind the tall structures in the distance. Myerdoth and Zir stand at the center, neither of them speaking a word to one another as I approach.

“Thank you for seeing us, Zir,” I say in greeting. “We know you’re working on things of great importance, but we may require your assistance. The language used in the Grimoire is one we’ve never encountered.”

The very short artificer crosses her arms and follows us beyond the walls. We venture past the decrepit buildings and onto a patch of sand that lays along the coast. Waves crash against the shore as rays of silver moonlight reflect on the waters.

Myerdoth gathers the stones needed to create more of our kind.

Zir suggests we start with a dozen or so.

I’m eager to grow our numbers, but I agree.

The artificer measures the distance between each stone and I use my power to carve the symbols required by the spell.

Myerdoth carves the features and characteristics of each gargoyle, making them unique in their own right.

I remove the pouch from my belt and hand the artificer the ingredients for the ritual.

Myerdoth stands beside me and Zir hands me the words to the spell.

Myerdoth channels his power into me as I read the spell aloud.

Zir continues to draw markings in the sand, scientific symbols that beautifully meld with the magic runes.

My power builds, flowing into the spell until the stone begins to glow.

Hassari runs through the amber grasslands between the mores and the palace.

She places her hand on the stone and whispers for the ancient guardians to rise, to protect her from the soldiers.

Blue light spills across the land, searching for her as the coven fights against the invaders.

Tears flow from Hassari's eyes. She turns to face her enemies.

Black riders with flocks of Obuqui birds approach.

There is nowhere to run. Her sisters have fallen...

The clouds part, washing her face in brilliant luminescence. A smile forms on her face as she stares up at the moon. Magic flows through her.

Hassari slams to her knees and presses her hands to the sodden earth.

She calls to the stone, to the rock, willing it to rise.

The ground trembles and bulges beneath her palms. A hand claws its way out of the mud.

Lightning streaks across the sky as a being of great strength climbs to its feet.

Wings, proud and erect, seem to span the length of the field.

The world shall tremble with fear, for a new race is born.

My eyes open and I find myself on the ground. Myerdoth stands over me, a worried expression pinching his features. He helps me stand.

Zir shakes her head and points to the stone figures. No life reflects in their eyes.

We've failed.

The hope I had once dared to feel defeats me.

"Leave them," Myerdoth says. "Perhaps their existence will help others remember our race long after you and I have left this world, my friend."

EILISH

Mortal Ruins

I stand in front of Theren's bedchamber door in a torn tunic that hangs loosely from my corset. The door opens and Cambion's eyes devour me from head to toe. I need his light. But now is not the time.

Cambion's arms brace against the door jamb.

He leans down to brush a kiss against my lips.

I wrap my arms around him and he drags me into the room.

He walks me over to the side of the bed.

Theren's bare chest catches me by surprise.

The roguish smirk on his face is breathtakingly handsome.

I hate that I must be the one to take that smile away.

"Elioth has risen," I say. "That means he may come after you both."

Theren's gaze drops.

He unfolds his legs from the bed and stands.

I force myself to look away as he pulls his shirt on.

Cambion's presence is soothing. It helps stave off my hunger, because he fulfills me in a different way.

Just the touch of his hand brings me peace and instills light within my spirit. Theren walks over to his mirror.

"Elioth is powerful. His time in the Chasm will have only made him stronger." He reaches inside the enchanted glass. His eyes become as dark as the mirror's surface.

"What do you see, brother?" Cambion asks.

Theren jumps back with a grimace. "Elioth is in Oronrel. If the Cockatrice is a follower of Abedon, then Elioth will have the Unseelie army in the palm of his

hands.”

“Should we be worried about an attack?” I ask.

Theren seems unsure. “I was able to do serious damage to The Veil with my army and I was fighting against Morrigan’s spell, all the while. Elioth is acting of his own free will in service to Abedon. Imagine what he will be capable of...”

“I haven’t forgotten what happened in The Veil,” I reply. “And I know how malicious your father can be. Do you think you can watch him without him realizing?”

“It’s risky, but I can look in from time to time. The problem is that if Elioth catches me watching him, he can use his own catoptromancy to find us. Mirror magic is very dangerous.”

Cambion moves to Theren’s side. “Only do what you’re comfortable with.

Don’t push yourself, you’re already wounded and not up to your full potential.

” He places his hand on Theren’s shoulder.

Theren turns to me and holds his hand out, tugging me into the space between them.

I feel Theren’s warmth against my chest and Cambion’s behind me.

They fill my senses and I allow myself to melt against them. Strong arms circle me. Cambion’s lips caress the back of my neck where Dragan bit me. “So rough,” he whispers. “You deserve softness as well, Eilish.”

Theren moves closer, his lips brushing the opposite side of my neck. Chill bumps prickles across my skin. Calloused palms slide across the skin peeking beneath the

edge of my corset... a knock on the door interrupts. Theren and Campion step back as Noni enters the room.

The little house brownie clucks her tongue in disapproval at the sight of my tattered clothing. “You can’t go to suppers like that! You a queen now! Noni make you a new dress. Very pretty with flowers and lace and pretty little bows. Come! Noni make you pretty clothes.”

Noni grabs my hand and leads me away.

I hear Theren’s frustrated sigh and grin.

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BARON

Mortal Ruins

Golden flecks of light reflect in my eyes as I watch the sun set on yet another day.

I taste salt on my lips as the damp wind blows.

My mind is thoughtless beyond aimless observations and that's how I like it.

Not thinking... not feeling anything at all is better than the gut wrenching agony I felt when I looked into Variant's eyes—the eyes of my murderer.

And now some sick twist of fate tells me we need him, that we won't survive this fight without him.

That Eilish won't survive this fight without him.

“Mind if I join you?”

I look up and see Dragan standing over me. “No. Do as you please.” He drops to the edge of the wall on my left, legs dangling over the side. I see it in his eyes that he's troubled. “The ritual?” I ask.

Dragan shakes his head. “It didn't work. We followed everything in the book.”

“Give it time,” I suggest. “It may just need a few nights to take hold. Hell, I was

buried for a hundred fucking years before I climbed out of that hole in the ground.”

“You don’t seem like the sort to have faith.”

I chuckle. “Not faith. Experience. Coming to life is difficult. Awareness sets in long after the heart starts beating. Being alive and living are two different things.” I watch a group of mages continue the construction of the eastern wall as a group of scouts return in trucks.

“You’ve changed,” Dragan says. “For the better.”

I nod because it’s true. “Everyone gets a fresh start. You’re no different. I got mine when Pyre took me under his wing.”

Dragan scrubs a hand over his face and groans.

“The last time I was charged with the responsibility of leading my people, they were slaughtered. Killed by the man who now rests in that tower.” He points to the tall structure just as a shadow passes by the small window.

“If not for Eilish, I would have taken his head when he first appeared.”

“My thoughts exactly. But... I suppose we do stupid things for love.” I’m surprised by my own confession.

“I’ve often wondered if our attraction to her... if it has anything to do with the balance?” he asks.

“It’s possible. You, Theren, and I call on the darkness to fuel our powers. Variant, Cambion, and Silvanus draw on the light. Pyre is neutral.”

“Why neutral?”

I shrug again. “He’s a necromancer, a bender of forbidden arts, but his kindness and compassion set him apart. I guess all of us together is a balance in and of itself. At least, it feels that way. I’m not sure if this is exactly what fate had in mind, but I’m alright with it.”

“I haven’t always been okay with it.”

“You’ve mostly been not okay with it,” I laugh.

He nods. “But I’ve grown to understand Eilish isn’t mine to possess alone.

She needs us all.” He snorts and snatches the rock from my hand.

“I didn’t remember Pyre from the first Great War because my mind was being manipulated by the succubae queen, but I’m glad he’s one of us now.

He fits with Eilish so well and I’ve come to value him as a friend. ”

“Yes, I agree,” I say in response. “Sharing this burden with him has brought us even closer than before. Fuck, it’s crazy to even contemplate what our lives would be if the bond hadn’t worked. To lose Aima and Pyre... we wouldn’t have recovered from a blow like that.”

“I’m sure they’re glad to be alive as much as we are glad they are.”

I nod. “Death isn’t the end, but it hurts like a son of a bitch.”

Dragan laughs and waves to Myerdoth. “This is where I leave you, my friend. I hope you find the answers you seek on this wall.” He claps me on the shoulder and I’m

stunned for a moment by the comradery in our exchange.

It's as though none of the animosity that separated us before remains, that we're free to act as though we have no past hanging over our heads.

Myerdoth and Dragan take to the sky and I watch them.

I look up to the tower where Variant is being held and will myself to remain impassive. The bloodlust within my veins is frightening. Pyre is right. I must control my anger. Getting lost in my rage would be much too easy now that the false king is within reach...

I must show restraint.

FLUMPH

Mortal Ruins

"Fuckin' hell! If I gots to serve one more bowl o' soup or pass out another damn blanket, I'm blowin' this place up.

" My poor little wings drag behind me as I enter the room for the little fae to sleep in.

Noni on her bed sewin' some shit. I hops up to see what that all about.

She lookin' real focused-like with her tongue hangin' out the side o' her mouth.

"What the hell you makin'?"

"Noni make a dress."

“Who fer?”

“The queen, silly!” She roll her big, freaky eyes at me.

“Ain’t she doin’ just fine with her giant clothes? Why she need a dress?”

“Because,” Noni say. “All queens need a dress. They goes to big parties and fancy suppers all the time. Noni want our queen to look real pretty when she do.”

I damn near fall on my ass when she say that. My hairy belly bouncin’ up an’ down ‘cause I laughin’ so hard. “She ain’t goin’ to no suppers! We in the middle o’ a war, for fuck’s sake! Unless she plan on havin’ a fuckin’ picnic on the battle fields, she’ll ain’t gonna be needin’ no dress.”

Noni pout with her bottom lip out. “But... Pretty need a dress.”

“Fine. Waste yer time with that dumb shit. I puttin’ my time to good use.”

“How, Mr. Flumph?” she ask.

“Well, I ain’t sure yet. But I gonna be real fuckin’ important when I figures it out.”

She tilt her head to the side, blinkin’ them big ol’ eyes. “You don’t know, do you, Mr. Flumph?”

“Knows what?” I pickin’ my teef with one o’ my nubly little fingernails, lookin’ over at the other little fae. They ain’t as important as I is. All they do all day is help the giants. Well, I gots quests of my own now. I’m a fuckin’ warrior...

“Noni thought Mr. Flumph would be upset because the naughty king is here.”

“The naughty... WHY THE FUCKS IS VARIANT HERE?!” I storm outta the room an’ fly over to where Theren is. He a dick, but he ain’t as big a dick as Variant. Nobody as big a dick as Variant. “Where he at?” I yell real loud.

“Who?”

“You know who!”

Theren laugh at me and point up to the tower.

With all my strengths, I fly right up there and pops my little head in through the window.

Sure enough, I find King Dick of all Dicks chained to the bed.

He look over at me an’ I lose my shit. Next thing I knows, my fists punchin’ him in the face.

He don’t seem to be gettin’ very hurt by it, but I can see the guilt in him’s eyes. He lookin’ real sad-like.

I don’t fuckin’ care.

The door open an’ Cambion come in with Pretty on him’s heels. She toss me off the bed but I be right back in Variant’s fuckin’ face for more. Cambion grab me by the wings an’ I don’t like that one bit.

“Enough, Flumph. Variant must be judged for his actions before he’s punished.”

“I’m fuckin’ judgin’ him alright! He’s guilty! He’s the guiltiest asshole I ever seen!”

“He was bewitched by Morrigan. You know this,” Eilish argues.

“Well, bring her out too. I’ll fuck ‘em both up!”

“Morrigan is dead.”

I stop mid-swing, holdin’ my chubby little fists up. “What?!”

“Variant killed Morrigan when he gained his freedom. The spell is broken and Abedon has awakened,” Pretty say.

All o’ my anger simmers down a bit. I still hate him, don’t gets me wrong.

I still wants to punch his face in, but I ain’t as mad as I was.

“Fine. I ain’t killin’ him just yet then.

” I climbs back on the bed and get in him’s face again.

“Me an’ the little fae are gonna be watchin’ you, King DickCock.

Just ‘cause you killed the Mother Heifer don’t mean we trusts you.

Step outta line and we’ll rip yer balls off. ”

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EILISH

Mortal Ruins

I walk Flumph back to the window and make sure the feisty sprite gets to safety before I turn towards the bed.

A tingle of awareness cascades over my skin as I look to the corner where Silvanus leans against the wall.

His smile is downright sinful. The room is warm, filled with the vibrancy of his and Variant's light magic.

Cambion, Variant, and Silvanus... they call to me.

Each thrum of their heartbeats echoes within my bones.

I glance at the bed and see Variant's hips roll.

"So hungry," Silvanus says deeply.

I look at him and take a deep breath. "That isn't... that isn't why I came here."

"But you need it, all the same," Variant answers.

Silvanus nods. "We are drawn to your hunger, Eilish. I can taste you in the air and my loins burn with the need to claim you."

My hunger draws Cambion closer. He holds back, not yet reaching for me, but I can see the desire in his gaze.

“You haven’t fed from the light magic in a while,” he says.

Silvanus touches his leather breeches and strokes himself to hardness. I’m entranced by the motions of his arm. The flexing muscles that ripple along his body cause me to moan as he pleasures himself to the sensation of my lust licking against his self-control. Variant releases a whimper.

I step back, brushing against Cambion unintentionally.

He hugs me to him and I melt in his embrace.

There’s no desperate heat or cloying intensity.

Cambion is patient. He holds me with love and gently pushes my hair aside to whisper against the column of my throat.

Variant watches. His luminous eyes hold my gaze unblinkingly.

There’s envy and guilt as well as affection.

He wants me to love him.

Variant desires my loving touch as much as he wants to bury himself in my heat.

And, yet, it’s Cambion’s arms around me.

The elf slides his hands along the curve of my hips and brushes a feather-light touch to the opening of my robes.

When Theren told me of Flumph's irate behavior, I was so eager to come to Variant's defense that I hadn't bothered with proper clothing.

None of them seem to mind. Cambion's fingers unlace the tie around my waist.

The whisper of fabric sounds louder than usual in the small room.

I gasp when I feel the warmth of Cambion's hands against my abdomen.

He grazes my skin lightly, moving to urge my robe off my shoulders.

It slips to the floor with a graceful flutter.

I hear Silvanus groan and my eyes drop to where he works open the front of his trousers.

I lick my lips and he grips the base of his erection in a firm grasp to hold off his release.

"Those eyes..." he hisses.

Cambion protests with a growl as I step out of his reach and approach the bed. Variant's eyes widen. I climb onto the barren mattress, spreading my thighs to accommodate the width of his hips. He shivers as I lean forward to trace the muscles of his chest with my tongue.

"You... you don't want me, Eilish. If this is to be my punishment, then so be it. But don't... don't torture us both with this moment only to deny me the privilege later."

"I'm exhausted, Variant," I whisper. "You took advantage of me when I was weak and couldn't defend myself in fear of your retaliation."

Now that I have you in my power, I find I don't want to hurt you at all.

Instead, I want to drain every last drop of pleasure from your body and feed on the light within your soul until I've had my fill. And you will lay here and endure it."

I feel him twitch beneath me and smile.

"You like that? You want me to use you for my pleasure?" My hips roll of their own accord and Cambion gasps behind me.

I peer at him from over my shoulder and see him pulling his tunic over his head.

My hands venture along the ridges of Variant's muscles as I take in the sight of Cambion's glory.

He drops his breeches to the floor and steps out of his boots.

Variant strains beneath me, arching to feel just a little more of my touch.

I feel intoxicated, drunk off their desire... and yet, I feel a distinct difference with them than I do with Baron or the others.

I want them to desire me, yes. But I also want their affection, their love and adoration.

My hands leave Variant. I cup my breasts and display myself to their gazes.

And they feast on me. Their sighs and gasps fuel my bravery as I slowly, teasingly, run my hands along my abdomen.

Cambion holds his breath as I dip my fingers between my folds.

Silvanus takes a step towards the bed, only to stop himself.

The fragrance of my hunger fills the room as slickness covers my fingers.

Variant squirms as his eyes follow the subtle movements of my fingers.

Power... this is power. They worship me even as I deny them the right to touch me.

Such patience should be rewarded.

My glistening hand brushes against Variant's cock.

He strains against his shackles once more, a hushed plea on his lips.

I know Cambion is watching as I lower myself onto the rigid length of the man he once deemed his enemy.

His eyes lock on the place where Variant's body enters mine.

I bite my lip and wiggle down a few more inches.

Variant's chest heaves up and down, his mouth now open wide as his eyes roll into the back of his head.

Slow and steady, I take him inch by inch until there's no more for him to give.

"Have you wanted me like this, Variant? Have you yearned for it?"

He opens his eyes and sits up as far as the chains will allow.

Thoughts that aren't mine invade my mind.

Images of Variant thrusting into servants or Morrigan herself while moaning my name flash in disjointed memories.

I shove him back onto the bed. I don't know whether I should be disgusted by women he's bedded or if I should submit to the new rush of juices between my thighs.

I brace my hands on his chest and lift myself up until just the head of his cock remains nestled within my walls.

Variant attempts to brace himself, but I don't take pity on him.

I slam down with a force that knocks the air from my lungs, causing my legs to quake as I take what I want from him.

The force of my thrusts bring a flash of discomfort as my body adjusts to the furious pace set by the aching need inside me.

And while each delicious drag of throbbing veins and pulsating flesh against my nerves brings me great pleasure, it isn't enough.

My hunger knows the other males in the room.

It recognizes them as lovers, friends, and mates.

I feel as though I may burst if I don't feel them both inside me...

together. My hips stutter and Variant bucks into me.

"Cambion..."

CAMBION

Mortal Ruins

The world stops spinning as Eilish beckons me over to the bed with a crook of her finger. I climb onto the mattress behind her, kissing my way up her spine as she rides Variant as though he's merely an object to use for her pleasure.

"Slow down for me, beautiful. I wish to feel you," I whisper into her ear. Eilish curls her fingers against Variant's shoulders and holds on tightly.

I grip myself and press into her. Variant meets my stare and I banish the anger inside to feel the tightness of Eilish's channel stretching around us both.

I smother her scream behind the palm of my hand and she squeezes me like a vise.

The puffs of her warm breath against my knuckles increases as I rock into her, sliding out before easing back in.

I remove my hand from her mouth and call Silvanus over.

"Keep her quiet. We don't want the guards to get the wrong impression."

Eilish gasps and Silvanus takes advantage, pressing the head of his cock against her lips until it glides over her tongue.

I hear the gulping sounds of her throat working and reach up to wrap my fingers around her neck.

She spasms, hips driving down to sheath my member completely inside her dripping center as I watch Silvanus each time he dips into her throat.

The god snarls and pulls out long enough for her to breathe. A moan escapes her lips.
“More!”

I move my hands to her hips and press her further down onto Variant.

The helpless male erupts with a broken sob, bathing my member in his seed as I work Eilish up and down my shaft.

My motions are slow with agonizing precision.

The wetness of Variant’s release eases my intrusion, allowing me to touch each place inside her that causes her to clench around my cock.

Her hunger builds. Eilish meets Silvanus’s next thrust, forcing the god to spill his essence.

She demands it from him, milking him with her plump lips and swallowing as she sucks down every last drop.

Silvanus removes himself from the bed, but I’m not finished with her yet.

Variant remains inside her, still hard and too sensitive to hold back the sounds coming from his mouth.

Eilish rears back and tries to hurry me along, but I stop her.

My finger dances along the nub between her folds.

I touch her lightly as I whisper to her.

“No, Eilish. Don’t rush this. Let me love you. ”

“Please....”

I kiss her neck and shoulder, applying more pressure to the place she needs me most as I pick up speed just a little.

It’s enough to keep her on edge, but not enough to tip her over.

Tingles ignite at the base of my spine. “You’re so beautiful, Eilish.

To see you like this is beyond words. You feel like... home.”

I push her down and pin her to Variant’s chest as I break through that wall of resistance that holds me back. My climax triggers Eilish and Variant tumbles into a second release. A burst of light fills the room.

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EILISH

Mortal Ruins

I feel... happy.

The world is the same hunk of rock twirling around the sun and yet I think I might just float away if I don't hang on.

I feel as though the first signs of spring have arrived—when the flowers begin to blossom.

The first kiss of sunlight against my skin is wonderful.

Silvanus stirs beside me. He reaches between my thighs and feels where Variant and Cambion's seed still seeps from within me.

“How delicious you are.”

Though I can't yet walk or stand, I sense power unfurling within me.

A smile creeps across my mouth. Muscled arms and legs litter the bed.

The heap of long limbs surrounding me is almost funny.

I would laugh if not for the fact that I have duties to tend to.

I untangle myself from Silvanus and Cambion lifts me into his arms. He kisses my cheek and wraps me in the discarded robes from the pile on the floor.

I walk over to the terrace that overlooks the courtyard.

Mages wander from one building to another, working to repair the damage time has inflicted on the ancient stone.

Theren walks along the path with a small satyr child on his shoulders, laughing and dancing around to make the child smile.

Dragan and Myerdoth stroll side by side, whispering among themselves.

Pyre and Baron are nowhere to be found, but Silvanus appears at my side.

“Take a walk with me, Eilish.” He waits patiently, sitting on the bed with a lopsided grin as I quickly dress myself.

“It is a pity to hide such a figure. Even if it’s beneath leathers that cup your rear and a corset that makes your breasts look delectable.

I still prefer you in this bed, wearing nothing at all. ”

Though I know him as my lover, as my first of many things, I still grow flustered when I hear his words. I try to hide the pink blush on my cheeks as I open the door and lead him out of my quarters. We move slowly through the courtyard, near the others, but they pay us no mind.

“I must tell you something,” he says. “It may change the way you see me.”

I look at him and frown. “Change the way I see you?”

He nods. “The last thing I wish to do is push you away, Eilish, but you must know I’m not who you think I am. It isn’t in my purpose to be your lover and your mentor, nor is it to care for you as I always have.”

I can’t help but laugh at that. “I haven’t seen you in a long time, Silvanus. I’m not sure how exactly I see you anymore. But I’ve learned we’re all contradictions to our purpose.”

“How do you suppose?”

“Dragan is a gargoyle, the King of Shadows, and yet he walks among us in the daylight. Theren is the Unseelie heir, but if you look at him with that child there, you see no evil in his heart.”

“Then I have nothing to lose, I suppose.” He casts a wandering glance towards Theren before turning his attention to me.

