



Moonlit Guardians (Shadow Guardians #9)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: MOONLIT GUARDIANS: An Angel Paranormal Romance

WHEN DARKNESS CLAIMS MY HEART

I never expected to be crowned Queen.

After killing my father and watching the Mercenary Stronghold fall to Fallen Angel Variants army, I find myself leading what remains of the rebellion against the darkness threatening to consume all realms.

But Im not facing this battle alone.

Five extraordinary men stand by my side, each bound to me in ways I never imagined possible:

Dragan, the fierce gargoyle king whose protective nature sends shivers down my spine; Baron, the seductive vampire whose dark hunger matches the intensity burning within me; Pyre, the enigmatic necromancer whose touch ignites flames I cant control; Theren, my first love whose forbidden magic and eternal devotion still haunt my dreams; and Cambion, whose light balances my darkness in the most intoxicating way.

As we establish a new sanctuary in the ruins of what was once called the City of Angels, the bond between us deepens.

Each of these powerful men offers something I desperately need—protection, passion, and a connection that transcends the physical realm.

But with Abedon awakening and dark forces gathering, our fragile peace wont last. The prophecies that once guided our path have been rendered obsolete, leaving us to forge our own destiny in uncertain times.

Will the strength I find in my guardians arms be enough to face whats coming? Or will the darkness that claims my heart ultimately consume us all?

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BARON

Delendren Glade

Seeing Silvanus riles up something inside me I thought I'd buried in the Veil.

It's been a long time since my anger bested me in a match of wills.

And Pyre defending him? It makes my blood boil.

If not for Pyre, I would have tried to take the god's head and most likely would have died for my efforts—well, died again, anyway.

Eilish turns and sees us for the first time since our arrival. She stands across the cavern, maybe forty feet away from us. When she sees us, her eyes go wide.

“Be careful!” she yells. “He's out of his mind with anger!”

I assume she's referring to her father.

I can't help but think of what Dragan must be feeling as we look at this hideous creature who was partly responsible for creating our lover. Eilish could become something like that—or more dangerous, if the darkness within her isn't balanced with the light.

“How the fuck are we supposed to fight this thing?” I ask, ducking a nasty swipe of claws that goes right for my head. Dragan blocks another with his blade, but the

Incubus' talons are sharper than razors and tougher than any element I've ever seen.

Pyre's magic is rising, I feel it prickling against my skin. He presses his back against one of the pillars, staying out of sight.

"We've got trouble," he says.

"What kind of fucking trouble?" I respond.

Ear-piercing shrieks echo through the chamber, and torch light fills the many tunnels leading into the room. Pyre stiffens, turning his head to me. "Goblins. Lots and lots of goblins."

I hear Eilish curse as she takes a blow to her arm, the fabric of her sleeve tearing open.

The scent of her blood forces me to her.

I dematerialize to the other side of the cavern, landing right in front of her.

She pulls back in surprise as I reach for her arm and lick the wound shut.

My saliva will help her wound to heal faster.

Her blood scorches me with her power, giving me a boost of energy.

The Incubus growls, tilting its gargantuan head back as it sniffs the air. I approach the being with the intent to kill it, a spell roiling with green energy, but Pyre stands in my way. He hits Gildlorthoine with such force that I hear a loud crack as the beast's head spins around.

The goblins flood the chamber and I cover Dragan as he tries to fight his way out of the swarm.

“We could really use Theren’s blood magic right about now,” I grumble.

Dragan, of course, disagrees. “Blood magic is worse than necromancy and whatever the hell you do. I’d rather swallow rusty razors than resort to Theren’s type of magic.”

“I wonder if you’ll say the same thing in another few minutes,” I answer as I eye the throng of goblins settling around us.

“My point of view won’t change,” Dragan assures me. “I don’t know what inspired Theren to pursue the practice, but it will push him toward the darkness just as it did his father.”

The gargoyle tosses a goblin into the air and I slice its belly open with my dagger before it hits the ground. A hot spray of sticky, yellow pus coats the pillars.

Fucking disgusting.

I cover my face to avoid getting any in my eyes. When I look up, it’s to see Pyre shoving Eilish out of the way. Gildlorthoine grabs Pyre by the throat and dangles his body in the air.

“PYRE!” Eilish yells. She runs at full speed, jumping from one chunk of fallen pillar to another. Her black succubus wings explode from her back and spread wide and she launches herself at her father.

Her dagger slices through his hand until he drops Pyre’s gasping body to the ground.

I wish to help them, but I'm overcome by goblins.

All I can do is watch as Eilish buries her blade into Gildlorthoine's neck, pulling down on the blade as she drops back to the ground.

A huge gash appears on one side of her father's neck.

She pulls her blade from his flesh as her wings begin to flap and she rises into the ground.

The creature tries to turn around to see her but his tendons are cut on one side of his head and he can't turn his neck.

Eilish wastes no time in slamming her blade into the other side of his neck and she drags it down again, using her power and the knife to sever his head.

It slides off his torso, leaving behind nothing but a stump as it rolls across the floor. Blood splashes onto Eilish's face.

The body tips and she wriggles free just in time to avoid being crushed it.

EILISH

Incubus Cave

The gush of blood causes me to recoil—not out of disgust, but because killing my father feels like I've closed a door that can never be opened again. It's the feeling of destiny shifting to form a new path, a path I had yet to discover but, still, I mourn his loss.

Everything will be different now. I will be different.

The blood of the succubae truly ends with me now. I thought I knew what being the last of something felt like, but this is far more profound than I ever imagined. The cold, harsh truth of being utterly alone, and not having the answers I seek, begins to sink in as I stare at the body of my father.

What was the life he lived before heartbreak took his sanity?

How did he love my mother, a creature so much brighter than him? Why did he never seek me out and show me I could be more than my instincts? Was I not good enough for him? Was he ashamed of me for being a half-breed? If my own father didn't place any worth on my life, then why should anyone else?

I look to my companions, my lovers , and though they're unaware, I see their hearts in their eyes. They look at me with something akin to reverence but their pride or awe doesn't echo in me. I feel... empty.

I came to the mountain searching for answers from a father I never knew.

Instead, the answers were right in front of you all along, I tell myself as the emptiness within me begins to fade.

As I move my gaze from Dragan, to Baron, to Pyre and realize each of them stares back at me, I realize I've been whole all along.

I never needed to seek my father out, to understand my lineage because it never mattered.

All that mattered was the family I have now—a family with the men who love me.

Morrigan was wrong about me. I'm not to blame for all that's happened. If I was, these fearless men wouldn't look at me as though I embody everything they've ever needed. And I feel the same. They are my strength.

I was robbed of a complete life, but killing my father felt good . Killing him to save Pyre feels even better.

Pyre...

Pyre's journey isn't over yet.

Silvanus is gone, but I know he won't stay away long.

He left the sanctuary of the Raven Forest and that means he's a fugitive as much as the rest of us.

If I can get Silvanus alone, maybe I can persuade him to join our fight and rid the realms of Morrigan once and for all.

Then, we could take on Abedon and restore the balance, finally setting things right.

But we must act—and act quickly, or we risk losing the progress we've made.

I use the shredded sleeve of my tunic to wipe the blood from my face. The Incubus is dead. Word will spread through the realms and soon there will be many who seek to claim this land for themselves.

My land. The land my mother created with the help of Silvanus. I can't let them take it from me. We need to restore this place, turn it back into the haven it once was before the worlds collided and the realms were thrust into chaos.

BARON

Incubus Cave

Dragan's jaw drops, and I stand with my own mouth gaping.

Eilish... killed her father...

I never imagined her capable of taking a life in such a brutal manner, much less her own flesh and blood. I move closer, cautious as I see fear still dancing in her eyes, warring with shock.

I touch her shoulder. "You all right?"

Eilish flinches, but she doesn't shake off my hold. Instead, she stares at me with wide eyes as she turns her gaze from me to Dragan.

"Eilish?" he asks.

She looks at Pyre.

"You did what you had to do," he says.

She nods and looks at me again. "It's okay," I try to soothe her in a soft voice. She doesn't say anything, just stands there, her chest heaving with her elevated breathing. And then she throws herself into my arms and weeps.

"We should leave," Pyre says as he lets out a pained grunt. Eilish pulls away from me and dries her eyes as she turns to face him.

“You’re hurt,” she says as she separates herself from me and hurries to him, lifting his head as she whispers a healing spell.

She glows brightly, washing them both in a light that causes the goblins to shrink away with fear.

They scurry back into the tunnels, leaving behind mounds of bodies and a river of pus flowing freely from each pile.

“We can’t go back the way we came,” Dragan says. “And there’s only one tunnel the goblins avoided.”

“That’s our safest bet to get out of here,” I say as I face him.

“Eilish, I need you to scout ahead,” Dragan says to her.

She doesn’t respond. I follow her gaze and realize she’s staring at the blood on her hands. My knuckles brush her cheek as I lift Pyre from the ground.

“Eilish, you need to concentrate,” I say firmly. “We need you to stay with us so we can get out of here.”

Dragan nears her and throws his arm around her as she leans into him. Although I wish it could be me who offers her solace, I’m glad someone can.

“Silvanus is out of hiding,” Pyre says. “Which means those who are hunting him will be here soon, if they aren’t already.”

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Eilish's hands tremble slightly. Her eyes flicker up to mine and she nods, separating from Dragan as she heads toward the tunnel.

Pyre wobbles on unsteady legs, but I help him stay upright.

He leans against me until we reach another cave not far from the edge of the glade.

The trek back to Theren is long and cold, but once we get close, I pick up a scent I recognize.

It's the same scent from hunting Morrigan in the Veil.

Her blood. Here.

I look to Dragan and notice he's picked up the scent, as well.

Morrigan is hurt.

DRAGAN

Delendren Glade

Eilish is ahead, scouting the trail as Baron suggested. My eyes never leave her. She's far calmer than I would've expected after we all witnessed her killing her father. Eilish is strong, yes, but I hope that strength hasn't made her numb to loss and...

death.