“After Morrigan and I trapped Abedon, I took her power away. In the beginning, I told myself I’d done so because of the darkness I sensed within her, but that was not true.

It was a different time then, I was weaker and. ..”

He pauses and I face him, smiling to get him to continue.

“With or without the prophecies, Morrigan was going to seek power beyond her understanding,” he continues.

“It was just in her nature. But if she’d been at full power, she could have defeated me and ascended as a god.

The world you know now would be a different place.

I took her power to protect myself, Eilish, not to protect the realms. It was selfishness that killed the gods and yet I was selfish in my actions against Morrigan.

She was heartbroken, alone, and without power for many years.

It wasn't until Elioth took her in that she found herself again in teaching the young princes. ”

“Morrigan did find herself in teaching Cambion, Variant, Aima, and Theren, but she also plotted their demise. She taught them magic only to bespell Theren so she could turn him against his brother in a war she started.”

“Yes, and I often blame myself for what happened to Variant and Theren. I was an arrogant god, Eilish. I only saw my own suffering and not what was happening around me until it was too late.”

“Until my family died, you mean,” I reply.

“I know you were there the day the Cockatrice came to kill me, the day Morrigan heard the prophecy that Abedon wanted me at his side so he could use my power to further his plans of destruction. Out of jealousy, she sought to end me. And because I had no memory, it nearly worked.”

“What stayed her hand?”

“The other prophecies, the ones that she thought would lead her to more power,” I scoff bitterly.

“Once she saw herself standing before Abedon with enough power to overthrow him,

her course was set. It didn't matter who she had to kill or manipulate to get to that point.

Endless prophecies and rituals, sacrifices without results.

.. she wasted so much time trying to ruin us that she didn't realize she was nurturing Variant to be her killer. ”

“Whatever Morrigan has done, my actions have been worse. Instead of coming to you and protecting you, I watched as your life was torn apart time after time and I remained in solitude. I kept myself safe rather than follow what my heart was telling me.”

“And yet, here you are. You could have stayed away. Whether you're doing this for me or not doesn't matter. You're here to fight beside us and that's all that matters.”

He shakes his head. “I carry the guilt with me each day.” He lowers his head and glances away in shame.

“I believe in second chances. If I hadn't given Cambion, Dragan, or Baron a second chance, I wouldn't be here. If I hadn't offered Theren and Variant the opportunity to defend themselves, I would never be able to forgive myself, let alone anyone else.”

Silvanus kisses me softly and takes his leave as I head to the war room. Colors somehow seem brighter as I saunter through the dusty corridors.

Aima stops me as she passes. “Woah, Eilish... you look radiant . I mean, you're glowing.”

I look down at myself—at my hands—and notice she's right. I am glowing. “I don't understand.”

“It’s an angel’s grace, Eilish,” she explains. “It’s been a long time since anyone other than Variant has been able to use angelic grace, but I’m sure you’re a natural.”

“What can I do with it?”

“I think it’s different for each angel. Some I’ve met were able to read someone’s soul and affect their emotions, others had the ability to heal...

like your mother. Angels can sense corruption and summon a cleansing light to help them in battle.

If most of your angel abilities have been suppressed all this time, there’s no saying what they’ll be. ”

Aima heads to the war room with me to fetch a few maps.

When she leaves, I look over what’s next on my list but, before I even get to work, I find myself easily distracted.

My thoughts pull me in different directions as I wonder what we can use against Abedon.

With Morrigan dead, there’s no way of knowing his weaknesses.

“Mind if I interrupt?”

Kolvar ducks his head inside the war room and sits beside me. The happiness I felt dwindles instantly as I begin to sense his unease. “What is it, Kolvar?”

“Novak.”

“Yes? What about him?”

Kolvar drops a ring onto the table in front of me. “That is the King’s ring. It was found on a burned corpse strung up outside Oronrel. Novak went to the Unseelie Kingdom lookin’ to get revenge on Variant. He was killed on sight.”

I feel my shock as my mouth drops open. “I’m so sorry, Kolvar. Do the Sunder’s Might know?”

“Aye,” he replies. “They’ll honor him tonight.”

“Another bloodline ended over the thirst for power.”

“With any luck, there will be enough legends to keep King Galmer’s story alive. He was more than just my King, at one point he was a friend as well.”

“I hope he finds peace in the afterlife.”

“As do I.”

THEREN

Mortal Ruins

I lower the child from my shoulders and he scurries off to join his friends.

The mother of the satyr boy glares in my direction.

With my presence now known among the people, it’s a reaction I’ll have to grow

accustomed to.

I give her a well-intended wave and she sneers.

A few of the creatures in the courtyard catch her reaction and look my way.

Some of them pity me while others are content to hate me on principle alone.

I know when I've overstayed my welcome. With one last glance around the flourishing courtyard, I retreat into the darkness of the library.

My quarters are in the loft above the endless rows of books and ancient tomes.

I pass Pyre as he flips through a book I can't identify.

He spares me a quick glance and a sympathetic smile.

I imagine his presence makes the people just as uncomfortable as my own.

I acknowledge his smile with a nod and climb the winding iron staircase.

The mages created my quarters with Cambion's instructions, giving me a place where I can be alone with my thoughts.

I summon my mirror to prop it on the dresser.

The black frame seems so out of place among the emerald curtains and brass fixtures.

Warm hues of wood and earthy shades of green and blue allow me to feel as though I'm at the heart of the forest and not nestled in a ruined city.

I stare into the mirror's reflection, feeling the forbidden call of my magic reaching through the surface.

Bewitched eyes stare back at a reflection that's no longer my own.

I feel the pull of the mirror and I allow it to take me within its glass, to hold me in its embrace.

I pull the cowl of my robes over my head to shroud myself in darkness as I walk through the Valley of the Unknown.

This place is neither life nor death, because spirits don't dwell in the unholy heat of such shadows.

I hear the cries of those who lost their sanity to their mirrors, catoptromancers who never returned to their world from these forsaken halls.

Since I was a child, my greatest fear has been joining the voices in the dark.

Even now, I feel the sharp edge of fear gliding along my spine.

My hand lifts to a door unseen. It opens at my touch and I enter a dimly lit corridor filled with mirrors.

The way ahead is endless, stretching far beyond what my eyes can see.

I walk deeper into the dreaded depths of this place, feeling myself pull further and further away from my world.

Coldness seeps into my veins. My appearance shifts, becoming as reflective as the mirrors that surround me.

And then I feel him... Elioth.

I stop just before a particular mirror, one lined with fractured wood that appears rotted with age.

The surface is marred with greasy streaks and finger marks that fog the image beyond.

I don't dare touch the mirror, but I sense my father's power on the other side, all the same.

I close my eyes tightly. Power flows from my body and forces its way through the mirror's glass. I see him in my mind's eye.

Elioth stands before a council of men. Humans that have been twisted and corrupted beyond recognition, tainted to the depths of their souls until they became something sinister.

They're black riders, priests within a brotherhood of darkness.

The ancient tongue translates their title as the Knights of Umbra.

Hideous, disfigured faces hide beneath tattered cloth.

I hear the clanging of their chainmail beneath the rotting cloaks that cover their bodies.

Shrill, hissing voices pierce my ears as they whisper to my father.

Obuqui birds rest on their rider's shoulder, cawing and flapping impatiently.

The dark warriors are, no doubt, eager to release their master.

I must stop them.

My power forces itself into my father's head.

He's too powerful. The strength within him is staggering.

I see nothing, hear nothing but the taunting laughter of the evil man who sired me.

His magic shatters the mirror and I run for the door.

He's felt me. Perhaps even seen me. Regardless, he knows I'm here.

Elioth is behind me, walking slowly as he follows.

"You defeated me once, Theren, but Morrigan's spell has weakened you. Never again will you be victorious."

With a final push, I shove through the door and slam it shut behind me. I manage to make it back to my quarters and break the connection before it can be traced. My head hurts and I stumble towards the stairs. "Pyre!" I shout.

The necromancer appears at the other end of the library. He makes his way over to me and helps me from the floor.

"We must find a way to stop Elioth," I breathe, my heart pounding in my head. "The Knights of Umbra are in the Cogost Mountains. They're preparing for a ritual..."

"How do you know this?" Pyre insists.

“I saw it,” I answer. “I went through my mirror and I saw it.”

He shakes his head and breathes in deeply. “That was the most foolish thing you could have done, Theren. What if Elioth finds us?”

“He won’t. I was careful,” I say with a grimace. “But he’s so strong. Stronger than the Chasm alone would have made him.” He’s too powerful. Strangely so. I look up at Pyre as something dawns on me. “Is it possible Elioth found a way to syphon excess power from the ethers?”

“Yes, I believe it is possible.”

Then hope is already lost.

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DRAGAN

Mortal Ruins

I awake to find Myerdoth standing above me. “What is it?” I ask.

“The gargoyles have awakened, Dragan. Zir says the ritual worked, but the stone needed several nights of direct moonlight for the magic to flourish.” He stands and tosses me the Grimoire.

I can’t hide my shock. “I can’t... I can’t believe it.”

“Well, believe it,” Myerdoth answers and actually smiles, which is rare for the gargoyle. “Pyre suggested we take our new recruits to the glade to train. As their creator, they’ll have most of your knowledge already, but controlling their abilities will take time.”

“Time we don’t have,” I add.

He nods. “Time we don’t have.”

“Eilish... does she know?”

Myerdoth shakes his head and opens the door for me as I take my leave.

My companion and I part ways along the way to the war room.

When I throw open the doors and stride inside, I find Eilish staring down at the map with a frown on her face.

She looks at me and frowns as she then slides to the floor with her head in her hands. I move to kneel before her.

“Are you alright, Eilish?” She is beautiful, strong and courageous, but I see the dark circles beneath her eyes and the tension in her muscles.

The pheromones of her lovers still permeate her skin, so I know it isn’t hunger that’s distressing her.

I wrap my arms around her and she allows me to hold her.

“So many lives relying on me...” she presses her forehead against mine. “I need help, Dragan. We can’t do this on our own.”

“I have something to show you. Maybe it will ease your worries.”

I help her stand, lifting her from the floor.

We walk through the double doors and wave to the guards.

They allow us to leave through the gate.

Eilish is quiet on our walk through the city.

She answers my prodding questions with a simple nod or sigh.

I keep her close as we approach the water and the wind gets colder.

Eilish is happy to snuggle against my side as we work our way through the uneven sands.

Though the city itself is a graveyard, there's so much life on the beach.

"We're here."

Large drag marks and symbols cover the ground, but there are no gargoyles. Myerdoth drops down from the sky in front of us. Eilish grips my hand and squeezes as a happy smile appears on her face. Four stone beasts land in the sands in a perfect formation just beside him.

Eilish appears surprised to see them, of course, but when she turns to face me, her surprise grows. "Dragan, how are they able to be in the daylight?"

"Myerdoth?" I ask, not sure of the answer, myself.

He nods at us both. "The short answer is... Pyre." Eilish and I both laugh at that. Myerdoth continues. "We've given them the choice to remain nocturnal or embrace the light. There's a possibility that many will still prefer the night, but having a choice is what makes all the difference."

Eilish approaches each of them, studying each one of them closely. Clearly, she's impressed. "Why are they still made of stone? Why aren't they flesh, like you?"

Myerdoth answers this question, as well. "The stone will shed in a few days."

"It takes a long time for gargoyles to build up a flesh form and when it first grows, it's still very thin," I add. "The stone acts as an exoskeleton until the process is complete."

“Do they have names?” she asks.

“They will get names and ranks once they mature completely,” I reply. “But, as you see, we now have more warriors for your army.”

“That... thank you, Dragan. I know you did this to restore your people, but I’m grateful you thought of the Vindication, as well.

” She returns to me, sliding beneath my arms to hold me tight around my middle.

“Belroth says he’s working on more golems, as well.

At this rate, half of our forces will be birthed from stone. ”

I turn Eilish towards the beach and we walk along the water’s edge. The water is a clear blue that seems far too large to be anything but an illusion.

“I wonder if this place was always so peaceful?” I ask.

“Not according to Bombri.”

“Who?”

“The infuriating little hobgoblin that follows Noni like a shadow. He considers himself an expert on the ancient humans. Always spouting nonsense no one but Pyre can understand and even he just shrugs it off sometimes,” she laughs.

“Bombri... is he that ugly little creature who yaps uncontrollably?”

Eilish laughs. “I find him charming.”

“Charming? Do we have competition where your heart is concerned?”

She shoves me a little, not finding my teasing as funny as I do. “Enough. Have your laugh, but you’re wrong. I’m quite content with the lovers I have. Our connections are what make it special.”

“Even Variant?”

Eilish slows down and stares out at the water. “I don’t know what to do about Variant. I’m not sure anyone truly knows him anymore. All our memories of Variant are tainted by Morrigan’s treachery.”

“That’s true.” I sigh. “What do you think is to be done about him?”

She swallows and remains quiet for a few more seconds. “I need to learn who Variant really is before I make a decision as to what to do with him.”

“Well, you may want to make that decision sooner rather than later. No one trusts Variant, obviously. The people are still adjusting to Theren. I worry there may be a revolt if they hear you’ve accepted Variant, as well.”

ABEDON

The Tomb of The Gods

There are times when my eyes deceive me, moments when the past and the present merge and I stand at the center of my prison with a frown on my face.

The shadows in the corners seem to grow as my mind plays tricks on me.

I can still hear Morrigan's laughter ringing out between the white marble walls.

Cracks as long as I am tall have ravaged the once pristine stone.

Moss and mildew creep along the edges. The ground is still sticky with the preserved blood of my foes as I walk over their bones.

I cast an orb of light towards the chandelier and bathe the decrepit hall in a scarlet glow.

Tattered curtains still drape from the ceiling, thin and spattered with holes like enormous spiderwebs. Beetles, maggots, and other insects have made the carcasses on the ground their homes as they scramble across the ground to avoid my thunderous footfalls.

I shrug my robes from my shoulders and stand at the heart of the tomb, bare as the day I was born.

My hands trail along the ridges of my protruding ribs and my skeletal form left behind by centuries of starvation.

But as my touch moves along the leathery flesh that covers my bones, the skin, muscle and bone heal along the way.

Muscle replaces the sharp dips and creases, restoring my figure to its former glory.

Sweat glistens in the crimson light as I finish the spell.

No longer are my teeth broken, crooked shards, but a flash of white framed by plush lips that once made females drape themselves across my lap like whores.

The angles of my face are now regal and the arch of my brows prominent.

Eyes of liquid gold that see beyond worlds and hair as black as the Chasm itself.

Yes, I am beyond handsome. I am a god Eilish would be a fool to deny.

“Elioth,” I whisper to the shadows. “Come to me.”

A moment later, the flickering image of the dark sorcerer appears.

“My priests?” I ask.

“Awakened,” Elioth replies. “They are much stronger than before. The darkness Morrigan and her pawns spread has been feeding them wonderfully.”

“What of the followers? Has the Cockatrice been successful in his convergence?”

“He commands the Unseelie Kingdom, my lord. A loyal servant.”

“Take over the Unseelie forces. Let the people know the true king has risen. Take back your home, Elioth, and see to it we’ve enough followers for the ritual.”

“What should I do about the Vindication? We still haven’t found them and my own heir protects the filthy hybrid queen,” he sneers.

“She will soon be your filthy hybrid queen.”

“My Lord?”

“I am taking Eilish as my bride.”

Elioth appears both confused and frustrated by this information. “I thought the plan was to use her magic and turn her into a weapon?”

“It was.”

He nods. “You arranged everything, my lord. You instructed me to send Prince Yanhir after her sister, knowing Eilish would protect her sister at any cost.”

“Yes, I am well aware, Elioth. And you did the right thing using your influence on Morrigan to send the Cockatrice. Eilish’s family was supposed to die.

Eilish was supposed to blame Cambion and Theren for not protecting her family.

Everything went as was planned until Cambion took away her memories.”

“So, why take her as a bride at all? Would she have you once she learns you orchestrated everything? That you and I have tugged the strings of fate all this time?”

“Eilish will never know,” I say and wave away Elioth’s concerns.

“She is weak and naive. Far too trusting. Look at the way she accepts the males around her,” I chuckle.

“It would be too easy to spin a tale of my own to earn her sympathy. And when the war comes and Eilish sees the glory of my might, she will leave them—all of them. Her hunger alone will demand she feed from my power.”

“But why her , My Lord?”

“Morrigan is gone. I require a new mate to ensure my lineage will endure the times to come. Eilish will be strong enough to bear my spawn.”

“Are you worried she will grow too powerful?” Elioth questions. “She could become a problem for us. This could be... too risky.”

“Eilish is a conduit of light and dark. With her, we will be able to destroy all light from this world and bring the darkness of the Chasm to the realms.” I lose my voice as I picture it.

Then I turn to face Elioth. “It will be far greater than the Singularity ever was. And Eilish will be willing to do as I command if I own her heart.”

Elioth bows his head respectfully. “As you wish, my lord.”

“Good. Now, gather my followers and prepare for the ritual. We require much blood magic to break through these spells.”

“And the Knights of Umbra?”

“Send them into the realms. Tell them to feed off as many fae as they can. We need them at full strength for the battle.” I return to my throne and watch as Elioth leaves me. Once again, I am alone within these walls that haunt me with visions of a time long past.

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ELIOTH

Cogost Mountains

My hands drip with inky black sludge as I pull them from the grave mound.

Wisps float out of the holes I dug, forming the spectral faces of undead warriors.

Unlike the Knights of Umbria, these beings are wraiths—ghosts of their former selves that are unable to pass into the spirit realm.

Patches of skin hang off brittle bones and a stench belches from their snaggle grins.

The smell is so foul, it causes tears to well in my eyes.

The groans and gurgling snarls grate against my patience.

Their tongues were severed by Abedon himself to keep them from speaking against him.

“The ritual will begin soon,” I advise them.

“We must go to the place where the injustices against Abedon began so we can free him from his prison and unleash the Chasm unto this world.”

Another wave of groans reverberates through the mountains as I approach the path that will lead us to Abedon.

My cloak brushes along the ash-covered ground.

Fire roils in the clouds above my head. Thunder bellows like a vicious beast hiding beyond the sky.

Red lightning strikes the mountain, breaking off chunks of stone deeply veined with diamond.

The Cogost Mountain was once a peaceful place, but the gods who dwelled on its peak were corrupt.

They valued the alliance between the humans and fae more than an alliance with those who fought in the ancient battles.

Abedon was the only general who stood up to them.

His magic surpassed the gods and they felt threatened.

Allowing Silvanus to ascend before my master was a mistake and a clear sign of their ignorance.

Now the gods are all but forgotten and Abedon will rise to rule the realms and the worlds beyond.

I lead the ghoulish wraiths to the golden doors of the temple.

The cockatrice and his disciples are already inside.

I can smell their stench through the colossal doors.

My power opens the temple and I see the opening to Abedon's prison ahead.

I lift a hand to touch the spells, but they repel me.

The cockatrice stands at my side, as though we are equals, as though he's worthy to be near such greatness.

A feral smile slowly slithers across my face and I grip his shoulder until he crumples to his knees.

“Are you ready to fulfill your true purpose?”

“I have turned the Unseelie against your heir. Morrigan has no power in Oronrel nor in the Shadow Realm. You are free to take your throne back whenever you please. I... believe such dedication to our mission deserves a reward?”

I squeeze harder to watch him writhe in pain. “A reward? Yes, I do believe you deserve a reward. One fitting of your actions.”

The cockatrice nods smugly.

I lean forward to whisper, “Esahani forethalo ini amattria atak...”

“Wait! You said I would...” The words trail off into a gut-wrenching scream as a wraith possesses the cockatrice's body.

One by one, the fae creatures that pledged themselves to Abedon fall to the ground as the tainted spirits assume control of their flesh and bones.

They twitch and tremble, letting out deafening screams until all is silent.

After a few more moments, I help them stand and position them in their proper place atop the sigils that control the spell that holds Abedon captive.

“This is your moment. Show your loyalty to your master. Give the ultimate sacrifice.”

Blades rise to the throats of each servant of darkness.

A streak of red appears. Blood gushes on the floor as they fall.

The pool of crimson spreads towards the door as I breathe the incantation.

Magic flows through me and into the temple, reaching deep into the foundation and along the walls.

I hear the shattering of each enchantment as I thrust every drop of energy into the door.

It bulges out, stretching unnaturally as though it wishes to be rid of the darkness of Abedon as much as the Dark Lord, himself, wishes to be free...

I lift my own blade and carve my allegiance into the palms of my hands.

Black blood flows from the wound as I reach through the barrier of magic and streak the macabre offering on the door.

My eyes change, glowing brightly as the nerves beneath my skin crackle with power.

I draw from the life forces of the others.

Blood floats up from the floor, hovering in the air as though the laws of the universe no longer apply.

My chanting grows louder, deeper, and stronger than before.

The lightning outside strikes the temple just as the spell swells to its full strength...

I lift the blade once more. There is no hesitation, only loyalty.

There is no fear, only faith that the darkness within me will bring me back once Abedon is free.

I do as the others have done and drag the sharp edge of the knife across my throat.

I feel the heat of the liquid pouring down my chest, soaking into the fabric of my robes just as the spell breaks.

He is darkness.

He is power.

And now he is free.

ABEDON

The Tomb of the Gods

I hear the chanting of my name. Such praise has not been spoken for many years.

Blood flows from beneath the doors and I hear the screams like a beautiful symphony.

The barriers are breaking. Fractures form on the door and I close my eyes to revel in the moment.

I sense the first sigil shattering and then another until the door is as fragile as a cracked mirror.

An explosion of dark magic causes the door to disintegrate.

Elioth collapses to his knees as I approach.

I place my hand above the wound he has carved into his throat and heal him.

Shadows swirl between us. I step past him and walk towards my freedom.

Bodies litter the ground, but they will be honored in death for their sacrifice.

I step out into the light and stare up at the churning sky, raising my arms up to the heavens as ripples of dark energy course through my veins.

I clench my hands into fists and rip the sky open. “In this hour, the darkness shall reign.”

My bones pop and snap, breaking down to reform into a monstrous beast of shadow.

I leap into the air as great wings appear—bone appendages strung together by thin, translucent flesh.

Horns protrude from my head as shadow and fire embrace me.

I breathe in the darkness of the Chasm, tasting soot on my tongue.

I see the nightmares of those living and those dead, feasting on fear in its purest form.

A booming roar shakes the realms as I soar across the sky.

The walls between words tremble in my presence.

My wings slice through the barriers with ease.

The Shadow Realm bleeds into the fae kingdoms, spreading death and darkness across the lands.

Shadows morph into shapeless demons, possessing the weak and draining them of their souls.

My black riders lift into the air beside me.

The Knights of Umbria sit astride their wyvern mounts. Venom drips from rows of razor sharp teeth as they snap their jaws, hungry for the taste of flesh. As omens of destruction, the Obuqui birds caw and flap their mangled wings as their shrill voices mingle with the screams of terror.

“Find Eilish,” I growl. The black birds dive towards the ground with a cloud of ash and darkness following close behind.

Earlann stands as a beacon of light, bathed in beams of sunlight as dawn greets the kingdom. I snarl and send a ball of energy catapulting towards the tallest tower. “Destroy everything!” The Knights of Umbria obey my command. They fly above the buildings as their wyverns set the kingdom aflame.

ABEDON

The Castle in the Sky

I fall from the sky as my beast form melts into flesh. An army of Seelie soldiers runs from the palace to protect the innocent, but I stand in their way. "Join me and live," I offer. "Fight and you will die before your blade can leave its sheath."

My threat falls on deaf ears, for the Seelie are much too proud to surrender.

I hold my arms out in front of me and press my palms together.

The soldiers charge with deadly intent glistening in their eyes.

I pull my hands apart, watching the magic crackle between my fingers before I force the spell towards them.

Agony appears on their faces, features contorted into an expression of pain beyond measure, and they fall to their deaths.

Those who remain choose not to fight. A spellcaster charges an enchanted orb and tosses it at me.

I catch it mid-air. The orb explodes into a burst of sapphire light.

I shield my eyes from the spell, but when I look up, the rest of the army is gone.

"Should we go after them?" Elioth asks.

"No, they will die soon enough. Save your strength."

Elioth follows me into the palace. My power taints the purity of the marble as we stroll through the corridors.

Bloodstone and iron replace the white and gold.

Green plants wither as I pass. The doors to the throne room open and I see Morrigan's lifeless body lying on the ground, nearly torn to pieces by the ice dagger that rests beside her.

"It's a pity I didn't get to fuck her one last time," I say.

"You still have Eilish."

"Yes," I moan. "Sweet, sweet Eilish. So soft and willing to please. I only wish I had been the one to take her innocence and not Silvanus. I bet she tasted so ripe."

"Indeed. Eilish has always been beautiful and so full of fire." Elioth licks his lips, no doubt remembering Eilish from when she was still untouched.

"Careful where your thoughts linger, Elioth. She will be my queen soon enough and only I will touch her. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord."

THEREN

Mortal Ruins

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Blood flows like an ocean of red, seeping into glowing runes on the floor.

The screams of a thousand souls weave between the ethers like a tapestry.

Ripples of forbidden magic simmer from sliced throats, wafting through the air until they stretch the very fabric of this world.

The blood of ancient lineages smears the gilded door and darkness spills from the cracks of realms long forgotten.

.. and from that darkness, a great evil rises.

He is darkness.

He is power.

And now he is free.

Sweat trickles down my chest and I shoot up from the pillows.

My lungs burn from the force of my screams. I throw my legs over the bed and rush from my chambers.

The sound of my bare feet slapping against the concrete brings me back from the fading images of my dream.

I summon my robes as well as my mirror as I search for Cambion.

The scent of lemongrass and red weed drifts from beneath my brother's door. I knock on the wood until my knuckles tear open. Cambion blinks his tired eyes at me. "What on earth could you want at this hour, Theren? It isn't even sunrise and you..."

"Enough," I hasten to say. "Do you feel it, brother? The darkness is coming. Abedon is free and we don't have much time. We need to warn everyone."

"Abedon is coming? How did you know?"

"Blood magic. It's dark and I've never sensed it on a scale quite like this. Fourteen perhaps fifteen lives sacrificed at the door to Abedon's prison. It broke open the lock and he's free," I explain.

"But how? Who?" Cambion starts.

"It has to be Elioth. No other sorcerer can command that much blood magic without it consuming them. The Chasm is within Abedon and I'm quickly losing hope..."

I don't wait to hear Cambion's response before I set off down the corridor.

I round the corner and pound on every door I pass, alerting everyone.

When I reach the courtyard, I sound the alarm.

Designated leaders show our people to the safest places within the buildings, but the soldiers are still beyond the walls.

"Cambion! Help the others, I have to warn our men!"

"No!" he shouts back. "Imatriat and the others are getting the people to safety. We aren't separating again, Theren."

We warn them together.” Cambion grabs me and races towards the gate.

We see the army. Tents litter the ground where rubble has been cleared away.

Soldiers stroll, unaware of the coming danger.

Dragan and Myerdoth see Cambion and me coming.

“Abedon is free from his prison!” I yell.

“How?” Dragan asks.

“Elioth used blood magic to sacrifice his followers and break through the spells Silvanus and Morrigan used to trap Abedon. Everyone must move quickly and take cover until the swarm passes. We need to hide the soldiers,” I suggest. “With any luck, we can conceal the army from Abedon’s spies and maintain an element of surprise.

If they so much as sense someone here, then our position is compromised. ”

“How do we hide everyone?” Myerdoth asks.

“The others are taking cover as we speak. While the Obiqui have very keen hearing and sense of smell, their vision isn’t very good. If you use your natural stone to shield the army, it should fool them.”

I can see Dragan’s doubts, but he commands the gargoyles to spread their wings and use their natural stone exterior to camouflage the soldiers.

Belroth overhears Dragan’s orders to his men and joins.

Golems and gargoyles work together to create a stone barrier.

Dragan uses his shadows to reinforce their efforts as a cloud of black smoke rolls across the sky.

The thunder follows, drowning out the sounds of footsteps as our people flee from the power getting closer.

“I thought we would have more time,” I say with a wince. “The Obiqui are here. They’ll swarm and attack anything in sight. We have to find shelter.”

“Have you seen the others?” Dragan asks.

I shake my head, eyes searching through the crowd for my companions.

“Where is Eilish?!” I dart towards the wall and climb up to the top.

Even with my enhanced vision, I can’t see her among the others.

Cambion aids a few of the elderly while I continue my search.

We meet at the edge of the kingdom’s border but, still, we can’t find Eilish.

“Lately she’s been training in the city with Aima and Pyre before sunrise. She wants to stay sharp for battle.” My brother worries his lip between his teeth—a habit he picked up from Eilish. It’s a clear indication he’s nervous.

“Where do they train? If they’re close, I may be able to warn them in time.”

Cambion points to a building in the distance that appears to have toppled onto its side over time. It’s far away. Way too far to risk mirror gating without knowing exactly

where I'll land. And the swarm is coming. "We can't make it to her in time," I say with a sigh.

Use your magic, Theren, I tell myself.

I focus my power into my eyes, enhancing my vision until I see three blurred figures fighting. My eyes adjust to their movements until Eilish is as clear as if she were standing right in front of me.

The swarm is close to her.

I tap into my communication ring and reach out to Pyre.

He answers after a moment. "Look to the sky," I say.

"Obiqui are headed your way. Make sure Eilish and Aima are safe. We don't know what lies on the other side of the swarm.

Abedon has risen and if he finds out where we are, the battle may come sooner than we thought. "

I jump down from the wall and see Baron helping people underground. The vampire looks mildly irritated, but not afraid as Cambion and I are. "Have you seen Silvanus or Variant?" I ask him.

"Variant is staying out of sight so as to not cause further panic. Silvanus is helping as many as he can to the Delendren Glade until this blows over. He says the swarm should pass in a few hours, but I'm worried about what might follow. We're not prepared at all for this shit."

"Better prepared now than we were at the stronghold," I reply. "But you're right. We

underestimated our enemy again and it could cost us greatly.”

Baron and Cambion seal up the underground tunnels and move to take cover. I race to the top of the tower and cast a shield around myself. My head tells me to take cover, but my heart is shouting for me to go after Eilish, to make sure she made it to safety.

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EILISH

Mortal Ruins

“What’s going on, Pyre?!” I insist.

The people are in a panic. Everyone hurries to take cover as the sirens blare.

“We aren’t safe,” he answers. “Theren said the Obiqui are coming.”

Pyre casts a spell to summon a spirit’s vision.

He gestures towards the sky and I stand in shock.

What appears to be millions of birds fly directly towards us.

“If they see us or sense us in any way, Elioth and Abedon will know where we are. We can’t chance them finding our people before we can better defend the keep.”

“Abedon is free?!” Aima says, her mouth dropping open in shock.

“Yes,” Pyre answers.

“How?” I ask.

“Elioth found a way to free him,” Pyre answers. He freezes for a moment and shouts, “Everyone needs to run! Now! Take cover as quickly as you can.”

Then he turns to face me. “Eilish, The Veil is in trouble.”

“Go!” I answer him. “I can keep us safe,” I continue, looking at Aima. I turn back to Pyre, who appears to be hesitant. “If The Veil needs you, Pyre, you have to go. We will be fine.”

He nods and closes his eyes, disappearing from view as Aima and I start running for the cover of a dilapidated building just in the distance.

She reaches the building before I do.

“Eilish! Hurry!” Aima calls out to me as I turn to look up at the sky to see how far off the Obiqui are. They’re right over my head. And, as I stare up at them, the ravenous cloud of flapping wings covers me entirely.

I drop to my knees as something overcomes me—a vision. Images I don’t recognize take over my mind and force me to bear witness to them...

Sickening sounds echo towards the sky as bones pop and snap, breaking down to reform into a monstrous beast of shadow.

Abedon leaps into the air as great wings appear—bone appendages strung together by thin, translucent flesh.

Horns protrude from his skull. Shadow and fire embrace him in a cocoon of magic so vile, it scars the realms.

He closes his eyes blissfully, breathing in the darkness of the Chasm.

A booming roar shakes the realms as he soars across the sky.

The walls between worlds tremble beneath his power.

Abedon's wings slice through the barriers, forcing the Shadow Realm to bleed into the fae kingdoms. Darkness spreads across the lands, leaving only agony and death behind.

Shadows morph into shapeless demons, possessing the weak and draining them of their souls.

The Knights of Umbria ride beside their master on winged serpents...

When the vision breaks, I struggle to catch my breath but I'm surrounded.

My legs buckle and I fight to hold myself up. The Obiqui are like parasites, eating away at every bit of my exposed flesh.

BARON

Mortal Ruins

"Baron!" I hear Pyre's voice calling out to me.

The Obiqui are moving on, pushing towards the mountains.

I leap from my perch and vault over the obstacles in my way.

Pyre stands at the northern wall, looking a bit green in the face.

It isn't until I'm almost at his side that I feel it too. Fuck. The Veil is tearing.

“How the fuck do we stop it?!” I ask, climbing up to stand beside my fellow guardian. “There’s too much power...”

“The ethers tore open when Elioth used the blood magic to free Abedon.” Pyre begins to spin a web of spells, looking down at his hands instead of the weird shit happening in the sky.

“When the ethers tore, it thinned the barriers between The Veil and this world. If we don’t try to repair it or at least contain it, the entire thing will come crashing down. ”

“So, are we talking about the dragon, Harpies, demons, and spirits coming over or something else?” I join Pyre, using my own magic to amplify his.

“There are more creatures in The Veil than that. Including the Leviathan.” Pyre yanks me closer and increases the energy flowing between us. He forms a sphere of magic and focuses on repairing what was broken. Already I feel drained.

“Holy hell, I’m not sure how much more I can take before I need to feed. I’m losing strength.”

“Feed from me when the deed is done,” Pyre answers.

I shake my head. “You’re barely doing better than I am.”

I look back and see Silvanus walking towards us. The god sends a bolt of crackling energy towards the tear in The Veil, but it bounces back and nearly strikes him.

“Your power is too light,” Pyre explains. “It will be repelled by The Veil.”

“If Abedon comes before we repair the tear, what will happen?” I ask.

“The darkness of the Chasm within him will latch onto The Veil and tear it further. Without you and me to defend and control the spirit world, it would collide with the realms and bring on the end of days,” Pyre answers.

“Well, then you better not fucking die on me.” I feel the bond between us fueling our magic.

It’s strange to think there was a time in my life when I didn’t have Pyre and Eilish.

All of us have become more than just outcasts with fucked up destinies.

“This war has to end in our favor. So long as Eilish is in charge, the future of the realms is bright. We owe it to her to fix all of the bullshit we screwed up.”

Pyre nods.

“I concur,” Silvanus says as he casts protective wards around the keep. “We can still fight through this. Even if we have to tear this city to the ground around us, Abedon and Elioth must not win this fight. It’s Eilish who should lead us into a new era.”

Through the barrage of squawking pests, I catch sight of Zir climbing up one of the towers.

She wears a mechanical mask attached to her hood to protect herself from the Obiqui.

“Pyre, can you do this on your own? I need to help Zir. I think she’s activating the cloaking device prototype.

If we can get it working, then we can better defend the keep. ”

“I can hold it steady for a while.”

Wind picks up as I race across the top of the wall.

I reach the tower and leap nearly to the top, catching the small artificer along the way with one arm.

She climbs onto my back, throwing her arms around my neck and holds on.

My fingers dig into the wall, striking holes through the brick where I hold on.

Zir taps away at the blinking screen attached to the device as we get higher.

A brick crumbles beneath my hand and we nearly fall to the ground.

I hang off the edge with one hand and toss Zir up to the tallest point.

“I need help! There’s too much wind and these damn birds are trying to knock me off!” she yells.

My fangs pierce through my bottom lip as I scale my way to the top of the tower. I crouch beside Zir and cast a shield around us. It crackles like lightning, surrounding us with a vibrant green sphere of energy. “Will this hide us from Abedon?”

“In theory it will hide the keep entirely and act as a repellent to magic,” she answers.

“So, in order to fight, we will have to leave?”

“Unless you wish to endanger the lives of the people here, you’ll have to fight Abedon away from the walls.

Preferably away from this realm entirely,” Zir grumbles irritably.

“But you’re in luck. The dark one isn’t here.

Only his scouts. Get rid of the birds and this whole mess is over for now.

Wait too long and the dark riders will come. ”

“How long do we have?” I ask.

“Less than an hour.”

I look below and see a shimmering mound of feathers.

Zir says the device is active. The birds fly right into an invisible barrier, unable to cross through.

Those trapped inside are still a problem, however.

I help Zir down from the tower and nearly knock Pyre over as I run to his side.

He grabs me and forces my hand up towards the tear in The Veil.

Our power becomes one, stitching the tear shut.

Pyre releases me and gasps to catch his breath.

VARIANT

Mortal Ruins

“I can’t just sit here and do nothing,” I shout at the annoying little sprite who thinks he can stand in my way.

Fluff—or whatever his name is—sticks his tongue out and points to the chair as if I’m supposed to obey him.

Eilish and the others need me. I don’t know what could be more important than saving her. “Look, you little rat, if you don’t…”

A shocked gasp comes from over my shoulder. Pyre’s little house brownie stares at me in utter disappointment. “You can’t talk to Mr. Flumph like that, Naughty King! Noni don’t like you. She think you’re a bully who picks on little fae!”

I rein in my temper just enough to lower my voice. “I’m sorry, Noni. I didn’t mean to bully him. But I need to get out of here. Eilish and the others are in danger. And I know how to help them. If I can get beyond the walls, I’ll be able to stop more Obiqui from coming.”

“Them fuckin’ birds?” the annoying sprite scoffs.

“These aren’t just ordinary birds. They come from the Cogost Mountains.”

“Where the hell’s that?”

“It’s the only place where the celestial beings came to touch the Chasm.

It’s where Abedon has been imprisoned for centuries and it’s the home of the Knights of Umbria.

” I walk over to the window and snatch up one of the Obiqui.

The large black bird flaps its wings. “The feathers are as sharp as blades and its talons are even sharper. Between their beaks are rows of tiny teeth that allow them to devour their prey.” I hold it up in the air as the Obiqui’s serpent-like eyes flicker around the room.

When Flumph trembles and covers his eyes, I snap the bird’s neck and toss it outside.

“An all them freaky things are out there?!” the sprite asks.

“Thousands. Maybe hundreds of thousands,” I reply. “And Eilish is out there fighting them while I’m in here... with you. You have to remember I’ve been fighting on the side of darkness for a long time. Now that my eyes are open, I need to do what I can to help.”

Noni’s expression softens as she looks up at me. “Ok, Naughty King. Noni will show you a way out. She know all the secrets.”

The other two bitch and complain until I step over them to follow the little brownie. Noni leads me through the keep. She stops in the kitchens and opens a trap door in the floor.

“You go down, down, down. Follow the ladders into the sewer. They take you beyond the wall. But Naughty King must hurry. Noni can’t be gone long or else Mr. Flumph get into trouble.” Noni pulls a lever and a light turns on within the cellar.

I climb down and close the latch behind me.

A second ladder leads me to a metal grate embedded in the floor.

I lift it up and jump down, kicking up water as my boots hit the stone.

Brown, greasy liquid drips from the ceiling.

I move swiftly through the old sewers, avoiding the tunnels that are flooded from the ocean.

Water splashes up as I run, ripples reflect on the walls and I reach a ladder that leads to the surface.

Slime covers the bars, causing my grip to falter and I splash back down to the murky sludge beneath my feet. I grit my teeth and pull myself up.

The cover is rusted, unable to turn without the help of magic.

Already I can hear the Obiqui as I push up against the metal that covers the opening of the tunnel.

I slide the cover aside and hoist myself out of the sewer.

The Obiqui don't sense me yet as I keep low to the cracked concrete roads of the human city.

In the distance, I can see a shield erecting to keep the beastly creatures at bay.

As it closes around the keep, concealing it from sight, I ignite my hands in a powerful flame.

The fire grows, engulfing my body with mystical heat.

My tunic burns to ash and falls to the ground.

I focus my strength into the fire, forcing it to spread higher and higher still, until I can

no longer contain the pressure that builds.

A shockwave of fire scorches the Obiqui and forces them to retreat.

Every muscle convulses at once and I stumble into the water.

A hiss rings in my ears as steam coils up from my body.

A flash of cold settles into my bones and I release a sigh of relief.

Birds drop from the sky with singed wings.

Feathers fall like snowflakes smudged with black ink.

I sink below the water for a moment to slow the unsettling tingle along my limbs.

Motion causes a rush of water to flow towards me.

I open my eyes in the clear blue, expecting to see fish or some other aquatic life form.

Instead, I see myself. But not as I am now.

.. I see an image of the man I was on the day I betrayed my companions.

And when I look into the eyes of my reflection, I see Morrigan.

This as a sign. A sign that I must separate myself from the sins of my abuser and take back what she took from me.

Killing Morrigan may have been satisfying in the moment but, now that the satisfaction has worn off, I'm left wondering who the real Variant is.

I can't hope to find the answer within Eilish. This is something I must discover on my own. While the others have faced many trials together, my journey is just beginning.

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EILISH

Mortal Ruins

The Obiqui continue to bite and claw at me. My entire body is riddled with the stinging pain. I fight to protect myself against them but it's no use. There are just too many of them.

As soon as the thought leaves my mind, the swarm is suddenly distracted. A putrid stench fills the air as the Obiqui begin to fall from the sky. Charred flesh and feathers litter the ground. I attempt to stand, but the pain in my body is fierce.

“Eilish.”

I turn to the sound of the voice and Baron grips my arms, helping me to my feet. My wings drag along the ground as he pulls me into the shadows. The Obiqui are hunting again.

“What happened?” I ask him.

“We set a barrier with the cloaking device. Someone outside the walls sent a flash fire into the sky and evened out the odds a little.”

“Dragan?”

“With the soldiers,” he replies. “He ordered the gargoyles to provide cover. The golems are helping too.” Baron tilts my head from one side to the other, searching me

over for injuries.

He moves quickly, checking the depth and severity of each wound.

“They really got you good, Eilish. Let me heal you.”

“No. We don’t have time to heal me. Those things won’t be down for long and I need to protect my people. They’re counting on me.”

“Please, just let me take care of the worst. You’re strong, but you’re not fucking invincible.”

“Baron, I don’t have time...”

“Make time. I won’t let you get yourself killed by being stubborn.” Baron pauses with his hand hovering near a gash in my side. The two of us stare at each other, close enough to share the same breath. “I just need to know you’re alright. Please?”

I lean back against the wall and let his magic pour over me.

Warm, tingling power cascades across my skin as it heals me.

I trace the curve of his jaw with my finger and pull him towards me.

With a faint smile, I press a kiss to his lips that’s lighter than air and finished in the blink of an eye. “I love you too.”

He chuckles and smiles at me as I step out of my arms and flutter my wings to test them before retracting them once more.

There are a few painful twinges left over, but nothing too bad.

However, I can see how much healing me has drained Baron as he rests for a moment against the wall. “Baron?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Don’t worry about me. I just need to feed and then I’ll be fine. Focus on ending this before anyone else gets hurt.”

I peer around the corner, watching as the Obiqui change course and head for Silvanus. He destroys most of them with a single spell, but there are too many for him to destroy all of them. I pass one last lingering glance to Baron before I rush to the center of the courtyard.

“Take cover!” I shout above the barrage of sound as a bright light surrounds me.

Pure, powerful grace amplifies within me.

The brightness of the light surrounding me suddenly presses outward, expanding in orbs that grow in diameter until they overcome the Obiqui and the hell birds vanish.

Nothing is left behind. Not a single drop of blood or bone.

I can’t get my power to recede. It builds within me until it threatens to blow, taking everyone with it. “Run!” I may level the entire city if I can’t get control.

Arms wrap around me and darkness neutralizes the light, dimming it until it’s forced to cower back in my body.

I look up and see Pyre’s beautiful, scarred face.

He holds me gently, lifting me from the ground in one swoop and carrying me inside.

Silvanus and Baron give chase, following us into the war room.

Baron digs into his bag and retrieves a potion of some sort.

“Drink this. It will take away the pain and make your head stop spinning.”

The bottle presses against my lips and I swallow down the bitter liquid. It tastes like ginger, ash, yarrow, valerian root, and a few more ingredients I can’t identify. My stomach burns intensely before a soothing warmth relaxes the cramping muscles.

“Is it over?” I ask. “Where are the others?”

“It seems to be over for now,” Silvanus says. “Cambion is tending to the people, Dragan and Myerdoth are busy with the soldiers still, and I’m not certain about Theren and Variant.”

“We have to find them. They could be hurt.”

I attempt to sit up, but Pyre keeps me on the table instead.

“I would sense if they are hurt and so would you, Eilish,” he says. “Leave them be for now. Your power is still unstable and you pose a threat to all of those lives you’re trying to save. Rest for a moment and let Baron’s potion help you.”

I nod and lay back down. “What happens now?” I breathe slowly and deliberately to ease the lingering nausea in my stomach.