I allowed myself to get to that point and I didn't do myself any favors. I want her to learn from our mistakes, not repeat them.

When Eilish is a good twenty feet in front of us, I turn to Pyre and Baron, breaking the silence. "I was surprised to see Silvanus," I start.

"I was too," Baron answers.

"You didn't think it seemed... convenient?"

Baron looks over at me. "What do you mean?"

I shrug. "All the times she's been in danger, he shows up now. Why?"

Baron grits his teeth as I come on his other side to help assist Pyre through the trees. "Silvanus is a wild card. None of us knows what his true intentions are."

"I agree," I say. "He's no more trustworthy than Morrigan...well, until he proves otherwise."

"Yes," Baron says as he looks over at me. Eilish pauses up ahead so we do the same. I glance at Pyre and notice he's unconscious. Baron notices as well and helps me assist Pyre to the ground. Eilish turns to face us and noticing Pyre's condition, she makes her way back.

Baron looks at me and says quickly, "We'll have to keep this between the two of us."

"What?"

“Our feelings about Silvanus.”

“Why?”

“Theren and Cambion are still trying to atone for their actions. Pyre has enough to deal with, and Aima is still healing. Eilish would allow her heart to cloud her judgment, so I think it’s best if our suspicions go unnoticed.”

“Agreed.”

After resting for an hour or so, during which time Eilish does her best to heal Pyre as much as she’s able, we start moving through the forest again. Pyre passes in and out of consciousness. I don’t know exactly what’s happened to him, but whatever it is, it’s something serious.

Baron keeps a watchful eye on our surroundings as we approach a small clearing beside a lake. Eilish stands at the water’s edge with her brow furrowed.

“What is it?” I ask, approaching her.

She points to the splatters of blood in the snow and the mess of footprints that lead to the lake. The once-solid surface is now fractured, and the vibrations of magic linger in the air. We follow Eilish toward the hovel that was once her home. Black feathers are scattered everywhere.

Baron stiffens just outside the door and jerks his head towards a red mark on the wood. “Blood magic,” he sneers.

I summon my sword as Baron sets Pyre against the wall, and we flank Eilish as she

turns the handle. When the door yields, the sight inside isn't a good one. Eilish gasps and runs in, dropping beside Theren with tears in her eyes.

Like the rest of us, Theren is covered in blood—only most of it's his own. His heavy-lidded gaze falls on me before his eyes finally slide closed, as if he now feels safe to succumb to his injuries.

"Theren!" Eilish says as she shakes him but it's no good. He's out.

"Is he dead?" Baron asks.

Eilish leans over and holding her head just in front of his nose, she listens for his breathing. She looks up at me. "No, he's not dead. I can hear him breathing."

"Now we have two unconscious deadweights to slow us down," Baron says. "Hopefully we can make it back to the stronghold before those fucking goblins realize they're free to leave the caves."

"We should hurry," Eilish says before she turns around and looks at us both. "But we're coming back here again at some point," she says.

"What?" Baron asks.

"Why?" I say.

She nods. "I want this place restored so we can use it as a safe zone. It would be good to have a place in which to retreat in case of emergencies. Especially after what happened in the Veil when the Unseelie attacked." She runs her fingers through Theren's hair, and I feel a stab of jealousy pierce right through my chest. He doesn't deserve her kindness.

I don't understand how she feels anything towards him.

"Will you help me, Dragan?" she asks as she smiles up at me and motions to the unconscious Unseelie prick beneath her.

I don't argue but I approach them both and notice how Baron's gaze drops to the ground as I lift Theren. The vampire goes outside to wake Pyre, while Eilish stays beside me.

"We should leave him here," I say.

Eilish shakes her head. "He was prisoner to Morrigan just as much as Cambion was. We can't leave him."

"The fight to free him nearly cost us all our lives," I argue. "I don't trust him—his power is stronger than Cambion's and much darker. This could all be a ruse."

"I don't believe it is," she argues.

"We will bring Theren back to the stronghold but I want to keep him in the cells until we know he's no longer under Morrigan's spell," I say, my lips tight.

She nods subtly. "Baron said blood magic was used here. Is... is that bad?"

"No magic is innately evil, Eilish," I admit. "But it can be used for evil. Blood magic, however, is far more susceptible to darkness than even necromancy."

"Darkness is what you and Baron pull your power from?" she starts.

I shake my head. "I'm not talking about the shadow magic that animates Baron and me. This is a different darkness altogether. I'm talking about the abyss."

“The abyss?” she repeats, clearly lost.

“Theren’s father and Abedon were once great sorcerers, too, and they succumbed—Elioth more than Abedon.”

“Succumbed to what?”

“To the power of the abyss. The Fae King, Theren’s father, never crawled out of the abyss.”

“You’re not suspicious of Theren, then. You’re concerned he’ll follow his father’s footsteps through his blood magic.” She lifts her hand and cups my cheek.

I feel the blood of her father sticking to her fingers, but Eilish’s touch is something I’ll never again shy away from. And there’s something in her eyes that holds me steady.

“Thank you for always coming to save me, Dragan,” she continues. “I know I don’t always say it, but I cherish you. I always have.”