“The Obiqui are gone momentarily, but they could come back,” Baron says, facing Pyre, who nods. At that moment, Silvanus enters the room. He looks at Pyre who simply nods back to him as if to say I’ll be alright.

“Elioth, the Knights of Umbria, and Abedon need to be taken care of,” Pyre says. “They’re building an army, one that will be fueled by the power of the Chasm.”

“Now that the realms have seen what the true darkness is, we may be able to bring the Seelie army over to our side,” Silvanus supposes as he sits in one of the chairs beside me.

“The Unseelie will follow Elioth to their deaths, but the Seelie will answer to Cambion if given the chance. Without Morrigan’s power influencing everything. .. it might be our only hope.”

“And we can ask the people to fight,” Baron suggests.

“The people are afraid,” I start.

Baron shakes his head. “If they know what’s at stake and you give them the chance to fight for their freedom, I think some of them might surprise you.”

I nod and take a deep breath. “The refugees can be sent to the Delendren Glade. Zir’s device can protect the keep from invasion while the rest of us march towards battle. We’ll need weapons and armor, but I think we can do this.”

THEREN

Mortal Ruins

I find them in the war room just as Variant enters from the other door.

His chest is bare and his trousers are smudged with soot and burned in places.

Eilish gasps at the sight of him and it’s clear that Variant was the one who produced the flash fire that lessened the Obiqui’s numbers.

I hurry into the room and prop my mirror against the wall.

“There is something I must do,” I call out to the others.

“It may be the only thing that can buy us some time before the next wave of attacks.”

“What is it?” Eilish moves to my side, placing a hand on my arm. “What are you trying to do, Theren? I think we should discuss it.”

“We don’t have much time. I need to use the mirror to track my father’s movements. If we know where Elioth is and what he’s doing, we can be better prepared for what’s coming next.”

“How dangerous is it?” she asks. I can see the concern in her beautiful eyes. My hand reaches out to her as though I’m helpless to stop it. I pull Eilish against my chest and kiss her softly. She sighs and curls her fingers over my shoulders. Baron separates us.

“Don’t start that shit right now. I’m hard as a rock and I need to feed, so let’s get this over with as quickly as possible.” He pauses and glares at me. “Answer her questions, asshole.”

I nod and look back at Eilish. “It’s... dangerous. I may need Variant’s help to make sure I don’t become ensnared by the mirror.”

Eilish tries to move around Baron, but Variant blocks her path. “Wait,” she says. “Theren, you don’t have to do this. We can find another way without taking such a risk.”

Eilish knows my greatest fear is to be lost to the glass, trapped inside the endless darkness between worlds. But, I love her and nothing less than love would inspire me to attempt this.

“I have to...”

“And how will you come back? How do you make sure you don’t get ensnared inside the mirror?” she demands. Then she turns to face Pyre. “Could you make sure Theren comes back?”

“It’s very complicated, Eilish,” Pyre points to the mirror.

“The world beyond that glass isn’t physical nor spiritual.

It isn’t my realm and so my power is useless against it.

While Theren trusts Variant to try and pull him back before becoming ensnared, if Theren is lost in that other world, then there isn’t a thing any of us can do to help him.

Only an equally skilled catoptromancer would be able to bring Theren back. ”

“And your father would like nothing more than to trap you,” Eilish says.

I nod. “If he catches me, then I’m better off dead anyway.”

I move over to the mirror and flinch as Variant draws near. It isn’t often that I have someone at my back who isn’t Cambion, but I need to do this without my brother. “Are you ready, Variant?” I ask.

He nods.

I continue. “It would be wise to watch my eyes. They will be black as marbles while I’m gone, but if they become as reflective as the mirror, you must break the connection immediately. I may attempt to fight you...”

“I’m ready,” Variant interrupts. “Just be quick.”

I stand before the mirror and see only myself staring back.

Variant and the others don’t reflect on its surface, for the glass obeys no one.

I feel the pull and, once again, I find myself wading through darkness.

Whispers glide across my skin. I’m alone with my past, my present, and my future as the air around me breathes.

I use my magic to probe the darkness, searching for my father.

A window appears. Drops of water slide down the glass as I reach to open it.

The smell of Earlann’s market reaches my nose and I climb through the opening.

People run through the streets, screaming as they beg for mercy. The Knights of Umbria soar through the clouds on their wyverns. Fire explodes on the rooftops of buildings. Through the thick smoke and debris, I see Elioth.

Cambion? Can you hear me, brother? I call out in thought.

By the gods, Theren. Where are you?

I have found Elioth. Earlann is burning. I’m tracking him now.

Don’t! He will sense your presence.

We don’t have any other choice, I argue. This is the only way .

I move closer, listening as Elioth shouts to his minions. Shadow demons ravage the shops and homes nearby. “Move faster, you wretched vermin! When sunrise comes, I want all of you in Oronrel. The Unseelie will either bow to me or perish!” Elioth yells.

And with the Unseelie Army, Abedon’s darkness will spread and Elioth will march through the Mortal Realm until we’re all captured.

I turn back towards the opening of the window.

Rain weighs down my robes, making it difficult to slide through.

I close the window and see my father pause.

He turns towards me, not seeing but sensing me near.

“Come out, Theren! Or must I remind you what happens when children play with dark magic?”

Pain... excruciating pain lances through my body and I stumble back.

I crawl through the shadows, keeping my eyes trained on the window until it shatters.

But the pain still lingers. And it’s stemming from my hands.

I look down, watching in terror as silver climbs up my hands and then my arms like vines.

The mirror is taking me. “Variant! Break the connection!”

I hear a loud scream in the distance before everything goes dark and I feel myself

falling to the ground.

I open my eyes and lights and shapes accost my view as Variant cushions my landing, but only just so.

Something drips from my eyes and when I touch the liquid, my fingers are covered in red. Blood.

Eilish rushes over. “We couldn’t get you out!”

“What does that mean?” I ask as I look up at her.

“Variant had to cut you to break the connection. You almost killed him!”

Cambion explodes through the door and catches my eye. “Did he see you?”

“No, but he knew I was watching. He knew I was there. They’ve attacked Earlann and they plan to move to Oronrel next.”

“Were the Knights of Umbria there?” Silvanus asks.

“I counted four with Elioth along with an army of shadow demons.”

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VARIANT

Earlann

I hiss through my teeth, sliding deeper into the tub as hot water glides over me.

The ache in my muscles increases, but only for a moment before I finally relax.

Fighting off Theren was harder than I anticipated, but I'm glad he's recovering.

Decadent soaps made of sandalwood and citrus cut through the dirt and grime that's been building throughout the day.

I wash away streaks of Theren's blood before refreshing my bath.

A knock sounds on the door.

"Enter."

I see her silhouette through the privacy screen that surrounds the tub. Eilish moves closer. "I hope I'm not disturbing you," she says softly.

"Of course you aren't."

She nods. "I just wanted to thank you for what you did today. We're all grateful and Cambion is making sure the people know it was you who helped save them."

“It won’t matter. One good deed, after everything that’s been done in my name...”

Eilish remains behind the screen, but she’s unmoving and as silent as the sunrise beyond the windows. The faint smell of her perfume fills me with a serenity I haven’t not felt in ages.

“I’m sure with time they’ll come around.”

“It will take more than one act of selflessness to earn their trust.”

“Yes,” she sighs. “I imagine you’re right. But before I can help them understand you, I have to understand you first.”

“What do you mean?”

She walks in front of the screen and approaches me, taking a seat on the lip of the tub and looks at me, as if she’s trying to see through me. “Everything I know about you is obscured by Morrigan’s spell.”

“And you’re wondering...”

“Whether you’re really a villain or just another victim of fate’s cruel design.”

“Neither.” I sink lower into the water, feeling the tension in my body fade with each passing second.

“When I was born, it was said the gods had reached out and bestowed a blessing on my mother. Songs were sung in my honor and people believed that, so long as I was alive, there would always be light in this world.”

“It was a lot for a child to live up to,” I utter bitterly. “Everyone was blind.”

“How do you mean?”

I shrug. “No one knew the boy who had been blessed with eternal light was drowning in misery. Each day, I cared for my mother as she drifted further and further into madness. Screams through the night, scribbling cryptic symbols on the walls, and forgetting her own name.”

I shut my eyes to the world around me as the memories pour through my head.

“Go on, Variant,” Eilish says softly.

“When I was nine years old, soldiers raided our home. They took me to a city in the sky where I met my father. He seemed every bit the king I was destined to be. But all wasn’t as it seemed,” I say.

“Not unlike Elioth and Theren, my father was threatened by my growing power. He locked me away inside a prison carved from stone. I was given just enough food and water to keep me alive. He used my mother to control me. If I fought back, I was beaten or my wings were burned with a hot iron. For a long time, I thought my life would end in that box.”

“What changed?”

“The Singularity,” I reply simply as I open my eyes and look at her, trying not to be pulled under by her beauty.

“When darkness eclipsed the light, I felt my eternal flame dimming. But then the city in the sky fell from the heavens and standing there to catch me was Morrigan. She handed me a sword of flames and told me to fight for my life. I was thin and damaged by all that had been done to me, but I fought beside Cambion and Dragan.”

“And you won.”

“ We won. For once, I felt as though I was part of something great.” I sit up in the water and scrub my hands over my face, wishing the memories would wash away.

“Morrigan gave my father’s title to me and I rose as the King of Light.

I hadn’t earned it, but I knew I would be a more just king than my father had been.

Theren was King of Oronrel, Cambion ruled the Fae Realm, Dragan had his Shadow Realm, and I.

.. I was a king without a kingdom for a long time.

I only conquered Earlann after the war. The throne belongs to Cambion, truly. It’s his birthright.”

“How did Morrigan take over? How did she control you?”

“She knew my weaknesses,” I say on a sigh.

“My mother died while I was imprisoned and my father died when the kingdom in the sky fell. Morrigan saw that I was starved for kindness and guidance. She gave me what I needed, feeding me scraps of affection until I was wrapped around her finger,” I explain.

My heart is heavy with the truth of my words.

“But I knew something wasn’t right. I knew there was more to what Morrigan was telling me.

She slowly turned me against the others until I was alone once again. That was when she got inside my head.”

“And forced you to kill Baron.”

“I fought it,” I say as I swallow hard and take a deep breath. I can’t look at her until I force myself to look at her. “I swear to you... I fought her every step of the way. I just... I wasn’t strong enough.”

She clears her throat and runs her fingers through my hair. The prickle of her nails against my scalp is soothing. “So, not a villain and not a victim. Then what are you, exactly?”

“I think, despite it all, I’m just simply alive.”

Eilish massages my neck and shoulders, working out the knots that have formed since the start of the day.

“You and I never got the chance to meet properly. Our encounter with Cambion and Silvanus was sort of spurred on by spite. But... it’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Variant. The real you, I mean.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Eilish.”

I smile up at her and for the first time, I feel like I’m home.

EILISH

Mortal Ruins

“How many refugees?” I ask, holding my head in my hands.

Only four days have passed since Earlann was taken by Abedon.

Already his forces have all but destroyed villages and settlements along the borders.

Elioth is in Oronrel preparing for battle and we’re still recovering from the last attack. The scout hands me a list of names.

“So far we’ve taken in nearly six hundred,” he replies. “Lord Cambion helps transport them to the Delendren Glade and Lord Theren has assisted with taking others to the Dales of Arborel. We’re evacuating as many survivors as we can.”

The doors to the war room open. Cambion enters with a young Seelie woman at his side. “Sorry to interrupt,” he says. “But I thought you should hear this for yourself.”

I shake hands with the scout who has just given me the update on the refugee situation. “Thank you for the report. I’ll send someone to the Glade to arrange more provisions for the refugees.” Once he leaves, I stand up and walk to the other side of the table. “I’m listening.”

“I was a maid in the palace,” the young woman says. “Oronrel is n-nearly a wasteland and Earlann is no better,” she stammers. “Abedon spends his time in the throne room talking about a war to come.”

“What is your name?” I ask her.

“Mila.”

“Thank you for being brave enough to come here. I know it couldn’t have been easy,” I say empathetically. “Can you tell me what you saw in the palace? Anything you can

think of will be a tremendous help to our cause.”

The young woman looks around nervously. “H-he sits on a throne made from the remnants of the Raven Forest. Hideous, spiked wyverns sit at his feet at all times. Dark creatures stand guard, helping him find ways to attack the villages. And....”

She pauses and I smile at her, encouraging her to continue. She takes a deep breath and swallows hard.

“I saw the Midnight Queen hanging from hooks on the wall.” Mila shivers in what I assume to be disgust. “Some of us left the palace immediately while others are still trapped inside.”

“Thank you, Mila. Lord Cambion will make sure you’re comfortable.

” I say goodbye to the girl and wait for the door to shut once more.

For the first time in days, I’m alone. I sit back in my chair and close my eyes.

Sounds of the keep swirl around me. I hear engines roaring, voices whispering, and.

.. children laughing. It amazes me that, after all of the hardship we’ve faced and we’re currently facing, there’s still happiness to be shared in this world.

I think of Variant and the words he said to me. Perhaps we should not view ourselves as victims or survivors—maybe we should just be happy we’re alive and able to keep fighting.

The fate of the realms rests on my shoulders.

Instead of pondering what this world has done to me, I should focus on what I can do

for this world.

And, like everything else in life, it all starts with a first step.

I stand up from my chair and exit the war room.

Most of my companions are present within the courtyard.

“Kolvar! Aima!” I wait beside the fountain that Noni and the little fae have built. Kolvar and Aima appear before me almost instantly. “Go to the Delendren Glade and make sure the refugees there are well protected and then meet us at the border of the fae realm in a week’s time.”

They nod without question and hurry out of sight. Then I go off in search of Baron. When I find him, I approach Baron quietly. He glances up at me with a smirk. “What is it now?”

“I need you to take the army to this location,” I say as I send him coordinates through the communication rings.

“What is this location?”

“The place where we will establish our camp.”

“And prepare for war?”

I nod. “And prepare for war.”

His smirk twists into a full smile. “I’m proud of you.”

I feel my face heating up, growing flustered beneath his praise. Baron leans over and

hovers just inches from my lips. “What are you doing?” I ask quietly.

“Kiss me, Angel.” His hand moves to rest on my hip as I slide my lips against his. I expect him to deepen the kiss, to draw it out until I’m weak in the knees, but he pulls away. “Thank you. I’ll do as you ask.”

He swaggers off in the opposite direction.

I realize I’m not the only female who has taken an interest in the dominating presence of Baron.

Several heads turn to watch him walk away I’m puzzled by the jealousy that suddenly consumes me.

It’s then that I realize my lovers bear no mark of my claim, nothing to show they’re mine alone.

And I have nothing to show that I belong to them.

That has to change. Before I go to find Theren, I put in an order with the blacksmith.

He eyes me warily, but agrees to forge the items I need.

Theren and Cambion are standing near one of the trucks when I find them. Cambion smiles when he catches sight of me. Theren casts a heated glance in my direction as I slowly approach. “I know you’re busy with the refugees, but I need you to do something for me when you’re done,” I start.

“Anything,” Cambion answers.

“If we want to beat Abedon, we need more soldiers. One of the scouts reported that

what's left of the Seelie army is no longer in Earlann. I need you to join Dragan and Variant when they bring the soldiers to the camp."

"What camp?"

I smile as I realize I've neglected to tell him the first part of my plan.

"I'll send you the coordinates. Silvanus and Pyre will be helping me clear any demons or other threats out of the area," I explain.

"We're moving the fight away from the keep.

Our main priority is protecting those we offer refuge. "

"Wise words from a compassionate leader." Theren finally meets my gaze. "Be careful, Eilish."

"You too."

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CAMBION

Vindication Camp

Dragan props Variant against a tree just as we see smoke from the camp.

As soon as they saw Variant, the Seelie attacked on sight, wounding the once False King until I made my presence known.

I explained to them the events that had led to Variant's rule as well as his fall.

After time to deliberate, they agreed to fight beside us if Eilish proved to be as strong a leader as the rumors made her seem.

Now, we peer over the lush forests along the outskirts of the fae realm, looking at the spattering of smokestacks that pepper the landscape.

Baron's voice sounds through the communication rings, informing us the refugees are safe and that he, too, is on his way to the camp.

We begin the long trek through the forest and walk for miles towards a large field littered with vibrant tents.

The flags of the Vindication flap in the wind.

Golems, skinshifters, elves, dwarves, and other creatures of the realms fasten themselves into armor as we pass.

I turn to Dragan. “Get Variant to the mages for healing and then make your way to Eilish’s tent.

” The gargoyle shuffles off with a nod as I face the Seelie soldiers.

“Find a house brownie named Noni. She will take you to get food and water. There will be tents and cots set up for you within the hour.”

The soldiers wear a look of relief on their faces as Theren leads them to Noni’s little tent.

I make my way through the camp and find Eilish’s encampment.

The bold white covering stands out in a sea of sapphire, scarlet, emerald, and black.

The closer I get, the stronger I can scent her hunger.

She needs me. And I’m drawn to her in ways beyond my control. My heart yearns to be near her.

I open the tent and step inside. A spell silences the sounds of the camp.

Eilish sits at a small desk, writing in her journal.

She scrawls a few more words onto the page before setting down her pen.

Blue eyes shine in the lantern light as a coy smile plays on her lips.

“You’re back. I’ve missed you.” She stands up from her chair and leans against the desk, causing her thin robe to cling to her supple curves.

My eyes roam over her figure. “I missed you, as well,” I reply. “When did the others arrive at camp?” I can’t stay away. My feet carry me across the intimate space, trapping Eilish against the desk. She hums and traces her finger along the arch of my brows.

“Myerdoth led the gargoyles and a few others into the camp yesterday.”

“Where is Silvanus and Pyre?”

“Pyre is in the trees,” she answers. “He’s checking the sky for signs of the Obiqui or dark riders. It doesn’t hurt to be extra cautious after all that’s happened.”

“It’s smart.”

“Zir contacted me this morning. She says Unseelie are pushing through the city. The devices should keep them from detecting the keep and the wards Silvanus put up will defend us against any more attacks. Still, I feel uneasy knowing they’re so close.”

I place my hands on the desk, leaning into her further.

“The refugees are safe, Eilish. Our people are well hidden behind the walls we’ve built.

The soldiers are here in camp with us, prepared to fight against Abedon and Elioth.

Things... are as good as they could possibly be, considering the circumstances. ”

Eilish curls her fingers into my hair and pulls me into a kiss. I grip her bottom and lift her onto the desk. She spreads her thighs to make room for my hips. The folds of her robe part. I move back from the kiss to look down at her bare skin.

“Silvanus said that feeding from all of you... at the same time would unlock something inside me.”

“Whatever you need from me... it’s yours, Eilish.”

Theren steps into the tent and tilts his head to the side.

I glance over my shoulder at my brother as he drops his robes to the floor.

“Whatever you need from both of us .” He walks over to the bed and climbs on top of the duvet.

Eilish watches him with her eyes like a predator stalking its prey.

I step away and pull her towards Theren, practically hearing the pounding of her heartbeat.

She straddles Theren. I untie her robe and slide it down her shoulders, remembering our time with Variant and Silvanus in the tower.

My prick thickens, craving the heat between her thighs.

Theren cups her ample breasts, eliciting a moan from Eilish’s lips.

I move quickly, tumbling her onto the other side of the bed.

I wrap my fingers around her wrists and pin her to the bed as Theren kneels between her splayed thighs.

He dips low, situating onto his belly. Eilish’s hips lift in a desperate attempt to feel Theren’s mouth on her intimate flesh.

I lick my lips, basking in the sweetness that fills the air.

Eilish squirms fiercely, too excited to focus.

My lips brush along her neck as Theren tastes her.

Seeing my brother between her legs should fill me with rage.

On the contrary, I find I'm aroused by the sight.

The flash of pink between her folds causes me to grow painfully erect in my trousers.

My magic takes place of my hands, holding Eilish captive against the bed as I strip away my clothes.

She stares unblinkingly. The soft brush of fabric against the floor causes her to flinch.

A scream pulls her lips apart. Before the sound can leave her, I slide my cock inside her mouth.

Eilish moans. The tight constriction of her throat forces a groan from my mouth.

EILISH

Vindication Camp

My tongue swirls around the velvet crown of Cambion's erection.

The taste of him explodes along my senses, filling me with a sense of calm that

contradicts the stuttering rhythm of my hips.

Wet suction steals the breath from my lungs and I pull off Cambion's length to stare down at Theren.

He gazes back at me through a curtain of hair that tickles my pelvis.

Glistening, kiss-swollen lips close around my clit.

The firm press of his tongue causes me to gasp, allowing Cambion to fill my mouth once more.

I swallow as he thrusts inside, feeling my mouth work his shaft.

He growls like a beast, but I see only love in his eyes.

I release a whimper of disappointment when he pulls away too soon.

My displeasure doesn't last long as Cambion wets his fingers to spread my folds.

Theren sighs his approval, dipping his tongue inside me.

Cambion's finger draws circles along my clit, causing tingles to spread through my body.

Theren pushes my knees to my chest and I feel the hot flicker of his tongue across....

"Oh God!" I whimper. "I need you inside of me. Please."

Cambion's fingers fill my pussy as the tight furl of muscle gives beneath the wet press of Theren's tongue.

An unusual pleasure tickles the base of my spine as he works open the entrance of my anus.

Theren inserts a finger, spreading spit along my insides.

Still, I hiss at the burn of the intrusion.

He casts a spell... to lubricate. I feel slick dribbling from forbidden places as a second finger joins the first. Cambion curls his fingers and I see stars along the edges of my vision.

The constant stretch of Theren's fingers mingles beautifully with Cambion's tingling.

"Breathe, love," Theren says softly. "You can take more. I know you can."

"Relax." Cambion kisses my lips as his thumb strokes my clit. The sensation triggers a wonderful climax. A third finger enters me, but the pain is lost in a maelstrom of pleasure. I moan into Cambion's mouth as waves of powerful aftershocks crash over me.

A throat clears from the entrance of the tent and I pry my eyes open. Pyre's eyes flicker from white to liquid gold. His nostrils flare as he stands beside the bed, looking over Theren's shoulder as he stretches me open.

"Isn't she beautiful, Pyre?" Theren asks.

"Indeed," Pyre answers with a rumble in his chest. Cambion releases me from his power and moves to sit. Pyre runs his fingers through my hair and yanks my head back. I groan in the back of my throat, feeling a tantalizing sting against my scalp. I love it when he's rough with me.

“You like this, don’t you?” Pyre demands. “Of course you do. You like feeling helpless, used up and filled with our seed.”

“Yes...”

“Then climb on top of Cambion and show him how much you like having his cock inside you,” Pyre commands.

He lets go of my hair and Theren slides his fingers out of me as I sit in Cambion’s lap.

The dark aroma of Pyre fills the room. It reminds me of a thunderstorm after a heatwave.

He plays the role of conductor, instructing Theren to take his place behind me.

“Eilish, lower yourself onto Cambion. Very good... nice and slow. Just like that.” Pyre reaches between Theren and me. He eases my arms behind my back and secures them with what feels like silk.

“Pyre?” I ask, suddenly growing nervous.

“Trust me,” he says in my ear.

I nod, excited to see what he has in store. “I trust you.”

“Good. If it gets to be too much, just say so.” He waits for my response, but I lose the ability to speak as Cambion slowly feeds his cock into my pussy. Pyre’s deep voice breaks through the intense sensations. “Eilish.”

My gaze snaps to his and I lick my lips nervously. I want to please him as much as I

want them to please me. “Yes, Pyre.”

He kisses my forehead. “Good girl.”

Theren uses the curve of my hips to steady himself behind me.

Slowly... oh, so slowly, he pushes into me.

Pyre’s fingers trace erratic patterns against my clit and my body sings.

Pulsing vibrations of magic erupt within me as Theren’s pelvis smacks against my ass.

He hunches over my back to kiss my shoulder.

I will my body to adjust to his size, feeling twinges in my muscles each time I breathe.

Pyre kisses me. “You are so perfect, Eilish.” There’s a mischievous twinkle in his gaze that makes me shiver. “Just relax. I’ll take care of everything.”

Cambion begins to move. Each thrust causes Theren to shudder behind me.

I fall against Cambion’s chest as Theren uses my arms for leverage, pulling his hips back before thrusting forward again.

Smooth, unhurried movements begin to synchronize as Cambion and Theren find their rhythm.

Pyre stalks beside the bed, still swathed in his black robes.

The vibrations in the air grow strong and I can't fight it any longer.

Light surrounds me. Cambion's back arches.

Red smoke floats from between my lips and into his mouth as I feed off his magic.

His eyes open wide as the orgasm is ripped from his body, filling me with spurts of thick seed that warms the ache in my muscles.

My pussy grips him, keeping him inside me until he begs me to stop.

Cambion's release causes me to climax, sending Theren over the edge with me.

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BARON

Vindication Camp

The smell of sex and heat smacks me in the face when I reach the door of Eilish's tent.

Her whimpers are like a siren's call to a sailor lost at sea.

I push my way inside just as Theren steps away from the bed to catch his breath.

The Unseelie strikes a match and lights the end of a hand-rolled cigarette.

Elfroot and something else wafts up with the smoke.

I recognize the concoction. The herbs are meant to relax the mind and heighten senses, making encounters like this. .. earth shattering.

Pyre leads Eilish away from Cambion as the elf takes in a huge breath and then extends his hands out on either side of himself.

I see the swatch of red silk holding Eilish's arms behind her back.

Pyre and I have discussed such things before, so the necromancer knows the contrast of red against Eilish's pale skin sets my blood aflame. Pyre is playing dirty. And I like it.

He pushes her chest against the wooden post at the center of her tent.

Eilish bends at the waist and spreads her legs.

My fangs elongate and I reach down to squeeze the bulge straining against my leathers.

“Fuck. I wish I’d gotten here sooner,” I breathe, in awe.

“Look at you, Angel.” I run my hand along her spine, touching the places where her wings would appear. “So needy...”

My hand travels along her ass and brushes the back of her thighs, teasing her with light touches.

“Baron.” Her cheeks flush, giving her the illusion of innocence even when she covers my fingers in wetness as I pet her wetness. “Don’t make me beg you...”

“But I love it when you beg.” I lean over Eilish’s back. “Should I fuck you into oblivion now or wait until the others arrive?”

“No need to wait, Baron,” Silvanus says as he and Dragan enter the tent.

The gargoyle pours a goblet of wine and downs the contents of the glass, staring at Eilish hungrily.

Silvanus walks to the other side of the column and brushes her hair from her face in a gesture that seems far too gentle for the primordial god.

“How beautifully you glow when you’re surrounded by so much desire.”

Eilish beams under his praise. Dragan hands me a goblet of wine and I gulp down the liquid.

Pyre takes the cup from my hand and sets it on the table.

I begin to undress myself as Eilish watches over her shoulder.

Pyre places a kiss against her neck and I see her legs buckle.

Her eyes devour me as my fingers work open the buttons on my clothes.

The shirt falls to the ground, followed with the loud clank of my belt.

I hook my thumbs into the waistline of my leathers and tug them down my legs.

And when there's nothing left to remove, I reach down and grasp my cock, guiding it into Eilish.

Variant smiles over at me from the chair beside the desk.

They all know how it feels to breach the opening of her sweet, excruciatingly tight body.

Beyond all else, it's her who unites us.

Pyre smacks Eilish's ass just hard enough to startle her.

She begins to grind against me like a bitch in heat.

Silvanus and Dragan stand on either side of her.

Pyre tilts her head back so she looks at him.

“Let Baron feed and then I’ll take you back to the bed,” Pyre says. “I’m sure Silvanus is dying to be inside you.”

“More than you know, necromancer.” The deep growl seems at odds with the light energy permeating from his body.

Eilish moves against me, trying to get me deeper inside when I’ve already reached as far as her body will allow.

My hips jerk, spearing my cock in and out of her.

“Push yourself back on my cock, Angel. There you go,” I snarl with absolute adoration.

My fangs tingle with the need to feed from her succulent flesh.

I strike with the speed of a viper. Eilish cries out.

The force of my thrusts lift her feet from the ground as I push her completely against the column.

“Yes! Harder, Baron!”

“You heard her,” Pyre chuckles. “Give your queen what she demands.”

The last shred of my control snaps. I drink from her veins as the power of The Veil wraps around us like a cocoon.

Her eyes turn black as obsidian crystals until Silvanus tugs her forward for a kiss.

One eye remains black as the other flashes to a clear blue.

She breaks away from the kiss and I feel her brilliant, angelic magic growing inside me. The essence of pure grace is too much.

“Cum, Baron,” Pyre orders. “Mark her as your instincts demand.”

The first jolt of pleasure causes me to release my hold on her neck. Silvanus and Dragan back away to watch. Blood drips down my lips and trickles onto her spine near the red silk of her restraints.

“Give it to me... give it to me...” she begs over and over until I give in.

My vision blurs and all I know is the sensation of her oozing honey.

Eilish whispers words of love and filthy praise as I hunch over her, carving a place for myself inside her.

The hot squelch of her pussy causes Dragan to roar.

Pyre separates us.

Eilish is stronger... much stronger as she breaks through the silk ties and sinks down onto Variant’s cock.

He removes his hands from the armrest of the chair and spreads the pale mounds of her glorious ass.

My own member, spent for the moment, gives a twitch of interest as she rides the other angel like a prized stallion.

Dragan blocks my view for a moment, but I look closer.

.. unable to hold back the moan escaping my lips as he pushes inside her from the backside. Gods... the sound she makes.

PYRE

Vindication Camp

“When will you take her?” Silvanus asks.

The illusive god holds no interest to me and yet I find myself curious as to why he too has restrained himself.

I take the hand-rolled cigarette from between Theren’s lips and inhale the bitter sweetness of the elfroot.

It fills my lungs with soothing smoke and I hand it back to the Unseelie before I answer.

“I’m building Eilish towards the moment when all of us take pleasure in her body. If you haven’t noticed, I’m maintaining the balance within her as she feeds. One light and one dark.”

“Then why let Baron take her on his own?”

“Because he’s but one half of a whole. Baron and I complete a circuit of immense power.

I'm neutral, despite my proficiency in the art of dark magic," I explain.

"My energy alone isn't enough to feed her completely, so I allowed his darkness to fester unhindered first. When my time comes, it will be the catalyst that unites all of you. "

"How so?"

"You will just have to watch and see." I move away from them to join Eilish once more.

She rocks back and forth between Dragan and Variant.

Retreating from one cock only to impale herself on the other.

I can see the overwhelming sensations building inside her.

Tears glisten in her beautiful gaze. I stroke her cheek fondly and she purrs like a kitten. "How are you feeling?"

"There's so m-much..."

"So much power?"

"Yes!" she screams, throwing her head back as that red smoke emerges once more.

Eilish wraps her hands around Variant's throat to keep him steady as it seeps into his mouth.

She hasn't fed like this before, but I find it erotic to think she's filling Variant as much as he fills her.

Her movements become erratic as she reaches yet another high.

Despite the impressive strength of Eilish's thrusts, Dragan keeps his movements slow and deep to draw out her pleasure.

The gargoyle seems to be in no hurry. But already Cambion, Theren, and Baron lay on the bed with their erections glistening in the lamp light.

Silvanus joins them on the bed without hesitation.

Their movements catch Eilish's attention.

"Patience, my love, you'll feel them again soon," I say.

My words appear to soothe her nerves.

Variant stills her movements, taking control as he grips her shoulders to shove her down onto his erection.

Eilish attempts to close her legs, but her mouth opens wide in ecstasy.

Dragan gives one last heaving thrust before he pulls out.

I move behind her and insert two fingers where his cock has just been, keeping his seed within her and forcing her muscles to remain open.

I press down against her twitching walls and stroke Variant to completion through the thin barrier of flesh that separates him from my fingers.

"Fuck," she moans as I remove my fingers and lift her off Variant's lap.

“Indeed.” I carry her over to the bed and lay her at the center. The others look to me for direction and I smile, as I expected this. “Baron, lay on your back and lower Eilish onto you.” Silvanus moves on top of her. “Dragan and Cambion will be on either side and Theren will be behind Silvanus.”

They move to comply with my instructions.

Eilish lies with her back against Baron’s chest. She aims his cock against her opening and he pushes inside slowly, so as not to harm her.

Silvanus is just as gentle as he wraps his arms around her and slips his cock between her sensitive folds.

Eilish breathes deeply, already teetering on the edge as she stares into the eyes of her first lover. Silvanus kisses along her neck and ear.

I guide Theren behind Silvanus and help him to push in alongside the deity. “It’ll be a tight fit with Baron inside her ass. There... that’s it. Don’t move just yet. Let her adjust to the stretch.” I leave Theren to press my lips against Eilish’s. “You’re going to suck Cambion and Dragan now.”

She quivers between Silvanus and Baron. “W-what about you?”

I kiss her one last time. “Something only I can do. And I do it quite well.”

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My hand lifts and I tap Silvanus on the shoulder.

He begins to pulse his hips, moving in short increments as the discomfort leaves Eilish's body.

I watch the expressions play across her features and smile.

This will be a night we all remember. I untie my robes and neatly fold them before placing them on the table.

The gasp of appreciation I hear only serves to widen my smile.

It's good to know Eilish takes pleasure in the sight of my body.

Though Silvanus and Dragan are mountains of chiseled muscle, I am the tallest and most proportionate.

It was once a joke between Aima and me that I was the most perfect human in existence even before the Singularity.

I'm flattered by the want I see in Eilish's eyes as she rakes her gaze over my figure.

I kick off my boots and unfasten the ties of my trousers, sliding them down my legs before I fold them as well. "Baron, you may move," I say.

Both Theren and Eilish begin to pant and whimper.

The sight before me is enough to make a nymph blush.

Eilish wraps her hands around Dragan and Cambion.

She sucks down the gargoyle while stroking the elf.

Her plush lips slide up and down Dragan's thick shaft, moistening it with saliva as three cocks stretch her open.

She pulls off Dragan and swallows Cambion in one move that has the elf gripping the back of her head.

"Are you ready for me, Eilish?" I ask.

DRAGAN

Vindication Camp

Eilish's mouth is a glory to behold. My mouth waters at the sight of my cock disappearing through her lips.

The weighty beast stretches her mouth to its limits.

Long, heavy, and slightly curved, it glides along her tongue before pressing into the back of her throat.

She grasps the base to stroke what won't fit, pulling back to give a teasing flicker of her tongue before moving to Cambion.

The elf moans towards the ceiling, eyes closed as he feels the moist heat engulfing his prick.

A splash of seed escapes the reddening tip of Cambion's erection and Eilish groans at the taste.

There's no doubt that the succubus within her is hungering for more.

Cambion hisses through his teeth. When I look up, I see his eyes are no longer closed, but he stares over at Pyre.

The necromancer removes his clothes with a casual air.

Pyre continues to instruct us, working as our voice of reason in the chaos of our claim on Eilish.

He saunters over to the bed as Cambion fists his hand in Eilish's hair. She greedily drinks him down until he releases her. Her gasping and whimpering causes me to twitch within her grasp. She presses a kiss to the tip of my cock.

"I'm ready, Pyre," she whispers. He grips the back of her head as Cambion had done and pushes her down the length of my cock. Eilish hums, sending vibrations along my shaft.

"Whatever you're going to do, be quick. We won't last forever," I say, barely restraining myself, as it is.

"Variant, hold Eilish down against Baron," Pyre says, ignoring me. "She will fight me, but know I'm not hurting her. Just the opposite. I won't stop unless she says so."

Variant grabs ahold of Eilish as Silvanus releases her. He lowers her back down to

Baron's chest and kisses her brow.

Pyre's voice breaks through the lustful haze once again. "Encase them in your wings, Variant. Let your grace embrace us."

I feel it as much as I see it in the eyes of the others.

This is our greatest fantasy come to life.

All of us fucking and feeding Eilish until we're spent, reduced to nothing but a quivering pile of bodies.

.. Pyre touches his hand to her chest and I watch his skin begin to fade.

The necromancer takes on a ghostly image.

Light shines through his transparent skin as he sinks inside Eilish's body until I can't see him anymore.

Pyre possesses her.

I can feel the power of The Veil inside her as she pulls off my cock.

Her face morphs into an expression of peace, even as a scream sends a shockwave of power coursing through our bodies.

A symbol glows brightly in my gaze. An infinite knot of light and dark.

I feel all of them. Pyre, Cambion, Variant, Silvanus, Baron, and Theren.

Variant spills his seed untouched. It splashes on Eilish's chest and the flat expansion

of her belly.

I'm next to fall victim to the powers around us. Eilish, with Pyre controlling her, seals her lips around the head of my cock. Her tongue tickles the sensitive underside until I burst inside her mouth. She swallows every drop. One by one, we succumb to the inevitable power of our queen.

A flash of white blinds me for a moment. I feel warm, surrounded by her radiance.

When my sight returns, I lay on the bed with sweat trickling down my temples. The others are beside me. Pyre lay on the floor, panting, until Baron helps him to his feet.

"I'm alright... I just... need a moment."

Pyre sways on his feet as if held up only by Baron's hold. Once he gains his footing, I climb off the bed. And that's when I notice Eilish. She's surrounded by a beam of light. And she's somehow... different.

One half of her pale hair is now entirely black. Silken strands of ebony locks flutter beside the hues of white. Blue eyes rimmed with black stare up at me. I'm speechless. One wing of elegant feathers and one of demonic beauty. She's the balance. She's the one who will lead us to redemption.

I watch as the brilliant light begins to leave her.

"I can't even begin to tell you how I feel," she starts, smiling up at me.

"It's as though all of you are here inside me," she says breathlessly as she places a hand over her chest. "I feel more than just magic and power. I feel your love and the loyalty you have to me and our people." Tears shimmer in her eyes.

Variant slides a robe over her shoulders as her wings retract. Baron and Cambion quickly try to hide the shock on their faces when they notice the change in her appearance.

“What is it?” she asks.

Pyre hands Eilish the small handheld mirror from her table and says, “Perhaps you should see for yourself.”

EILISH

Vindication Camp

I touch my hand to my face, unable to fathom the change in my appearance.

Though my features remain the same, there's no denying the eerie color of my eyes or the darker side of one half of my hair.

My fingers move to toy with the black strands.

There's something inside me and it's growing by the second, roaring to life like a storm at sea.

It's power and it's dangerous—beautiful, but dangerous.

“We need to prepare the soldiers to march soon,” I say.

Silvanus approaches. He places a hand on my shoulder before snatching it back.

His fingers flex with a crackle of magic.

“You can sense the impending war. It's no surprise you're feeling the urgency of battle with the rise of your power, but you must remain resilient in your convictions and try to see through the emotions emerging within you.”

“That's easier said than done,” I snort irritably. “I can feel so much and yet, at the

same time, I feel... numb.”

Dragan moves me away from Silvanus and over to the table.

He sits across from me and holds my hand on top of the table.

“When I first met you, I was a shell of the male I’d been.

I was no warrior, no king. It wasn’t until I took you from Anona that I felt my life was beginning.

It was just as you described. You feel as though you’re filled with so much angst and uncertainty that you’ll burst, but there’s also a part of you that dreads what will happen if you let go of the control you try to cling to. ”

“I know what we must do—no, what I must do,” I say.

“But I can sense the fragile souls around me each time I draw breath.” My voice cracks and I tear my gaze away from Dragan.

I don’t want him to see me as weak, as the frightened girl I was when he found me.

But Dragan tilts my chin up and stares into my eyes once more.

“I’ve never seen a more strong and beautiful woman in all my days, Eilish. There’s no part of you I don’t love with all my being. You are the last beacon of hope for the realms and we stand beside you as your lovers and your champions.”

Pyre returns to the items I requested of the blacksmith.

I see the runes he engraved within the metal as he hands them to me with a smile.

The men to whom I've given my heart, body, and soul stand before me.

They're ready to fight this war, to lay down their lives, in hopes of building a better world. I've never felt more humbled.

Pyre helps me to my feet and I present him with the first cuff.

It circles his bicep and adjusts to fit perfectly, marking him as my consort.

It's a symbol of love. Pyre accepts graciously and bows his head in honor of the claim.

Baron approaches next, offering his arm without hesitation.

There's a glimmer of mischief in his gaze, but he only smiles as I mark him as mine with the bracelet.

Next, I move to Cambion and Theren where they sit on the edge of the bed. "Do you accept?" I ask them.

Theren stands and then drops to his knees before me. "I pledge myself to you in this life and in the next, should we face our end at dawn."

I bend forward and kiss his lips before clasping the cuff on his arm as I've done with the others.

Cambion's display of loyalty is much more subtle, but no less impactful.

He takes one knee beside his brother and waits quietly.

The cuff for Cambion is gold, unlike the silver used for Dragan, Theren, and Baron or

the iron used for Pyre.

And it's with no light heart that I walk towards Variant and Silvanus. Their eyes lock onto me and I slow my steps. Variant keeps his head low, and watches me through a curtain of hair as he avoids looking into my eyes. I present Silvanus with a golden cuff and he smiles impishly.

"This is a very unusual gesture for someone to make to a god, but I suppose I can make an exception," he jests. Silvanus's smile broadens further as I turn to Variant. He looks on as though proud of the changes our old enemy has already made.

Variant no longer holds himself with the arrogance and entitlement of a false king, but he assumes a position of great remorse and determination.

I cup his cheek and feel him flinch slightly.

He doesn't pull away from my touch, but he seems surprised by it.

"Variant, do you accept my claim? Will you love and remain faithful to only me?"

"I am... unworthy of the gift you offer, Eilish." Variant shakes his head. "If you care at all about how your people will perceive you, I can't accept. Everything you've fought for..."

"Will be judged and scrutinized whether you're by my side or not," I interrupt him.

"If we are to face any adversity, then I wish for us to face it together." I push the hair back from his face and marvel at the perfection I see.

Beneath the beauty and the seemingly flawless appearance of Variant, I can see the scars of a damaged man.

“Please. Accept this bond and start anew. We can be strong together. You don’t have to be alone anymore. ”

Variant unbuttons the sleeve of his tunic and rolls back the fabric. I slip the cuff onto his arm as he mutters a heartfelt thanks. The look of pure gratitude in Variant’s eyes is proof that change is coming.

CAMBION

Vindication Camp

A scout rides into the camp at dawn as the forces don their armor.

Forged from a rare metal found in the Delendren Glade, the blacksmith and Eilish have designed something as fierce and beautiful as the queen herself.

I buckle the last of the plating onto my legs and stand to exit my tent.

On the wind, I hear whispers: Eilish and Theren’s voices.

It’s wrong to spy and yet I feel no regret when I hear the nature of their conversation. Eilish lowers her voice. “You can’t ask me to do this. After everything you’ve suffered?”

“It’s imperative that if the decision should present itself, you choose what’s best for the realms. That means if it comes down to saving us or the people, you choose the people no matter what.”

Eilish’s footfalls stop just outside my tent. Her gasp is loud enough for me to hear

through the tent's cloth. "Theren, if you have foreseen something in the mirror, I should know."

"Just promise me, Eilish."

It's then that Variant's voice joins their discussion. "Eilish, if anyone is to sacrifice themselves for this cause, it should be me. The others have suffered enough already. I told you about my past."

"Variant," she starts.

"It's always been my destiny to do this," he interrupts.

"I'm not going to argue with either of you," she says.

"No life is more valuable than another. No one is a sacrifice. That was Morrigan's way of doing things, not mine.

We stand and we fight. If we die, then we die together and for a purpose.

I'm not leading this army like a herd of sheep to slaughter," she states firmly.

"Now, I need to see Pyre before we leave."

I push through the opening of my tent with a practiced air of casual politeness. Eilish smiles up at me, unaware that I've been listening. "Good morning, my queen."

"Cambion." The breathy sigh as she speaks my name causes my heart to ache. She wraps her arms around my waist and rests her chin against my chest. "You smell like summer rain and elfroot smoke. Where are you off to?"

“I wish to meet with the scout to see if he brings word from the Sori. Queen Ivana and Lydia of the Amazons wanted nothing to do with this war when we met them in the Dales of Arborel, but I’ve kept in touch, hoping they change their minds.

When we first set out to make camp, I sent a man to the Dales to get their final answer. ”

Eilish kisses my cheek and gives a nod of approval.

She disappears through a black tent as Variant glances my way.

I wave to him and walk swiftly towards the scout as he removes his helmet.

The young elven male bows in a show of respect and holds out a scroll.

I accept the rolled sheet of parchment, expecting yet another rejection.

Instead, I peer down at a blood smeared letter written with obvious desperation.
“What happened?”

“The camp was attacked in the night. Most of the Sori were able to retreat to the Delendren Glade, but not without cost. Lady Lydia asked that I bring this to you immediately and inform the queen that the Amazons will be marching to the Plains of Reckoning to fight beside us.”