“I cherish you.”

She raises herself onto the tips of her toes and presses a kiss to my lips, dry and cracking from the winter air.

From the doorway, Baron clears his throat and we separate.

I toss Theren over my shoulder, feeling another rush of warm liquid pouring down my back from the wound on his belly, but I’m too tired to carry him with my arms alone.

Pyre is more lucid, but he'll need to return to the Veil soon.

"Heading directly through the desert may kill us," I say. "We don't have enough water, strength, or magic to make the journey to the stronghold." I turn to Eilish, hoping her memories are intact enough to help. "Do you know of any other portals out of here?"

"There's one across the lake near the location where we came out of the cave.

If I remember correctly, it leads to the Dales of Arborel.

There was a tribe queen there my mother used to trade with.

She guards a portal into the mortal realm," she explains.

"We should be able to get transport from Sori's camp and ride to the stronghold. "

"What are the odds Variant raided the place?" Baron asks.

Eilish looks at him and shrugs. "Not likely, unless he wanted to go up against a brood of Amazons," she replies with a smile.

Baron dips his head and steals a kiss from her before helping Pyre steady himself.

I hide my grin in the fabric bunching on my shoulder.

Looks like I wasn't the only one feeling a little jealous over Eilish and Theren.

It's strange but the love between Baron and Eilish no longer bothers me—not like it used to.

Yes, there are still moments when the jealousy gets me but those moments are now few and far between.

We gather what we need and leave behind what's too heavy to carry. I have no memory of the dales. Most of the lighter regions of the realms are never seen by my kind.

As we walk, Eilish focuses on healing herself. She applies the techniques Pyre taught her during her training in the Veil, using herself as a filter for the pain and then releasing the energy into the ethers.

“What does it feel like?” I ask.

“Like I’m a balloon filling with air until I’m about to burst,” she describes. “And then I slowly let the air out until the pressure goes away.”

Eilish points ahead to a thicket of thorny bushes, where something in front ripples like a stone hitting the surface of a placid lake. The portal.

“This is it,” I announce. “It’s strange... it feels light. Like the way Earlann used to feel when we crossed through the gates as kings.”

Reaching out with my hand, I push through the thin barrier. I feel sunlight on the other side. Not hot like the Desolate Border, but warm. I step through the portal and a world of lush green greets me.

Birds sing in the trees and the sound of rushing water meets my ears. Plush grass covers the ground and beams of pure sunlight break through the tops of the trees. Fragrant flowers sweeten the air along with fresh morning dew.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper as Eilish and the others follow me. I watch as their eyes

widen when they take in their new surroundings. When Eilish smiles, her expression is pure and filled with child-like vigor. I wonder if the dale is the way she remembers it from her youth.

A rustle in the underbrush causes me to turn my attention as a ray of light nearly blinds me.

There I see Cambion who stands with a group of women with painted faces and skin as dark as ebony stone.

He catches sight of his brother and rushes forward.

I allow him to take Theren, grateful for the relief of the weight off my shoulder.

“Is he dead?” Cambion asks, his face full of concern.

I shake my head. “He’s alive, but just so.”

“What happened?” Cambion asks.

“That is a question best asked once he’s awake,” I answer as I shrug.

“In other words, none of us has any fucking idea,” Baron adds.

“And Pyre?” the elf asks, glancing over at Baron.

“Will need time and healing,” I respond.

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CAMBION

Dales of Arborel

I pace through the tent as Dragan and Baron fill me in on what I missed while searching for Eilish. The tracker seems to be some sort of seer, for he was able to deduce the exact moment my companions would step out of the portal and into Arborel.

It's been many years since I've visited the home of Queen Ivana. The Amazon warrior is skilled at keeping her tribe safe in their forest, that much is sure. She sits nearby with her consort Lydia.

"And the Incubus King?" the queen asks. "How can you be certain he's dead?"

"We can't be certain," Pyre replies. "But we each watched Eilish sever his head from his body."

"You can't get much more dead than that," Baron grumbles.

"You would be surprised," Pyre says as he turns to face his friend.

Then he moves his attention to the Amazon queen once again.

He opens his robes and points to a long scar that runs from his left shoulder to his right hip bone.

It's difficult to see behind the black tattoo ink that covers the expanse of his chest. "I got this while fighting the Incubus King many years earlier," he says and motions to the scar.

"I killed him that day as well, yet he still lived. While the rest of us regain our strength, I ask that Cambion be permitted to take his party and a few of your Amazons to the caves to make certain the Incubus King... remains dead."

Queen Ivana nods. "Go," she orders her people and me. "And kill every nasty beast that lives there. It would be best to rid the Delendren Glade of the goblins as well. Take Lydia and her company."

Lydia bows her head and reaches for the longbow beside her. I follow the queen's consort to the heart of the camp, where seven Amazons await their leader. Their language is one that sounds harsh to my ears, but I still hear the fae roots beneath the sharp consonants and the drawn-out vowels.

Eilish lifts her head when she sees me, climbing to her feet before she approaches me.

"Cambion," she says.