I clap the young man on the shoulder and hurry over to Pyre’s tent. The necromancer is still bare from the waist up, but his long crimson hair is secured back from his face in an intricate style, reminiscent of a Viking warlord. He cocks his head to the side as I enter.

“Why do I smell blood on you, Cambion?” he asks grimly.

Eilish appears at his words with a bundle of fabric in her hands. She takes one look at me and discards the cloth on the table. “They’re dead, aren’t they?”

I shake my head. “Not all of them. Queen Ivana is dead. Lydia has taken her place and led the Sori Amazons to the Glade to seek refuge. They are now on their way to the battlefield.”

“Was it Elioth?”

“The Knights of Umbra raided the tribe’s camp,” I reply. “If the Sori are marching to the battlefield, that means Elioth and Abedon won’t be far behind. We must move out as soon as possible. Have the men prepared the horses?”

Pyre nods.

“Good. Then I shall begin leading the soldiers out of camp. The Seelie will follow me. We can establish our position before the dark army arrives.”

Eilish clears her throat. “May luck guide you, Cambion.”

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“You as well, my queen.” I retreat from the tent and signal the soldiers to follow.

We reach the horses and ride towards the Plains of Reckoning.

Hooves beat against the ground as trees and hilltops flash through my peripheral vision.

The fields aren’t far from the camp. Lush green pastures fade to scorched earth as we draw nearer.

I see the mounds of bones and armor piled towards the sky from the last battle.

The soil is blackened and still stained with blood.

Clouds conceal the morning sun as lightning streaks across an ashen sky.

Lydia and her Amazons stand with their weapons ready.

She shouts to me, but thunder drowns out her cries.

I look to the sky just as Elioth appears amid the dark clouds.

Behind him is his shadow army, riding in on the wind and black clouds.

A bolt of lightning strikes the ground as the dark army approaches.

The lightning causes the ground to crack and separates the two armies.

I reach for my sword, but before I can do anything, a burst of darkness and fire flashes in my eyes. I feel myself falling from my horse and I hit the ground hard, the breath knocked out of me.

The darkness fades and I find Elioth atop me. We roll to the other side of the ravine. An army of orcs, demons, and creatures of nightmarish origin now stand between me and my allies. In the distance, I see Eilish as she rides to the frontlines with Theren and the others at her side.

“You and your brother have defied me for the last time,” Elioth yells. “Submit to my power and the darkness of the Chasm may take pity on you. Disobey and you will die a death more painful than any torture you have yet endured.”

“Do whatever you wish to me. I came here prepared to die.” My throat constricts as Elioth wraps his hand around my neck. Still, my words sound strong and clear. “Surviving this long has been nothing more than a twist of luck, Father.”

A bark of wicked laughter blares in my ear. “You think you’re ready to die, Cambion? What would Theren say if he knew he sacrificed everything only to have you throw it all away in a fit of foolish bravery?”

“Theren knows the price of freeing the realms from Abedon’s control. We’re prepared to do whatever is necessary to restore the balance. You were weak, you gave in to the forces of darkness and...”

“I followed my destiny! I followed the path laid out by our bloodline,” Elioth sneers, gripping my throat tighter than before.

My gasp slurs into a gurgle. “You and your brother broke the chain. You were born for greatness, for power. But all it took was a woman to sway Theren and the course of the world was changed forever.”

“Theren made a choice to be more than what you envisioned for him.”

“Theren dishonored our legacy.”

“You built a kingdom on weak foundations. And I’m ashamed to admit I once fell down the same well of disgusting uselessness.” I shove back, trying to dislodge Elioth’s hold, but he’s too strong. He forces me to my knees once more.

“Let me show you just what your brother did to me.” Elioth places his hand on my head and images play in my mind like a broken film reel. I see a young Theren. He isn’t a boy and not yet a man, but there’s a wisdom in his eyes that speaks of the terrors he faced in my stead.

Theren eases open the book and presses down on the secret button.

The shelf groans quietly before it opens without even a whisper of sound.

He pushes inside the dimly lit room and stares over at the book resting on the altar.

A bitter chill fills his spirit, a warning from someplace beyond this world. .. he should not be here.

And yet, Theren takes another step towards the black book. The purple stone on the center of its cover calls to him. But he isn’t weak. Theren reaches out a hand and places it gently on the stone. The clasp opens and the pages turn.

“For Cambion,” he whispers.

But the door bangs against the wall with a fierce gust of power. Elioth stands with seething hatred glaring from his red-rimmed eyes. Dark magic swirls around him as he storms over to the altar. “You should not be here! If you think you barely survived

the last punishment...”

The words of the Unseelie King halt as Theren slices open his palm and presses his hand onto the page of the open book.

Golden eyes morph into obsidian mirrors that reflect the evil within Elioth.

The Chasm rises, churning like a cloud of ash and smoke that surrounds the Unseelie King.

Theren speaks the dark words of the ancient elves, using every drop of his strength to rip open the fabric of the universe and end Elioth.

“You will never hurt my brother again,” Theren yells.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

The vision breaks and my chest burns with a raging fire.

My father releases me and I fall to the ground, heaving onto the dirt. I look up to where Eilish and the others ride towards the battlefield. I want to call to them, to tell them to stay back. But we know what’s at stake if we choose not to fight.

I’m not the coward I once was. Eilish’s love has changed me. “You will fail, Father.”

“Don’t you understand?!”

“Understand what?” I spit back.

“When Theren used his blood to send me into the Chasm, he bound us together. If I die, then so does he.” Elioth grips my hair, yanking me to my feet. “Do you want this

to end with the blood of your beloved brother?”

“He... knows the price,” I reply weakly, no longer sure what to do. “And he will destroy you.”

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EILISH

Plains of Reckoning

I see Abedon.

He stands on a pile of bodies that appear to be elven.

Thorned wyverns and the Knights of Umbra surround him protectively.

A horde of undead skeletons, orcs, shadow demons, ghouls, and possessed Seelie stretches towards the horizon in the distance.

The forces of Abedon and Elioth outnumber us one to a thousand.

“He has Cambion,” I hear myself say. My gaze moves over to Theren. I can see the fear in his eyes.

“We can’t just let him kill my brother.”

“I’m not going to let Elioth kill Cambion.

” I lift my hand and signal Pyre. He shoots an arrow at Elioth, but it never reaches its target.

Abedon blasts it out of the air with a flare of magic.

A victorious smile appears on his face, but it's short lived.

Though the arrow doesn't hit Elioth, it provides a distraction.

Cambion uses the opportunity to kick his father back and dive for cover.

Elioth bellows in rage, launching spells at his son. Theren looks to me with a silent plea in his eyes.

"Go to him," I order. "End Elioth. We'll focus on Abedon." And the war begins as swiftly as the wind blows. The Knights of Umbra charge on their winged steeds with a screech that fills the air. A volley of arrows soars across the battlefield.

I raise my blade and the soldiers move into formation.

"Steady," I call, watching as the line of orcs pushes towards the ravine.

"Now!" The wraith warriors float to the front and barrel through the orcs.

Pyre signals the archers once more and arrows rain down on the opposition.

Baron shifts in the saddle, seeming eager to join the fight.

The gargoyles take to the sky. Knights of Umbra clash against the stone guardians.

Swords of shadow batter against enchanted armor.

Myerdoth covers Dragan as they attempt to even the odds.

Theren moves swiftly through the chaos, inching his way towards his brother.

Shadow demons swarm him. My heart sinks but I can't worry for him.

I have to defend my people. "Mages, ready! Attack!"

A spectrum of color flashes like fireworks as spells break through the darkness.

Magic hovers all around, lingering for only the blink of an eye before exploding against our enemy.

"Baron!" I shout. The vampire releases a battle cry and shadow walks to the other side of the ravine.

Ghouls descend on him. I swallow thickly, eyes scanning the fight before me as I search for Cambion.

Lydia vaults over a troll and pulls herself onto the back of Cambion's mount.

The Amazon leader rides toward me, leaving behind a trail of severed heads and a cloud of dust. She pulls to a stop beside me, sweat beading on her brow and upper lip.

"There's a way around the ravine. We can send some of our forces to the other side to trap the horde, but if those demons find a way across..."

Then our soldiers won't stand a chance.

"Take Belroth and the golems with you. Aima and Kolvar will lead the next wave of attacks. Make sure you steer clear of Abedon." I snap the reins and urge my horse forward.

"On my signal, we ride east." The soldiers meet my gaze squarely as Lydia and her tribe move out of sight.

I hear the sounds of great wings flapping and the hairs on my arms stand on end.

Without another second of hesitation, I fling my dagger.

It whirls through the air and strikes one of the Knights of Umbra, stealing his soul and leaving him as nothing more than a pile of ash.

Soldiers rush towards the ravine to keep the demons at bay.

Variant spreads his wings and launches himself into the sky.

Wyverns roar. Fire spits from their powerful jaws, searing the ground and spreading flames across the barren lands.

Dark spellcasters form a bridge and orcs spill onto our side of the field.

I ride hard into the fight, crashing against iron shields. My mount tumbles.

I hit the ground with a painful grunt, bouncing once before I roll into a crouch.

A demon with pus yellow flesh and large horns lifts its hammer above its oddly small head.

I jump back, slamming my body into a ghoul waving around a wickedly curved sword.

It slashes towards my head, but I shove the ghoul at the demon.

The enormous war hammer smashes the ghoul's skull in one fatal blow. I dive for the sword.

My hand brushes the hilt. The sharp hiss of a wyvern catches my attention.

I hold still, glancing to my left until my eyes land on the serpent-like creature with wings and a mane of thorns.

The narrow muzzle curves upward, showing off a set of sharp teeth that could rip me to pieces.

I grab the sword quickly and kick the wyvern away from me.

A growl escapes the demon as I use the blade to deflect its attacks.

My foot catches on a body and I fall to the ground once more.

Silvanus appears. He blasts the demon with magic and summons dual axes. The primordial god twirls his weapons and fights with a warrior's grace. His broad shoulders flex each time he swings his axes.

I jump to my feet and spread my wings as the wyvern circles me.

With Silvanus occupying the demon, I'm left to deal with Abedon's lapdog.

The wyvern's taloned thumb swipes, its wings cutting through the air effortlessly.

I duck and slice through the webbing of its wing, causing the creature to shriek.

A second wyvern crawls towards me at a terrifying speed.

I grip my sword and run in the opposite direction.

My wings give me momentum.

I plunge my sword into the wyvern's chest, but a thick layer of bone protects its heart.

Wounded but alive, the wyvern sulks away to return to its master's side.

The second wyvern grips my shoulders with its claws and drags me across the ground.

My fingers slip and the sword drops back to the dirt.

I kick my legs and shove up to knock the creature off balance. The wyvern releases me.

Baron shadow walks over to a large orc, but I grab a dagger from his belt as he passes.

The wyvern leaps onto my back. I spin at the last second before I hit the ground and bury the dagger to the hilt within its belly.

A sputter of smoke belches from its mouth.

And then it freezes into a petrified statue of scales and teeth.

I kick it over and it shatters like delicate porcelain.

Pyre reaches my side and hands me my dagger. "Keep this with you," he demands in a scolding voice. "If you want to throw knives, I suggest you take Aima's daggers."

"I had to protect Dragan!"

Pyre grips my chin, forcing me to meet his sightless gaze. "Whether you want to believe it or not, the future of the realms depends on your survival." His thumb

caresses my bottom lip. "I gave you the dagger for a reason. Please... be more careful."

I press a kiss to his thumb and step away from him. "I promise."

CAMBION

Plains of Reckoning

The screeches and caws of the demonic black birds are nothing compared to the dark souls of the Knights of Umbra.

I block one sword, only to narrowly miss being gutted by another.

Elioth is busy fending off the barrage of spells the mages bombard him with.

One of the knights knocks me off of my feet and I land on my back beside a large stone.

A hand grips the front of my shirt, yanking me behind the rock.

Theren.

My brother shoves my back against the boulder and dabs away the blood dripping from my nose with his sleeve. "How did he get you, Cambion? Elioth was supposed to be far from the plains until the rest of us arrived," Theren asks. I bat away his hands and peek around the boulder.

"He was already here when I arrived."

“Did he ambush you?”

“No, the soldiers weren’t harmed. Elioth took only me.”

“Why?”

“He tried to convince me to submit to the darkness and threatened...”

“Easy, Brother,” Theren says soothingly. He brushes my hair back and searches my eyes for something. “We aren’t frightened children anymore. He threatened you because he’s afraid. Stay strong, Cambion. We can beat him.”

“He’s so much stronger than I remember.”

Theren steps away from me and uses his blood magic to summon the Staff of Scorn.

I press a hand to the shallow gouge in my side and mutter a healing spell beneath my breath.

My head spins. Nausea rips through my core and I double over.

Theren is there to catch me. A streak of crimson against his cheek seems so out of place on his perfect features.

“Elioth showed me what happened the day you sent him to the Chasm.”

My brother flinches, keeping his eyes trained on our father as he speaks. “It was Morrigan who told me to use the book. If I’d known it was a trap, that she only wanted Elioth out of the way so she could get her hands on his book... I wouldn’t have done it.”

“Liar. You would have done it or something equally reckless. And you would have done it just to save me.” I reach out and grip Theren’s shoulder, bringing his gaze back to mine.

“I can never truly repay you for all you’ve done to protect me.

Perhaps if I hadn’t been so blind to your suffering, we wouldn’t be fighting in this war. ”

“Dwelling on what could have been is useless. You’re my brother, Cambion. I need no other reason to do what I’ve always done and that is to keep you safe.” Theren claps me on the arm and charges Elioth when the mages are overwhelmed by the dark sorcerer’s power.

My legs are weak for a moment as the healing spell takes longer to seal my wounds.

I grit my teeth and shuffle over to a pile of bodies, in search of a weapon.

I need to provide Theren with backup. He’ll need it.

A sea of demons parts as Variant drops from the sky.

He uses a ray of light to send the shadow demons running and turns to face me.

“Glad to see you’re still alive, Cambion. But it appears just barely so.”

“I’m fine,” I snarl.

The angel snorts and shakes his head. A warm glow emits from his hand as he presses it over my slowly healing wound. The skin heats up until the pain leeches from my body. I shove him away, before catching myself. “I’m grateful for your aid, but Eilish

needs you by her side more than I do.”

He nods. “Don’t forget to use the communication rings. It would be nice to know the two of you are still breathing.

Variant leaps into the air once more as the clouds begin to swirl. The magic charging the atmosphere roils, mingling with the lightning and thunder that shakes the ground from time to time. Each flash of light illuminates the battle beyond the clouds.

Gargoyles tear into the dark riders and the Knights of Umbra unleash the wrath of darkness on the stone guardians. Hunks of rock fall from the sky, scattering the obscene number of orcs and ghouls still standing.

I pull myself from behind the boulder. My boots crunch lightly on the small pebbles that pepper the ground.

Pain nags at my back as I sneak closer to Elioth and Theren, crouched down like a thief in the night.

My father lifts a dark curse in the palm of his hand.

And that’s when I make my move. I run as fast as I can, as fast as my wounded body will carry me, and I tackle him to the ground.

Elioth shakes me off easily and sends me flying into a large boulder. It breaks with a loud crack.

Theren races over to me, but I raise my hand to keep him from getting too close. I stumble to my feet and stand tall against Elioth with defiance written on my face. “Let’s see who walks away from this fight, Father.”

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THEREN

Plains of Reckoning

“Ah anidakrivas!” Elioth thrusts his spell towards Cambion, but I push my brother out of the line of fire.

The magic grazes my arm, searing nearly to the bone.

I can’t use my power to heal myself if I want any chance of beating my father.

I don’t have the time. Elioth paces. He wipes blood from a cut on his cheek and snarls.

The words of the ancient elves heal him quickly and I breathe a curse to my ancestors quietly.

Cambion splits himself in two, using the illusion to distract the dark sorcerer while we come up with a plan. “The mages can’t help us for much longer. They’re needed elsewhere and I don’t want them to drain their power before they assist Eilish,” he says.

“I have an idea,” I answer.

My brother turns to me with a skeptical expression.

“Is this like that time you talked me into sneaking out of the temple and we nearly got

set on fire by the wards protecting the mountain?” Cambion digs his fingers into the mucky ground and pries up an old sword.

Though there’s a considerable amount of dirt on the weapon, I can tell from the narrow blade and curved hilt that it’s elven in origin.

“No, this is far more likely to end in death rather than just a few burns,” I reply.

My hands work swiftly to remove layers of my armor until I wear nothing more than a thin tunic and trousers.

I unlace my boots and toss them aside, feeling the ground beneath my bare feet as Cambion watches closely.

“I need to get in close. When I’m in position, I’ll… ”

“You aren’t using blood magic on Elioth, Theren. He told me about the day you sent him to the Chasm.”

“What of it?”

Cambion breathes in deeply. “Killing him will kill you, as well. Maybe we can just find a way to send him back.”

I flinch, remembering the day I set in motion events that are still haunting me to this day.

“You heard what Eilish said, we have to destroy them. Elioth came back from the Chasm stronger than before and I’m to blame.

If we send him back, he’ll only return with even more power. Perhaps more than

Abedon has now.”

“Then come up with a better idea.”

“We talked about this. Everyone knew fighting this war meant some of us may not return. I have to set this right, Cambion.”

Cambion grips the front of my tunic and pulls me closer, glaring into my eyes with a whirlwind of emotions in his eyes. “I know what we said, but I just got my brother back. I’m not ready to lose you, Theren. Not now. And not because of him.”

I swallow past the lump in my throat and step out of Cambion’s reach.

Elioth roars, sending a shockwave of blue energy hurling toward the mages.

They shield themselves, but I can see them growing weaker.

“The mirror,” I say suddenly. “Pyre said when the time comes that I must face our father, I’ll have to choose between the power of our bloodline and saving Eilish.

I use blood magic by choice, but the gift I inherited from Elioth is catoptromancy. ”

“It sounds like you’re onto something.”

“The world beyond the mirror isn’t a place of life or death, darkness nor light.

It’s an entity of its own and it consumes whoever lingers too long,” I explain.

“If we can get Elioth inside the shadow mirror and then break it, he won’t be able to get out.

Once consumed by that world, he will be no more. ”

“And you will no longer be bound by the spell you used to send him into the Chasm.”
There’s hope in my brother’s eyes once again.

“Get close. I’ll distract him. When the mirror is ready, give me the signal and we can end this.

Be careful, Theren.” Cambion runs over to the mages.

He casts a shield of his own and blocks Elioth’s next attack.

I prop my gear against the cracked boulder and move quickly across the field.

My steps are soft on the soil, leaving behind no trace of my presence in the area.

The gear is nothing more than a diversion meant to make Elioth believe I’m hurt or cowering behind cover.

I adjust my vision as I creep through throngs of soldiers and hellish monsters.

I blink and the colors dim, washing the world in hues of gray.

Elioth’s aura stands out like an ink stain on parchment.

I call on the shadows, power not unlike the darkness that Dragan has mastered.

It flows through me as real and vital as blood.

The shadows swell, churning in a way that matches the clouds above our heads.

I move them, shaping them into illusions of reflective surfaces before summoning my mirror.

Elioth's back is to me as I step into a small clearing.

Cambion meets my gaze from over our father's shoulder.

The dark sorcerer catches Cambion watching and smiles as his eyes land on me.

The reflective illusions circle Elioth. His spells falter as his concentration is split between Cambion and the floating object around him.

"Stop these childish games and face me, Theren! Trickery won't save you from the darkness you fear so much," he slurs.

"I can sense it. You pretend to be a master of your craft, but deep inside you're still just a frightened boy playing with power beyond his understanding."

"You're wrong. I've been shown the way, Father. Cambion and I both have. Eilish has already taught us what it means to be a true leader."

"She is an abomination!"

Unbridled rage rises within me. I clench my jaw and pour my energy into opening the mirror.

Elioth's eyes widen. He glances around, searching for the mirror among the illusions twirling around him.

The ground begins to tremble and the ghouls nearby scatter.

Wind kicks up dust, blowing it around like a desert storm.

I call out to Cambion in my mind. Now!

Cambion forces his power into my spell as I weave a cocoon of destructive magic around Elioth.

My eyes blacken like the mirror's surface and blood drips from Cambion's nose.

The energy builds to a crescendo. Elioth drops to his knees with a roar that causes my ears to ring.

The shadow mirror widens, opening a gateway into the other world.

I use the vortex of magic and thrust Elioth through the surface.

An explosion of great force knocks me down.

My body aches and bile crawls up my throat, causing me to gag, but I hold back.

I press my hands to the ground and push to my knees.

Cambion stands in a patch of scorched stone with the mirror in his arms. Elioth pounds against the unseen barrier with eyes burning with a promise of retribution.

Though Cambion can't see the silver vines crawling up Elioth's arms or the cracks like fractured glass forming on his skin, I know he senses the evil of our father fading.

Already, my ability to see into the mirror dwindles.

“How do we destroy the mirror?” Cambion asks weakly.

“What has been forged of shadow, must be undone by light. Use your power, Cambion.”

I stumble back, splashing into a shallow pool of blood. It soaks through my tunic, staining it black, green, and crimson. Cambion sends a tendril of light into the mirror and the darkness recoils. Cracks begin to form along the frame until the mirror shatters with a high-pitched squeal.

DRAGAN

Plains of Reckoning

“Fuck yeah! Did you see that?!” Baron’s voice blares through the communication ring as the dust settles around Cambion and Theren.

It’s unlike Baron to cheer anyone on, let alone the Sons of Elioth.

But even I can’t turn a blind eye to their impressive show of magic.

Elioth, last of the dark sorcerers that draw from the Chasm, is no more.

His heirs stand victorious where he met his end.

“Yes, I fucking did,” I reply curtly. “But if you haven’t noticed, I have the Knights of Umbria on my tail!”

“I’m sorry, Dragan. If I could fly, I would help.

” The line on our communication rings goes silent.

I curse under my breath and catch sight of Silvanus obliterating a cluster of shadow demons.

He throws one of his mystical axes and it boomerangs back to him, after cutting down another slew of enemies.

But as ten fall, twenty more take their place.

Abedon’s army is beyond anything we prepared for.

My companions and I spent ages fighting against Variant when the real threat had been building a monstrous army—the likes this universe has never seen.

I call out to Pyre over my communication device, even as I see him in the distance.

The necromancer flips onto the shoulders of a stone golem and fires a stream of arrows into a line of orcs.

He leaps from the golem and onto a horse, barreling across the battlefield as if the mount itself is possessed by the power of The Veil.

“Pyre!” I yell again.

“A little busy at the moment!”

“Do these things have a weakness? Our weapons are useless against the dark riders.”