"Are you okay?" I ask as she wraps her arms around my waist. I pull her in even closer and inhale, needing to smell her, to feel her. God, I don't know how I managed to go so long denying myself this.

She presses her forehead against my chest and sighs. I feel Dragan and Baron's eyes on me, but they aren't filled with as much hatred as I recall. Perhaps their time with Theren has changed their opinions of me somehow? Or perhaps they realize Eilish needs me as much as she needs them?

"I should have told you I was leaving," she whispers.

“What’s done is done,” I say as I tilt her chin up and brush away the tear that slides down her cheek.

“Please be careful,” she whispers.

I lean down and kiss her again. “I promise.”

She steps back, and I drop my arms from around her, watching as she turns to leave. Already I feel the heavy burden in my heart. She killed her father and now I’m the one who must see to it that he’s truly dead.

“Your hair is now completely white,” Dragan says to her as he looks over her head at me. Then he glances at Baron.

Baron narrows his eyes at Eilish and then at me. “Then that means,” he starts but doesn’t finish.

I don’t respond and I don’t wait for a response.

Instead, I turn to face Lydia who meets me at the portal and instantly I’m struck by the cold breeze that wafts toward me.

We venture through and into the cave but a few meters away.

The stench is strong at the entrance, and we follow a long, twisting tunnel into the main chamber.

There’s no beastly body lying at the center of the chasm as they described, but one that resembles a fae male with the horns of a demon.

Yes, this is the face Maeline Fulthain fell in love with.

The beautiful seducer, the manifestation of every woman's dreams. Even standing over his head, I'm envious of his stunning beauty.

It makes perfect sense as to why Eilish is so charmingly lovely.

For as crazy as her father became, he was easily the most exquisite of men.

"Take the head and the body. You can't burn an incubus or a succubus," I say.

"Then how do we make sure he's dead?" Lydia asks.

"We must keep him from healing. It will take quite a bit of my magic, but I can do it. Focus on the goblins. We'll meet at the portal." I cast a spell to levitate the head and body before I walk toward the tunnel once more.

I stop just shy of the opening, as something strange catches my eye.

Touching the wall gingerly, I adjust my vision.

The name 'Maeline' has been carved into the wall thousands—if not millions—of times.

The letters aren't carved in the same script as the runes that mark the days the Incubus King has lived here.

No. Someone put them on this wall to taunt him, torturing him with the name of his beloved until it drove him mad.

This isn't Variant or Morrigan's doing, nor is it my brother's. I suspect the Cockatrice is responsible for it, which means Abedon is responsible.

The body and the head float out of the cave behind me as I walk to the lake and peel off my tunic.

My hands make fast work with the buckles of my belt and my trousers fall to the snow.

The wind slices against my skin like a hundred tiny knives.

I walk into the water until it reaches my hips.

Then I turn around and beckon the body of Eilish's father closer.

I take hold of his head, then, with a deep breath, I dive into the freezing water.

My muscles ache and my chest tightens as I reach the bottom of the crater.

I cast a light that hovers above my head, shining a ghostly glow on clusters of grasses longer than I am tall.

I draw images within the water and a dome of crystal begins to form around me and the body of the Incubus King.

Water seeps from the quartz cast, leaving behind a bubble of air that surrounds me.

"There may have been a time when you weren't the monster you're perceived to be," I say to the body. "I can't imagine an angel loving such a creature. But you turned us away when we came to you for help in the Great War," I tell the corpse that hovers beside me. Of course it doesn't respond.

"I'm glad Eilish was able to get closure with your death.

Your image may fade from our minds as time passes, but if there's just a bit of the man Maeline loved within your soul, I wish him well in the afterlife.

May you rest peacefully, Gildlorthoine, the lost King of The Succubae and the father of the woman I've loved since I met her. ”

I allow the body and head to fall and I watch as they're encased in more crystal. My energy is waning, but these spells will ensure that even if Gildlorthoine lives, he can't rise again.

I return to the surface, shivering as I extricate myself from the water and walk up the beach.

I waste no time in pulling on my dry clothing, as I magic my body dry.

The feeling in my fingers is slow to return, but I trek toward the portal nonetheless.

Lydia eyes my disheveled appearance, but she doesn't ask any questions.

She lifts a necklace from around her neck.

“Are those... goblin toes?” I ask as my face screws up into a grimace.

Lydia laughs and walks through the portal. I follow. Night has fallen on the dales and Dragan soars overhead, casting his shadow on the moon. He drops beside me.

“We're leaving. If you need to rest—”

“I'm fine,” I cut in. “It's best we get Theren to the healers at the stronghold. We've outstayed our welcome with the tribe as it is.”

I walk over to the mercenaries I rode in with.

They pack up the horses, and a wagon is gifted to us by Queen Ivana so we can transport Theren without injuring him further.

Pyre and Eilish are too spent to heal him and my light magic won't do anything for him—only time and the Mage's Guild can help him now.

EILISH

Desolate Border

I ride in the wagon with Theren. The chill of the night desert is nothing compared to the frigid air of the Delendren Glade.

I wish I knew what dreams plague him. I wish I had access to that place in his mind where I can't go.

Theren has been trapped in his own head for so long, I can't imagine how he must feel now.

Is he thinking of me to keep his sanity? Or does he think of Aima? She's loved him as deeply as I have and in ways I never will.

It pains me to think of Aima standing by his side for so long when I'd been denied even his friendship in our youth.

But, even though so much time has passed and in ways Theren feels like a stranger to me, I still feel twinges of affection for him.

I want answers, but I can wait. My fingers trace the flawless features of his face, admiring them with touch alone.

I wonder what our lives would have been like if we'd run away when we planned to.

.. if his father had never imprisoned him.

Now I understand why Dragan fears Theren could become like his father—a cold, lifeless man who used to haunt my dreams as a child. But is my own father any different?

Theren blinks his beautiful golden eyes and looks directly at me, but says nothing. My hair spills over my shoulder, shrouding us in a heavy curtain as he stares unblinkingly into my gaze. I trace the bow of his lip lightly before moving the tips of my fingers along his jaw.

“Sleep, Theren. You need your rest,” I whisper.

He grips my hand when I attempt to pull away and brings it back to his mouth. Holding my stare, he presses a feather-light kiss to my palm. I shudder with a breathy exhale that causes my cheeks to color.

“Eilish,” he whispers as a smile takes hold of his mouth. I return it and watch as he loses himself to the oblivion of sleep once again. Just then, a scout announces our arrival at the stronghold.

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The rattle, clang, and bang of the rusty wagon wheels eventually comes to a stop outside the stables. While Cambion and Dragan take Theren to the mages, I stay behind to see to the horses with the stable boys. Our loyal mounts deserve as much respect as the other members of our rebellion.

THEREN

Mercenary Stronghold

I stand over a blood-soaked, trembling, naked girl. She's not much younger than me, but the men laugh as my father spits at her. Eilish is her name. It's beautiful. She's beautiful. Much like the crystal blue gaze brimming with tears that stares at me as though trying to tell me something.

I don't speak her language. She isn't from our kingdom.

"A pitiful succubus," my father sneers. "She's just as useless as the rest of the whores at the brothel."

But she doesn't look like the succubae I've read about in books, not with her white hair and her bright blue eyes. She looks like... an angel.

I fear this is my fault. I was the one who tracked her to a small camp.

A group of men had attempted to take advantage of her, so I fought to save her—but

now, my father and his men seem no better a fate for the young girl.

I swallow down the bile in my throat as she reaches a hand toward me only for my father's boot to step on her fingers. She screams out in pain and fear.

That's when I realize I know her... she's the same girl I see in the forests when I sneak out of the palace. The same girl I've watched from among the foliage so many times. Even back then, I was enraptured of her as I am now.

Knowing her name somehow makes her seem more precious.

And even though I'm responsible for her capture, she doesn't look at me with hatred.

She's a fighter, this girl. When my father's boot lifts from the ground a second time, she rolls onto her hands and knees, glaring up at him with a seething hatred, apparently careless to the fact that she's as naked as the day she was born.

And it's only then that I realize the same.

I look at her exquisite body and at the idea that these assholes would force themselves on her... I can't complete the thought.

"You killed my men," Father says. "And you will pay for that, whore."

She sits back on her heels and lifts her chin defiantly. Her voice is thick, accented in a way I don't recognize, but she speaks our language easily.

"I shall slit the belly of kings who rain their fists on me. And I'll wash in the blood that spills like the River of Sorrows until you gasp for your last breath."

Her words cause me to shiver. Not a monster, but deadly, nonetheless. The Unseelie

soldiers seem taken aback by her brazen oath, though they're much larger and older than she.

Eilish meets my gaze once more.

"You dare look into the eyes of a prince!" my father yells at her.

I bite the inside of my cheek as my father's hand slaps the girl across her face. She lifts her chin again and he rears his arm back for a second blow, but I shove him aside before I have time to consider my actions and decide against them.

My father spins on his heels and grabs me by the throat. I see the magic dancing in his eyes, the bloodlust that causes his nostrils to flare. He would like nothing better than to kill me here and now, where my mother can't intervene...

"Please," I gasp. My father drops me as if he's bored with squeezing the air from my lungs.

He strips me of my gear and orders his men to tie Eilish and me to a tree.

Of course we are both helpless as there are far more of them than us.

We might fight against them, but eventually they win.

The only difference in our treatment at their hands is that they touch her breasts and the flesh between her legs. My father among them.

"I will be back for you later," he tells her as he eyes the triangle of white hair between her legs. He sickens me and I hate him. Detest him.

Though our night is filled with tears of pain and shivers from the cold, it's the start of

a beautiful friendship.

Sometime in the early hours of the morning, I manage to free myself and I free Eilish, in turn.

And from that moment on, I return to the Delendren Glade each day, visiting the girl with the broken smile and the heart on her sleeve.

She's near once more. I feel her presence like a siren's call and look up at the ceiling where a drop of water falls from a crack in the stone.

I was asleep for most of the journey to the mercenary stronghold, so I don't know its location.

But the warmth that radiates from the terracotta tells me it's in a place washed in sunlight.