I hear the sound of clashing shields and the sickening suction of a sword being pulled out of a ghoul. “The Knights of Umbra have not risen since the Singularity. They

may be conditioned to the..."

"I need a simple answer, Necromancer! If there's a way to kill them, I need to know."

"The only being to ever successfully kill a Knight of Umbra without Eilish's dagger was Variant's father.

You need the Sword of Eternal Flame." Pyre drops the line and my ears fill with static.

I search the scuffle below for any sign of Variant just as he soars toward a cluster of wyverns.

He spins mid-air and slices the belly of one of the beasts, causing thick blood to rain down on the soldiers and orcs below.

"Variant!"

The angel turns, changing course until he reaches my side. I can barely hear his voice over the roar of the wind. "What do you need?"

"Your sword!"

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Variant unsheathes his sword and the blade sparks to life.

Flames engulf the metal in a cleansing fire.

He tosses it to me, but a wyvern swipes me with its tail.

The sword twirls as it falls to the ground.

Variant dives after the enchanted weapon as Myerdoth knocks the wyvern out of the sky.

The Knights of Umbra surround Variant. He swings the blade wildly, trying to drive them back.

I use my wings to shield my body as I push through their ranks to cover Variant's flank, but he stops me with a wall of magic. "I've got this. Find Eilish. Make sure she's okay."

Myerdoth nods. "Go to the queen. I can cover him."

My eyes scan the battle for any sign of Eilish, but it's my heart that finds her.

I sense her anger and confusion as she fights her way towards Abedon.

Like an angel of reckoning, she slices through anything that stands in her way.

Blood covers her armor and streaks of red mar her lovely face.

I glide to the ground beside Eilish and block an incoming blow.

“Elioth is dead. Cambion and Theren are alive, but their magic is nearly drained. Variant is fighting the Knights of Umbra with Myerdoth, but there seems to be no end to Abedon’s forces. ”

“Baron says the souls of those who have fallen can’t cross over into The Veil.

The barrier is weakening and we’re running out of time.

” Eilish uses her sleeve to wipe the sweat from her face, causing more blood to smear along her cheek.

“Baron and Pyre are trying to contain the energy, but the creatures in The Veil are drawn to all of the death.”

“What do suppose we should do?” I ask.

“The only thing we can do: keep fighting.” She braces her feet against the ground and pushes off, leaping into the sky as her wings open. I follow. My shadows spread along the ground, obscuring the orcs’ vision.

Baron’s voice booms in my ear. “Vampires!”

“In daylight?!” I hear Eilish ask.

“They’re not like me or the vampire mercenaries. These are natural daywalkers that feed off fear. Don’t let them touch you or else they’ll drain your life force,” he warns.

PYRE

Plains of Reckoning

My head throbs and my eyes burn with a searing pain as I summon sight from The Veil.

Images flicker until the haze around my vision clears.

I tear the mask from my face and raise my hands towards the sky.

Baron appears at my side, using all his power to keep The Veil from bleeding into this world.

But I sense his exhaustion as if it were my own.

“We can’t keep this up forever Pyre,” he groans. I see his legs buckle beneath the force of our efforts.

I glance over my shoulder. Variant falls to the ground with burns scarring his wings.

He coughs and sputters, clinging to his sword as the Knights of Umbria descend on him.

Silvanus joins Variant’s fight, but even he doesn’t have the strength to heal his own wounds.

Cambion and Theren limp from one enemy to the next, covered in the Unseelie’s blood from using forbidden magics. Dragan and Eilish are faring no better.

Our companions are losing the fight.

Vampires surround Eilish. She lifts her chin in defiance.

I feel a stir in the air. My gaze is drawn to the pile of growing bodies beneath Abedon. He smiles, eyes swirling like the sky of The Veil. “Baron! Abedon’s drawing on the ethers. If he focuses enough, he may be able to take from the wellspring itself.”

“What do we do?” Genuine worry colors Baron’s voice.

“Tear it down! Release the dragon!”

I lift my arms toward the sky, squeezing my hands into fists before yanking down the barrier.

A deafening roar fills my soulless chassis with icy tendrils of fear.

Baron dashes towards Eilish and places himself between her and the vampires.

Harpies fly out of the portal, diving towards the dark army with a vengeance.

Abedon looks on. Uncertainty flashes in his gaze.

My bow manifests in my hands and I race towards Variant.

He sees me coming and rolls on the ground as I fire arrows at the Knights of Umbria.

With my distraction, he’s able to climb to his feet and sever the head of the Knight King.

Horrific screeches bring me to my knees and my vision fades to black once more.

A hand grips my throat and tosses me to the ground.

My bow disintegrates, turning to ash in the palm of my hand.

“You think to stand in my way?!” Abedon growls as he pins me to the ground. I bring my knee up and slam it into his spine, but it’s useless. He lifts me up, only to slam me back down, knocking the air from my lungs. “You should have died long ago, with the rest of the humans!”

I kick up, wrapping my leg around his neck and flipping him onto his back.

Abedon shouts angrily as I assault him with magic.

I know he can taste it on his tongue. I know he hungers for power that will never be his.

“Feel that?” I ask mockingly. “It’s what Morrigan fought so hard to get her hands on.”

“What... what sorcery is that? No element in this world radiates such immense power.” Abedon comes into focus as my vision returns. “Tell me, Pyre, how did a human come across this?”

“True power comes to those who are worthy.” I leap out of the way, evading a ripple of dark magic from Abedon.

“True sacrifices aren’t measured in the number of bodies that have bled to fuel your magic.

You were a disgrace to all arcane masters.

That is why the gods denied your ascension.

It had nothing to do with Silvanus and Morrigan. ”

“And what great sacrifice do you think Silvanus made? Why is he more worthy of divine power than I am?”

“He served and still serves a higher purpose.” I cast a wall of fire between us and I run for my mount. The horse tosses its mane as it gallops over to where Baron and Eilish fight side by side. Eilish nods and grabs ahold of the saddle horn, using it to swing herself up and behind me.

“Can you get me in closer?” she asks. “I tried to fly overhead, but the wyverns are guarding Abedon. Flumph took care of most of the hounds.”

“I just felt his power, Eilish... he is more powerful than we thought.”

She grips my shoulder, squeezing tightly. “I have to do this.”

I feel a catch in my throat but she’s right.

This is her calling. “I’ll do as you ask, but be careful.

I don’t want to have to put your soul to rest in The Veil.

” My hands snap the reins and the mount veers to the left.

Eilish brushes a kiss to my cheek, steadies herself with a hand on my back, and jumps over the wall of flames.

Her wings flap, extinguishing the flames with a gust. Smoke swirls around her like an

aura of destruction.

I tear my gaze away. It isn't my lack of faith in Eilish that fills me with dread, but my fear of the darkness that fuels Abedon's magic.

I've already loved, lost, and lived well beyond my years.

Losing Eilish to such darkness would be my undoing.

Even my bond with Baron—though something I cherish—doesn't compare to how I feel for Eilish.

This is her destiny. I have no right to take this from her, no matter how I feel. And if I watch her battle against our enemy for the liberation of the realms, I would give my own life to save her. I would give anything to save her. But I can never dishonor Eilish or her wishes by interfering.

I pull the horse to a stop near the Seelie soldiers and Amazon warriors.

"There is an Elemental coming. He will attack everything that moves on this battlefield. You must protect yourselves. Poisons and mortal weapons won't harm the dragon.

Use the elements and pray it's enough," I order.

"Fire, ice, stone—whatever you can conjure."

EILISH

Plains of Reckoning

“So, the day has come that we finally meet,” Abedon says as he runs a hand through his hair, mouth curling into a smile at the edges. He is handsome and there’s a confident swagger to his walk.

“I’m not interested in your conversation,” I spit at him.

He chuckles at me. “I have heard so much about you and yet I feel as if I know nothing at all.”

My steps are light, deliberate. Abedon watches me closely. I hear the familiar roar of the dragon that laid waste to The Veil Forest and Pyre’s home. Harpies circle above my head, no doubt drawing on the death and pain that thickens the air. “From what I gather, you and I aren’t so different.”

“I am no abomination.”

If he means to upset me, it doesn’t work. “Though we are both products of foretold prophecies, only one of us can rise as the new power.”

“You see yourself as my equal?” His laughter mingles with the thrashing bodies and explosions of magic that rage around us. “You’re a child, Eilish. These people may call you their queen, but you are a plague, a leech that will suck this world dry, if given the chance.”

“You’re wrong.”

Abedon shakes his head. “Morrigan was the same in her youth—headstrong and yet so naive.”

“Morrigan was a woman driven mad by love and fear, a woman who chose to betray the realms in her search for power rather than do what was right,” I hiss. “She had to die so we can build a future. Elioth had to die as well. Now, you are all that stands between the realms and peace.”

“A dragon, Harpies, spellcasters, and necromancers... you think you can beat me with your rebel army? You’re a fool, Eilish.

” Abedon swings his sword. I barely deflect the blow.

Vibrations shoot down my arms, causing me to cringe.

I grit my teeth and dig my heels into the dirt.

Abedon attempts to knock me off balance.

My blood-drenched hands slip on the dagger and my grip falters.

I bash my head against Abedon’s skull. He stumbles back and I fight against the throbbing in my temples.

My fingers curl tighter around the blade and, for a moment, I think it’s all that can protect me.

But that isn’t true. I’ve been given the power to protect myself—power to make sure that I, and those who are like me, never have to be victims of fate again.

I drop my dagger. It falls into a puddle of blood.

Abedon chuckles darkly. The condescending glint in his eyes makes me want to carve them out of his head.

I lash out with a stream of light. Abedon grabs ahold of it as though it's a physical thing. I can see it burning his hands as he pulls me closer like the beam of light is some sort of mystical rope. I try to retract the spell. It doesn't work. Abedon's face contorts into a sneer.

"Your grace tastes so sweet." He yanks me against his chest and licks a long trail along my neck. Then he spins me around, but his hold is bruising. Each time I try to wrestle free, he grinds his erection against me.

"I can be forgiving, Eilish. Join me and allow me to feed off your power. Be my queen and no one else has to die."

He uses his hold on my power and lifts my arm as though I'm a puppet on a string. My fingers curl slightly and black bleeds into my lightness, tainting it with cold shadows. Rock begins to form from the sky and as I look upwards, I realize my magic is ripping the gargoyles apart, one at a time.

"Stop!" I yell as tears stream down my face. Lightning flashes and the elemental dragon flies over the last sliver of light in the sky. Dragan releases a furious cry. My companions rush towards me, but are stopped by a vortex of power that surrounds Abedon.

"I will allow them to live," Abedon says as he faces me with intent. "Only if you agree to be my queen, Eilish. Only if you agree to be my wife."

"She will never agree to aid you!" Silvanus yells from behind me.

Abedon turns his corruption on Silvanus as the god approaches from behind.

Silvanus fights Abedon's power—using his own magic as a stream of energy that pours out from his chest. But Abedon turns his darkness towards Silvanus.

And, little by little, he forces Silvanus' energy back. Silvanus crumbles to his knees.

I open my mouth to scream once more, but something begins to unfurl inside me. I reach for it, summoning it to the surface. I see nothing... hear nothing... but I feel it, all the same.

I am power. And power flows up and through me.

Raw, unfiltered magic erupts from my body.

The untamed hunger of my succubus side fuels my lightness and I unleash the power of the angel and the succubus at the same time.

My wings wrap around Abedon and he pulls his attack from Silvanus, facing me instead.

His eyes go wide as he feels the power radiating from me.

I reach for his head.

“You can't defeat the darkness!” he yells at me.

“I don't want to defeat the darkness,” I reply, hardly able to recognize my own voice. “But the new world will have no place for beings like you.” I use my power to force Abedon onto his hands and knees.

He tries to fight the surge of magic flowing through me but it's too strong, even for him. The lightness and darkness within me gush, each fueling the other until I feel as if I'll explode if I don't release the power immediately.

I face Abedon and hold my hands out towards him.

His eyes go even wider as I funnel everything within me into him.

As soon as the energy hits him, he clenches his eyes shut tight and then attempts to raise his hands to fight me.

But my power is too much for him. It's too much for me and all I know is I have to continue emptying it from myself and into him.

I have to fill him until his body can't take anymore.

And that point comes quickly.

Abedon throws his head back and begins screaming as the lightness of my angel energy surrounds him and the darkness of my succubus shadows wrap around him, entering into his eyes, ears, nose and mouth.

As I watch, blood begins pouring out of every hole in his body—from his mouth, nose, ears and eyes. Still, I don't stop. I don't let up. I have to free myself from this power. If I keep it inside me, I'm afraid it will burn me until I become nothing but flames.

And that's exactly what happens to Abedon—he gets engulfed in an incendiary of power that burns through him.

BARON

Plains of Reckoning

I pound my fists against the barrier, even as it begins to eat away at the skin on my knuckles. Pyre syphons energy from the dead and uses it to slowly break through. We need to get to Eilish. I have to know she's alright. "Theren, can you tear this down with blood magic?"

Though it goes against my natural instincts, the Unseelie's magic might be the key. Theren hobbles over on unsteady legs and lifts the staff—the barrier breaks before the spell is ever uttered from his lips.

I run over to where Eilish and Abedon fought.

She stands tall with her head high, wings proudly on display, and she's heaving in breaths, her chest rising and falling with the effort.

Abedon is no more. He's now reduced to a pile of charred ash before her. Ash that lifts on the wind and is carried away. But my concern is no longer for Abedon and his army. It's entirely devoted to Eilish.

Her eyes are different. Glowing orbs stare back at me as I make my way to her side. She doesn't seem to notice me. I hover in front of her, wanting to hold her, but unsure of myself.

"Eilish," I say but she continues to stare straight ahead as if she can't hear or see me.

"Silvanus!" I call to the god, where he stands not far off. "What the fuck is wrong with her? Why isn't she responding?"

“It’s time. We must restore the balance while Eilish is in this state,” Silvanus answers.

“If we don’t, the power inside her will continue to build until she destroys everything left in this world.

” He lifts her into his arms in a bridal hold.

Eilish’s eyes remain open, unblinking as she stares off into the distance.

“Can you and Pyre take us to the Tomb of The Gods?”

I look to Pyre. He nods as he faces Silvanus. “Baron will need to feed to resource his magic and energy, but we can do it.”

The dark army remains as the balance is still askew. Kolvar catches sight of us and shouts. “Go! Aima and I will fight off the soldiers. Myerdoth and Belroth are clearing the skies.”

The portal to The Veil remains open. It won’t be long before it consumes everything. We hang on a thin line with multiple threats on the verge of a cataclysmic event.

“You must feed before we can go any further,” Pyre says as he faces me.

I want to argue, because time is of the essence, but I know he’s right.

He reaches for me and I sink my fangs into his arm.

With the bond, we both pull strength from my feeding.

I taste his blood on my tongue and he taps into the power of The Veil inside me.

I break away from his wrist and help Pyre cast a portal. Silvanus and the others pass through first, cutting down demons as they go. Variant tosses his sword to Aima. She accepts it and uses the Sword of Eternal Flame to smite the Knights of Umbra.

Pyre and I make it through the portal at the same time. We land in the Cogost Mountains.

BARON

Cogost Mountains

This place isn't right.

I can feel the souls that still linger. Remnants of a battle long ago still litter the ground. I can see the temple at the top of the mountain, but my feet won't allow me to take another step. Silvanus carries Eilish in front of me, surrounded by the others.

"Why can't I follow?" I insist as I glance down and find my feet stuck in place.

Pyre remains at my side. "Because we don't belong here, Baron. We are soulless entities, Guardians of The Veil. Our presence isn't welcome here."

Part of me expected this.

Why would a vampire be welcome in a place like this? My instincts tell me to go after her, to be there when Eilish returns to herself, but I know the damned don't dwell here. I must trust that the others will protect her as fiercely as I would.

And I know they will.

Theren slumps against a large crystal protruding from the ground. Cambion looks between his brother and Eilish. Theren shakes his head. “Go with her, Cambion. One of us should be there. I’ll only slow you down.”

The elf hurries after Silvanus as they trek up the mountain path. Pyre paces in a circle, marking the ground before gesturing me over. “We have to be ready in case Abedon still has demons or wraiths protecting the mountain. It’ll take all three of us, but we must do this for Eilish.”

“But Abedon is dead.”

“Yes, but there will be those who are still willing to fight for his cause as well as those who think they have no other choice but to fight.” He crouches down and draws symbols in the ash.

“Pyre, that’s...”

“I know,” he replies. “But if Silvanus fails and Abedon’s minions take the temple back, then we must be ready to destroy the mountain. Only Eilish will sit on that throne.”

VARIANT

The Tomb of The Gods

Eilish rests in the arms of the primordial god, eyes open and haunted by unseen foes.

I feel helpless. I feel as though I'm once again that frightened boy chained within a concrete box, wondering if my mother is still alive.

Only this time, it's the woman to whom I've chosen to devote my life. And now I face losing her.

"How much time do we have?" I ask.

Silvanus leads me to the doorway of the temple.

The ground is covered with bodies. Blood sticks to my boots as I follow him inside.

"Seconds. Maybe minutes if luck shines on us." He steps over corpses and forces his way inside the chamber.

The Throne of The Gods rests at the far end of the room.

Silvanus's presence seems to awaken something.

Stone cracks along the walls, allowing pale light to filter in.

The shadows retreat, skittering into the corners.

Cambion uses a surge of magic to collapse one of the columns. “Place her there. We’ll need her lying flat to...”

“No,” Silvanus interrupts. “It was my magic that gave the Sacred Oath its power. It was my magic that saved the realms and locked Abedon away. Eilish isn’t only my lover, she was once my pupil. Everything in our lives has been leading us to this moment.”

I step in front of Cambion when he attempts to argue against Silvanus. “What do you need us to do?”

“Barricade the door. If any of Abedon or Elioth’s followers remain, they may come here. No matter what you hear, let no one inside.” Silvanus carries Eilish over to the throne. I grab Cambion by the arm and steer him out of the throne room and into the temple.

“You had no right to agree to this!” he shouts.

“Maybe not, but that doesn’t mean I’m wrong. Silvanus was the one who was there before any of us. He was the first to nurture her magic, to feel her love. If anyone can reach Eilish wherever she is and help her restore the balance... it’s him.”

“Eilish should have a choice.”

“This is her choice, Cambion,” I chuckle dryly. “She said to put the realms first, to set them free no matter the cost. Eilish would give her life to save innocent fae like Noni just as much as she would give her life to save a broken... undeserving false king like me.”

The fight leaves Cambion. Only sadness remains in his gaze. “I love her. And I blame myself for all of this.”

“There’s no use in blaming yourself anymore,” I answer on a sigh. “Or anyone else for that matter.” I inhale deeply. “Silvanus’s plan may still work.”

“What plan, Variant?” he asks, moving to stand just inches from my face. His brow pinches into a frown. “Do you know something the rest of us don’t?”

“I’m not certain. It’s just a theory...”

“Tell me.”

I swallow past the lump in my throat and seal the doors behind us. “Baron was able to save Pyre and Aima and prevent Morrigan’s plan to use a dark tantric ritual to break open The Veil.”

Cambion takes a step back, realization creeping into his expression. “Silvanus is going to use the power we gave Eilish to bind himself to her.”

“But he isn’t planning to split guardianship,” I explain. “He’s going to use it to make her his vessel, to give her his divine power.”

“And she will rise as a goddess.” The elf leans against the door with a stricken look on his face. “Will it kill Silvanus?”

“It may kill us all or set us free, but it’s the price to pay and he’s willing to make the sacrifice.

” I take my place beside Cambion. He flinches as I draw nearer, but doesn’t deny me his company.

“When this is over... if we’re still alive, I mean, I don’t want to be a leader.

I’m not ready, Cambion. I have no qualms about being Eilish’s consort, but I am no king.”

“But your father...”

“Was no better than your own before he died,” I confess.

“There is no kingdom in the sky. No Earlann or Oronrel. Even the Dales of Arborel have fallen. All that remains are the refugees in the Delendren Glade and those who defend the keep we’ve built in the mortal realm.

There is no place for me among them when I was the one who took everything they had.

I’m better off serving our queen elsewhere.”

“If an undead vampire can find his place beside a human necromancer and a gargoyle can befriend a house brownie, there’s a place for you, Variant.

I, myself, have come to cherish the friendship I share with Zir and the mages.

Theren banters with Bombri and Flumph while playing with satyr children in the courtyard. Anything is possible.”

I feel warmth bloom in my chest. “Are you trying to comfort me?”

“I’m trying to give you hope for the future that Eilish envisioned for the realms. It’s her dream that we must keep alive. No matter what happens here and now, that is our legacy.”

SILVANUS

The Tomb of The Gods

Her hands are stiff and frigid as I drape her across the throne.

Though the gods themselves are long gone, their power still lingers here.

It's faint, but there may be enough to invoke the ancient oath of peace and balance once more.

I pull her hand against my chest and let my warmth seep into her. "Hold on, little one."

My lips brush her temple and I allow the energies to flow through us. Eilish is the ultimate vessel, the one strong enough to bear the burden of birthing the new world. And if it should be my fate that I die here today, then...

"So be it," I whisper against her skin. The divine grace of heavenly powers fill me.

The rays of light flow into Eilish, forcing her to gasp and writhe as she lay on the throne.

I hold her steady, but she releases a scream that shakes the walls of the crumbling temple.

Dust and stone rain down from the ceiling.

Columns fall like dominos, tumbling over, before crashing onto the ground.

Debris kicks up and a shard of stone knicks my cheek.

Warm blood drips on Eilish's armor. Bright light envelopes her body and I claim her mouth with a kiss.

Light passes between us until the physical world begins to fade...

SILVANUS

Blessed Meadows

A radiant curtain of sunlight bathes my face in a warm glow.

The scent of lavender tickles my nose. Of course.

Ever since Eilish was a young child, she adored the purple fields of fragrant flowers.

Though the Blessed Meadows appear to each soul differently, this isn't where Eilish belongs.

She needs to be with her people, leading them into a new era.

I hear the sound of wings flapping in the wind. A shadow falls over the field. Eilish lowers herself gracefully to the ground in front of me. A smile stretches wide across her face.

"Blue skies. I can hardly believe it," she sighs as she walks closer to me. "Is it over? Is Abedon..."

“He’s dead.”

She nods but there’s no emotion on her face. “I killed him.”

“Yes,” I answer, using my thumb to touch one of the balls of her cheeks.

I glance down at her and take in her person—she’s dressed as if she were a goddess.

The long, ivory garment is very thin. Fashioned out of lace and nothing more, the dress allows teasing glimpses of her skin to shine in the sunlight.