There are no windows in my cell. I don't know if it's day or night, but I stand up without much pain in my body.

At least, not as much as there should be. I don't know whether it's the work of exceptional healers or simply time that's healed my wounds, but I'm grateful.

"So, you're awake."

My gaze shifts to the dark corner near the stairs.

Baron.

He stands and unlocks the cell, but I make no move to leave just yet in case this is a test. I imagine it probably is. The vampire chuckles and gestures for me to follow.

“Where are we going?” I ask quietly, as though I’m required to whisper when walking down a dark corridor.

“You’re going to bathe and get dressed into something that doesn’t reek of sweat, blood, and whatever other bodily fluids you were spewing up before we found you. You look like hell, by the way. Those pretty elf features don’t hide the blood magic that’s wafting off you. Makes my stomach turn.”

Baron shudders in mock repulsion as he leads me out of what appears to be a barracks of sorts. He’s changed. Of all of them, Baron was always the most compassionate, the most understanding and the slowest to move to anger.

This man before me might wear the same face but he’s different. I imagine being killed and brought back to life will change a man, most likely for the worse.

The walls are sturdy, and the training grounds are swept clean of debris. Dummies line the left side of the corridor, next to a door I’m assuming leads to an armory.

Guards walk along the walls and patrol the streets.

The flickering lights inside the windows look like thousands of stars that blend with the night sky.

Baron leads me along the cobblestone road that unites the boroughs of the stronghold, to a place that bears the crest of the Vindication on the gate.

Eilish has already made her mark here. I wonder what she can do with the world at her fingertips. I hope I’ll find out.

The vampire opens the gate and escorts me into the main building. Inside, my surroundings have a warmth to them, despite being the headquarters for a rebellion,

as if someone designed this space to be a home rather than a place to discuss war.

The bedchamber I'm given is beside Cambion's. Its walls are lined with wood and a stone hearth sits along one wall, unlit even in the chill of the night. The bed is large and draped with emerald linens. Black silken blankets, along with plush pillows, cover the mattress.

"This is more than I deserve..."

"Yes, it is." The vampire turns to leave but hesitates at the door. "Eilish is across the hall, if you wish to talk."

"Talk?" I repeat, surprised by his information.

He nods and I can see the hatred he has for me in his eyes. "You owe her your gratitude, at the very least. If not for her, you'd be rotting in that cell on King Galmer's orders."

"I will be sure to give her all my gratitude," I say.

"And if you try to hurt Eilish, I'll gut you where you stand."

"Will you?"

"I'd have to first fight Aima for the chance."

"Understood," I answer.

An hour or so later, I'm freshly bathed and dressed in new clothes that fit me well

enough. I'm not fully healed but I feel night and day better. Now that I'm feeling presentable, I don't wait before approaching Eilish's bedchamber.

I need to prove to her that I am the man I say I am.

I won my battle for dominance against Morrigan.

I'm truly free of her influences now. But Eilish will need to be convinced.

That, and she and I have much to discuss.

My heart beats ravenously in my chest as I lift my hand to knock.

The door swings open at the softest touch and I find myself face to face with a house brownie.

"If you be looking for the angel, Mr. Theren, she be in her tent," the little brownie named Noni says. She then leads me to a tent not much different than the ones around it. I'm not surprised Eilish chooses to sleep near the refugees waiting to be sorted into their new homes. Ever the outsider.

I push open the flap and step inside to see her leaning over a small desk with a quill in her hand. The feather flicks back and forth as it scratches the paper.

Eilish doesn't look up at me, but I know she senses my presence. "Are you feeling better?"

"I am now that I know you're safe. When they told me you were going after your father, I was worried about you," I admit. "But you've always been the one to stare danger in the face. Some things never change."

“Not always. Without my memories, I wasn’t much of anything, other than a burden.”

I move closer, dropping to my knees in front of her. I notice she still won’t look at me and so I reach out, gripping her chin and turning her head so she’s forced to look at me. I push her hair back from her face so she can’t hide from me.

“What happened?” she asks. It takes me a moment to realize she’s referencing the scene she and the others came across in the glade.

“Morrigan was in the glade. I knew she’d go after you if she could, or at least use you as bait to get to Silvanus,” I explain. “So, I fought her. I fought her to free myself and to make sure she couldn’t use you anymore.”

“Forever my protector,” she says but her eyes are narrowed, angry.

“Forever,” I say as I brush my lips against her temple, surprised she allows me. I wrap my arms around her and inhale her floral, feminine scent.

“Eilish,” I start.

“Shh,” she interrupts and drops her head to my chest. “Just don’t... say anything.”

She’s stiff in my arms, and I know we have a long way to go in order to return to the way we once were.

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MORRIGAN

The Castle In The Sky

“It worked.”

I feel the magic within me again—potent and stirring.

“Theren walked right into the trap,” I explain to Variant. “I knew he’d protect her to his last breath.”

“And how did he manage that?”

“The only way to do so was to free himself completely,” I explain. “His victory restored part of my power. I can use it to track down the mirror Silvanus used to keep the rest of my power from me.”