“But there is more to be done, Eilish. The dark army remains. If we can’t restore the balance, then all of this will have been for nothing. You can’t stay here.”

“My mother and sister are here.”

“This place... it isn’t real,” I say gently.

“How is that possible?”

“This is a place where those who are lost come to hide from the world. Your body is strong enough to hold amazing power, but your mind is fragile.”

“What will happen to me?”

I tuck a strand of black hair behind her ear and dip my head to kiss her.

“Let me take care of you, Eilish.” My hands move down her shoulders and trail faint lines on her arms. She shivers with a little sigh that I capture with my lips.

Her hands move to my chest to squeeze and knead the muscle that bulges beneath my

armor.

I grip her hips and bunch up the lace that covers her body.

“This time will be different,” I start as I look at her. “Then any other time we have melded our bodies.”

“How?”

I silence her with a finger on her lips. “Wait and see.”

Eilish dips her tongue into my mouth, moaning as I pull the dress over her head.

I drop the gown off to the side. She stands before me wearing nothing but a trusting smile and her wings.

I suck her tongue into my mouth, causing her to squeal.

Eilish pries at the straps of my armor, growing impatient as the chest plate seems a bit stubborn.

I pull away from her kiss and use my magic to undress myself.

Hungry eyes watch as I trail a hand along the contours of my muscled chest. Lower and lower, sliding my fingers through a light dusting of hair.

She squeezes her thighs together and I know she’s envisioning my beard marking the tender flesh of her thighs.

I lick my lips and wrap my fingers around my cock, falling back into the plush grass.

I spread my legs slightly, tucking an arm behind my head to tempt her.

Laying out like an offering for her to devour. “Come.”

Her eyes widen and a pink blush stains her cheeks.

Ever the illusion of innocence, Eilish tiptoes over to me.

She kneels beside my legs seeming unsure of herself.

But I grab her hand and lead it to the thick shaft of my member.

It jumps against her palm and I bite my lip.

That blush on her cheeks spreads, touching the tips of her ears and her chest. “You grow more beautiful each time I look at you. It was a great honor to show you the pleasures of taking a lover.”

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Eilish gasps again, ducking her head in a coy manner at odds with the warrior I saw on the battlefield.

I yank her down to my level, feeling the slide of her skin and the feathers of her wings against my body.

She tucks them into her back and I roll over, pinning her beneath me with my weight.

She presses her nose to my neck and inhales deeply.

“I love the way you smell,” she says. “Like water in a stream or the crisp wind blowing through the trees. Like moist earth.”

I nip at her ear and kiss my way down her neck.

She rocks her hips, rubbing her slick against my thigh.

My hands cup her breasts and I seal my lips around one sensitive nub at a time.

She pants as my tongue rolls, squealing each time I bite her nipple with my teeth.

Frantic thrusts of her hips urge me lower.

I leave a wet trail along her belly, dipping my tongue into her navel.

Eilish spreads her legs wider, trying to accommodate the breadth of my shoulders.

I lift her legs and prop them up, spreading her glistening lips as she flattens her feet on my back. The angle of her hips is perfect.

“Hold on to something,” I warn, pressing a kiss to her inner thigh. “When I taste you on my tongue, I won’t stop until I’ve had my fill.”

“Oh god... Silvanus.”

A bead of moisture slides from between her folds and I give in to the carnal urges inside me.

My tongue captures the essence of Eilish and I groan, sliding my tongue between her lips.

I taste sweat, magic, and woman. She bucks up as I flutter over her swelling clit.

Eilish’s thighs flex and release over and over.

I kiss the sensitive nub that twitches beneath my ministrations.

Eilish coos, riding my tongue with subtle movements of her hips before I suck her clit.

She screams. Pulsating suction eases into teasing licks and firm strokes, bringing her higher and higher still.

I cover her heated flesh with my mouth, slurping as her juices soak my beard.

The tip of my tongue tickles her anus and she flies over the edge.

I release her legs as she curls her fingers in my hair.

Her thighs spread and she rolls her hips, forcing my face against her sweetness.

I pull her nub between my teeth, tugging slightly and a gush of warmth hits my chin.

Eilish pushes me away, but I grip her ass hard and grind her mound against my lips until she climaxes again.

EILISH

Blessed Meadows

My chest heaves as Silvanus rises from between my thighs.

I feel the heat of my blush grow as I stare down the length of my belly at this gorgeous deity.

His full beard glistens with slick. Liquid drips slowly down his chest and rippling abdomen.

His thick erection stands proudly as he smiles down at me.

Hues of gold and emerald dance in his eyes as the light warms our skin.

Silvanus lays over me, bracing his arms on either side of my head as he kisses me.

I taste myself on his lips and moan. The nudge of his cock between my folds causes my hips to stutter.

He grinds against me, brushing his hard length on my clit until I shiver.

His lips graze my ear and he presses into me, forcing my muscles to comply with his intrusion. I bite his neck, drooling at the feel of the delicious stretch. His hips pull back only to snap forward. I rake my nails down his back and hear a deep growl in my ear.

A slow, deliberate dance begins. Pressure coils inside me. Past and present begin to collide, and I remember the first time Silvanus brought me such great pleasure. His fingers move down to where we're connected. My head spins.

I arch my back, not sure if my body wants to get closer or retreat, but Silvanus doesn't let me. Those fingers move to my clit and I squeeze my eyes shut. His hips pick up speed, thrusting hard and deep. I fight against it for as long as I can, but my body gives Silvanus what he needs.

And then it becomes all too much. My legs tremble, body convulsing as he pumps into me.

Silvanus turns my head. "Look at me, Eilish." He holds me close. I see something unreadable in his eyes. "Open yourself to me."

I realize now what he means. And like I have always done, I obey the wishes of my mentor. I take a deep breath and open myself to his magic. But something is different. Something feels different. "Silvanus?"

My dagger appears in my hand. Silvanus's magic takes control of my body. And as I watch, in horror, the blade sinks into his chest. I try to pull away, to stop myself from harming him, but I can't.

"I love you," he whispers as crimson spills from his lips. Magic flashes. It burns away the image of my lover and the field of lavender turns to soot beneath me.

I see a portal ahead. When I glance down again, Silvanus is gone. Disappeared as though he were never here.

Someone calls my name in the distance.

I throw myself through the opening.

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EILISH

The New World

My eyes open.

I sit on a throne of gold and white marble.

Cambion and Variant push open the doors to the large chamber and I rise to my feet.
“Where is he?! Where is Silvanus?” I demand.

“I am here.”

I spin on my heels and see the god emerge from behind a gilded column.

Tears of relief fall from my eyes and I run to him.

He lifts me into his arms. Confusion, anguish, and happiness war within me as I hold him tight.

My hands curl into the fabric of his tunic.

He pulls back and pushes the hair out of my face.

“W-what happened?” I ask.

Silvanus smiles down at me. “You are the balance, Eilish. Inside you is endless

power,” he explains. “Light and dark coexisting. I thought it would take many to achieve equilibrium, but all along I only needed one. The oath was always meant for you.”

Silvanus sets me on my feet and I look around. Frames of gold display images of me... graphic depictions of my conquests. The destruction of the Threst, fighting against darkness, discovering my powers, healing the injured, forging alliances... everything is here.

I walk along the walls until I stop in the center of the room. Variant points to the ceiling and I see a mural of myself holding Abedon’s head in my hand. Wings spread and eyes glowing as a battle rages around me. I can almost smell the burning fires and feel the weight of my armor.

Footfalls thunder in the corridor and I glance over my shoulder. Pyre, Dragan, Theren, and Baron stand in the doorway. Breathtaking grins flash on their handsome faces. Pyre makes his way over to me.

“Would you like to see the new world, Eilish?”

Uncertainty swells within me. Pyre must have noticed my growing panic, because he tucks his arm around me protectively. I allow him to lead me outside. My heart stops for a moment as I take in the sight before me.

Gone is the ash and burning stone. The sky is blue. White clouds scatter across the cerulean expansion. In the distance, I see forests and sparkling lakes. No more rotting buildings and demon hordes.

“I don’t understand,” I say as I turn to face Pyre. “How did this happen?”

“There are still places that will need your help, places where we’ll have to rebuild,

but this is the start of a bright future. This is your canvas, Eilish, and you are the artist.”

EILISH

Delendren Glade

Three years later...

Part of me knew I would always come home.

The realms have collided into one. The Veil, Aborel, Oronrel, Earlann, the mortal cities... and we are a nation finally at peace. Darkness and light working in harmony to build towards a prosperous future.

Baron and Pyre still guard the Echoing Spire.

Cambion and Theren have plans to build a school for spellcasters.

Aima and Kolvar are commandants of the royal army and are expecting their first child.

Variant and Silvanus work tirelessly towards repairing the damage done by the war.

Dragan and Myerdoth venture off into foreign lands to create more gargoyles.

We all have our place in this new world.

These days I'm known by many titles. Goddess of Redemption, Queen of The

Vindication, and many more. But, to me, I'm still just Eilish.

Each day seems longer than the last. Though our bodies are strong, none of us walked away from the war without scars.

Theren can't be in the same room with a mirror without breaking down and I hardly sleep through the night anymore.

I know we have hard times ahead, but I have faith that we will conquer whatever stands in our way.

A knock on the door pulls me away from the window. Noni pops her head inside and blinks over at the book in my hand.

"It finished?" she asks. "Noni can't wait to read about all your adventures, my queen."

I stroke the cover of my journal. "It's done, Noni."

Noni reaches up and grabs onto my sleeve, tugging me downstairs. The floorboards creak as we head into the kitchen. A commotion comes from outside. The door bursts open to reveal Flumph covered in soot.

"This the respect I gets after savin' the fuckin' world?!"

"Mr. Flumph!"

Bombri and Baron trail behind Flumph with irritable expressions.

When he sees me, Baron smiles and then leans over to kiss me.

A mischievous glimmer shows in his eyes.

Pyre, Cambion, Dragan and Silvanus enter the intimate home through the back door.

Each of them stops to greet me in their own way. It's Theren who lingers, however.

I love the feel of his hands on me.

Others might think I'm foolish for living in a cabin in the mountains. But I know where I belong. I don't need a castle or a temple to lead my people. I have everything I need right in front of me.

With a strange twist of fate, the girl who had been born an abomination has grown into the leader the world always needed.

The End

I hope you enjoyed the Shadow Guardians Series!

ONE

Neva

Air escapes me in an undignified wheeze as I hit the unfinished hardwood floor, and I curl onto my side to minimize the pain of what's coming next.

The toe of Darius' boot catches me in the ribs, just below my sternum, where he knows the bruises won't show.

Bruises don't make money. And that's what Darius is after.

Even so, no man who's entered the Wicked Lyre Tavern has ever had the chance to get a good look at my tits. No one except Darius, that is.

But that's the price of sharing the attic space above the tavern with him. I'm given three meals a day, and a hit of the only thing that makes living in this miserable place remotely tolerable.

The force of his kick flips me onto my back and I turn my head sharply to the side, hiding my face behind the sable fall of my hair. I'm not giving him the satisfaction of seeing the tears that squeeze from the corners of my eyes.

"I said get up, slag. Are you deaf as well as stupid?"

I choke on my response, producing only a few inarticulate coughs instead of an answer.

I do manage to prop myself up on one elbow, peeking up from beneath a fringe of hair to ascertain just how pissed he is.

He wakes me like this most mornings, and I have to say, I prefer it to the mornings when he tries a gentler approach.

Namely, when he prods me awake with his cock and demands I satisfy him.

Somehow, the beatings seem a little more dignified.

“Maybe, if you hadn’t kept me up all night,” I grumble under my breath, crawling onto all fours. I keep my voice low, though. I’m sore enough as it is. Besides, push Darius too hard and he’ll decide to teach me a lesson. One I don’t want to learn.

“What was that, slag?” he demands.

Yes. Definitely pissed. I’m not sure what I’ve done to earn his ire this early in the morning, but it doesn’t bode well for the rest of the day.

I manage to get my shaking legs beneath me and climb to my feet, leaning against the opposite wall for balance.

I hug the wall, feeling like the most wretched creature in the entire city of Ascor.

I doubt there’s a soul between here and the Forest of No Return that feels as shitty as I do at the moment.

When I manage to stop shaking, I turn in a slow half-circle to face the man who’s both my tormentor and my savior. Darius leans against the vanity, careful not to disrupt the glass bottles and creams on its surface.

He watches me struggle, a cruel glint of amusement in his dark eyes. I wish he didn't look so much like his father. It makes it harder for me to hate him as much as I should.

Gregory was the only man who ever showed me an ounce of kindness, and it chafes me that this little bastard wears Gregory's face.

It's not an especially handsome countenance: too boxy to be traditionally handsome, the eyes too deep-set and far apart, nose too large and teeth not large enough.

But where Gregory's eyes were kind, Darius' always have the mean, rangy look of a feral cat.

And he has the temper to match. He's also shorter and thinner than his father ever was.

"You're dancing in the back room tonight," Darius informs me, flicking the closet door open to reveal the small selection of gowns he's procured for my act.

All are made of silky or sheer fabrics and would easily cost a year of my wages. They've more than paid for Darius' tavern in the last few years. More accurately, I have more than paid for this tavern. After all, it's my body men are flocking to see.

"Please." The ragged entreaty is all I can force from my shaking lips.

He knows what I'm asking for.

Darius has kept it from me for three days. He can't honestly expect me to dance while my stomach tosses like a ship at sea. I need a bump if I'm going to be able to make it on stage sometime tonight.

I can read the answer on his face before he ever opens his mouth.

That hateful smirk tics up a few degrees; he's clearly enjoying my distress.

It's a rare treat for him to hear me beg like this.

The last time he got the satisfaction, I literally came crawling back on hands and knees, begging for another dose.

Hopefully I won't have to do that again this morning.

He toys with the small, leather pouch at his waist, jiggling it in my direction as a taunt before flipping the material of his coat over his front to hide it from view.

"You'll get it when you've earned it, slag.

" Then he chuckles as he sneers down at me.

"A group of merchants are selling their wares along Gendar Street for the next fortnight before moving north. At least half of 'em will be downstairs tonight. You please them and then I'll give you that bump you're so desperate for.

" His lips curl into a viper's grin, dripping insincerity like cloying venom.

"And if you please me tonight, I'll give you another. "

With his toe, he nudges a bowl across the floor, and a portion of my daily slop oozes over one corner and onto the hardwood.

For just an instant, I imagine scooping the bowl off the floor and grinding his nose into the congealed mass of tasteless slop.

Let him feel the indignity of being fed and put through his paces like a fucking show pony.

But my fingers only perform an ineffectual flex at my side, instead of the suicidally stupid action I've just contemplated.

This place isn't palatial, my role is demeaning, my jailer is an arrogant prick, but I'm under no illusions.

I'm better off here than I would be on the streets.

That's the only reason I've stayed as long as I have.

Because, as shitty as this life is, it's still better than being homeless in Ascor.

I'll put up with Darius until I can squirrel away enough gold pieces to buy myself a way out of Ascor and a way in to some other city.

Any other city, where my face isn't instantly recognizable as the salacious Snow White.

Darius selects a gauzy, multi-hued dress and tosses it lightly on the bed we share.

I stare at it, mouth popping open in indignant surprise.

I've worn this dress only once before, performing for Prince Achmed, who hailed from a place far, far away.

A place called Agrabah in the Anoka Desert.

The prince painted a hazy picture of Agrabah while I danced for him that night,

dropping each layer of my gauzy drapings, one by one, until I lay mostly bare before him on stage.

On the rare occasions I've dreamed of escaping, I've thought about traveling to Agrabah to find the prince again.

"The Dance of the Seven Veils?" I breathe, too tired to summon true outrage. "You can't be serious."

Damn Darius to the blackest regions of the nether realm!

I've only done this dance once in front of an audience and that was a long time ago.

Now he expects me to do it again without any practice, with barely a cup full of oats in my stomach and the fatigue of withdrawal threatening to drag me sideways to the floor?

I'll make a fool of myself and then Darius will punish me for it later.

Darius worms a hand into his coat and dips one finger lightly into the pouch at his belt.

It comes away dusted in white, like a baker's confection.

He steps closer to me, offering the digit.

I don't normally like to take it this way, but he's not leaving me much choice. This is all I'm going to get.

So I take his finger, guide it reverently to my mouth, and slide my tongue along every contour, trying to catch every speck of the priceless powder I can find. The process is

over quickly, and my mouth tingles pleasantly as relief swells through me.

“Perform well, and you’ll get more,” Darius promises. “But, if you don’t...”

He lets the statement hang, a sword over my head, waiting to drop. The meaning is very clear.

Failure isn’t an option.

I tangle my fingers in the velvet folds of the navy-blue curtain and drag it back a few inches to peer out at the crowd beyond.

Male voices overlap, sounding like a rumble of distant thunder.

The room is hazy with pipe smoke, the heavy fog of it pressing into my lungs and further tightening my chest.

The number of men who occupy the chairs that ring the small stage staggers me, and I can tell there are still more I can’t make out clearly, arranged at the small tables or standing at the back.

How many men are packed into this back room?

Fifty? One hundred? I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many men crowded into the Wicked Lyre at one time, even around the annual festival, when spirits run high and men pay their last coin to see the creamy flesh of a nubile, young thing.

Every man in the room is wealthy. If their clothing isn’t a giveaway, their voices would be. Cultured speech, with accents that range from the clipped tones of Grimm,

the airy sing-song of a Wonderland noble, or the lilting honeyed tones of a cove-dwelling merchant from the Sea of Delorood.

I let the velvet slide between my fingers, dread settling in the pit of my stomach like a heavy millstone.

How the bloody hell am I supposed to pull this off?

I'm dizzy already. I'm going to go out there, slide one veil off, and then trip and fall on my face.

And that will be the end of poor Neva Valkoinen, the end of Snow White.

They'll find my body in an alleyway, a patchwork of blooming blue and purple bruises, swarmed by the city's vermin.

Darius' voice issues from the other side of the curtain, an ugly common accent among the sea of more pleasant voices.

The room goes silent when he begins to speak, introducing me to the crowd as he has for years now.

Is it four? I think it must be. Gregory died when Darius and I were seventeen. I'm twenty-one now.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:56 pm

And I don't know what to make of those years. They're gone and I have nothing to show for them. But nevermind. Thinking about the past only depresses me and my life is depressing enough as it is.

“And now, the main event! The greatest beauty you'll find in Ascor. Perhaps in all of Fantasia! I give to you, the lovely Snow White!”

The curtains are drawn aside to the sounds of thunderous applause, revealing me in all my dubious glory.

I'm bathed in the glow of a thousand twinkling faerie lights that illuminate the stage.

The lights are another item that sets the Wicked Lyre apart from other taverns, besides the star attraction.

Darius is the only man within the city able to afford to light the place with fae-spelled orbs, day or night.

The weight of a hundred gazes falls on me seconds later, tracing what little they can see of my silhouette through the veils.

The one dangled above my head is taupe, and the colors grow increasingly bolder the closer they get to the center of my body.

Light glints off every jewel and bangle adorning me.

And there are many. They chime as my body moves to the beat of the sultry music.

It's too bright. My head spins and I choke on bile. I feel as if I'm going to faint dead away. My eyes sweep the crowd, searching for something. Rescue? Pity? Perhaps a man who can look at me and see a sick girl being paraded on stage, instead of an object of lust to be used and discarded?

Every face I meet is eager, drinking me in like I'm a draft of Sweetland Port. There's no one here who gives a damn about me, no one who...

My gaze settles on a man perched on a stool near the back.

He was easy to miss at first, because he's not nearly as rotund as most the men I see.

Many men in Ascor wear the evidence of their wealth around their belt buckles, where girth stretches the seams of their fine clothing. But this man is different.

He's as tall and lean as any farm hand, with a slightly golden cast to his skin that suggests he spends a great deal of time outdoors.

His clothing is less elaborate than the rest of the men in the room—he wears a simple scarlet tunic draped over buckskin trousers.

Only the gold buttons that stud both give away the fact that he didn't just stroll into the Wicked Lyre by accident.

The understated wardrobe makes the artistry of his face seem even more absurd in contrast. His jaw is slanted at an angle that appears sharp enough to cut glass.

A layer of golden stubble ripples across that strong line, drawing my eye to a perfect bow-lipped mouth.

His hair has been swept to the nape of his neck, the flyaway golden strands gathered together by a leather thong.

But it's his eyes that strike me most. I expect them to be blue, like those of one of the savage Northmen. But they're not.

They're a perfect tawny color, like the piercing eyes of a hawk.

He cocks his head in an almost bird-like motion, considering me with detached interest. There's no ardent desire in this man's gaze.

He doesn't even appear mildly aroused by my dance or by me.

I can't puzzle out what he's doing here.

Why come to this show, if he isn't here to get a thrill by peeking at Snow White's tits and ass?

I don't know how long I stare at him, but the moment I realize I'm still swaying to the melancholic beat of the music, I snap back into myself.

My body begins moving without conscious thought, like a snake before its charmer.

I close my eyes, trying to block out the appreciative murmurs that run through the room as I sway this way and that, releasing my veils to the ground one at a time.

Amethyst, sapphire, ruby, and topaz drop from my body, curling like colorful smoke before they fall to the floor.

I pretend I'm alone. Alone but for the curious stranger, with his odd eyes and his benign interest. I pretend I won't be what these men, with their avaricious appetites, will be envisioning when they tug their cocks tonight.

In my mind, the curious stranger and I are alone and this is art, not a tawdry peep show.

And then... it's over. I find myself on the ground, bosom heaving, in the final pose of the dance, with my head bowed. I'm wearing only the shimmering and slightly diaphanous white material that makes up the undergarments Darius provides me.

I'm exhausted and I feel sick to my stomach. My ears ring and tears are already wetting my eyes. I can only hope I don't heave up the contents of my stomach right here. But, then I remember there isn't much in my stomach to heave up.

The applause is a dull roar in my ears. I climb unsteadily to my feet, gathering the veils I've abandoned as the stage is showered with coins. I take two of them—only two because they're all I can hide in my tight brazier. Any more and I risk Darius' wrath.

I spy him in the back, leaning against the bar, talking to the mysterious stranger in the buckskin trousers. I allow myself a curious flick down to the stranger's groin and I'm offended when it appears I've had little effect on him.

Darius and the stranger are in deep conversation, to the point that I wonder if they're arguing.

About what, I don't know, but I imagine the subject must be money.

At the moment, though, I don't really care.

There's only one reward I want for this night's work, and it better damn well be waiting for me when I get backstage.