I drop my robes to the floor and slide into the bath of scented oils. They soothe my muscles, seeping into the parts inside me that are still cold from that godforsaken mountain. “Silvanus was there too. I was able to catch a hint of his signature.”

“So we can track him,” Variant says from where he sits perched on the windowsill. His hair flutters in the wind and I take a moment to appreciate his beauty.

“Yes,” I say.

“What will you have me do? We have the Unseelie army as well as my own. The orcs

thirst for blood.”

“Send your spies to the mortal realm and head north. There’s an old human fortress nestled away from the ancient villages. Silvanus may be hiding there. At least it’s a place to start.”

I watch as Variant drops his own robe to the marble floors, revealing his impeccable form.

He climbs into the steaming waters, slotting himself between my thighs.

I groan as I feel the weight of his prick nudging between my folds.

He strokes his hands along my sides before reaching beneath the water and grasping my hips to lift me onto his lap.

“Your moves are bold, Variant...”

His lips cut off my words with a searing kiss.

I arch against him, grinding my hips into his.

Variant leans back against the tub and I place my hands on his shoulders to steady myself.

That fiery gaze holds all of his hatred for me and I love it.

I don’t want him to desire me any longer. I simply need him to obey.

My hands glide along his silken skin, caressing him until he can stand it no longer. I grip his rigid length and position him at my entrance. Variant bites his lip as I sink

down on his thick member.

I hiss as my body struggles to adjust to the sweet burn of his possession. “This is what I need from you, Variant. Obedience.”

He grits his teeth, but I see his resolve melting.

His hips buck up, driving the fleshy steel of his cock into my spasming channel.

Each throbbing vein sends a delicious tickle as he caresses the fluttering walls of my delicate flesh.

I place my hands on him again and force myself into his thoughts.

I want to know what anger he feels. But, instead of anger, I see him fucking another woman...

Eilish. Shock jolts me as I realize he imagines I am her.

As he shoves his cock inside me, it's her face he sees, not mine.

“You pretend I'm her,” I say in a scathing tone as I glare at him.

“Yes, I want her,” he says. “But that's nothing new.”

“You're obsessed with her,” I say, even though it's more of a question.

“I will have her beneath me. I will know the inside of her. And then I will kill her,” he says.

“As long as you realize what it is you must do,” I say.

He stills within me. Then he smiles. “I may enjoy finding release in your body, Midnight Queen, but know this...” he moans. “I will break free of your treachery, as Theren has done.”

I laugh as Variant grips my thighs and pulls me down into each thrust. His chest heaves as I ride him.

The muscles of my legs burn and he lifts me out of the water, positioning us on the floor without ever sliding free of my body. He tilts my pelvis to pound into me at the perfect angle. I gasp and scrape my nails down his spine until he roars above me.

I dig my nails into his chest, shredding his skin. Variant stares into my eyes and licks his lips. He leans forward and sinks his teeth into my shoulder. I hold him tightly against me as I shatter, milking his member with my tight heat until his back bows and—

“Eilish!” he shouts as he spills his seed. I feel it trickle as he pulls out and I shove him off me with a furious shriek. Variant comes back to himself and reaches for his robes.

“How dare you?”

“You know the truth, why should I hide it any longer?”

“The truth?” I insist.

“I fucking want her! I can’t stop thinking about her and yes, whenever I shove my cock inside you, it’s her face I see.”

I blast him with magic. I’m stronger now that I no longer have to maintain Theren’s compulsion spell, and Variant writhes on the floor as I hold him in my clutches.

“You vile pet. To think I ever imagined you beside my throne sickens me. Love that pitiful creature all you want, but she will fall to the prophecy and so will the rest of them.”

“Morrigan—” he says, fighting against my magic.

“Enough!” I scream. “You are beneath me, Variant. I’ve changed my mind. You’ll be tracking Silvanus yourself and will be held responsible for any mistakes that are made. No deviating from the plan, unless you wish to find yourself even further on the wrong side of my anger. You’re dismissed.”

I free him from my spell and he takes a deep breath as he pulls on his robe and stands beside me.

“It burns you, doesn’t it?” he insists.

“What?”

“That I think of her when I’m with you.”

“No, I don’t fucking care anymore.”

“You made one crucial mistake, Morrigan.”

I look up at him and scowl. “What mistake?”

His smile is broad. “You fell in love with me.” Then he chuckles.

“You don’t know your place,” I start.

“Control me all you want, Morrigan, but I will never love you.”

Variant storms out of the bathing room and I cast a spell to refresh the water of my bath. I step back into the warm water and scrub my skin until it's raw. Never have I felt so humiliated. For Variant to belt the name of... her in such a moment of intimacy... My mind reels with anger.

Abedon would never...

Though his mistress was darkness itself, he was never unfaithful.

The pain I feel in my heart forever amazes me. Millennia have passed since I betrayed Abedon with Silvanus' help, and yet I love him now as I always have. And, yes, Variant spoke the truth when he said I love him. I do. But it's a different love to that I felt with Abedon.

My betrayal of Abedon wasn't out of spite or scorn, but love. He was out of control. He wasn't the man I vowed my life to. But here I sit with thoughts of his affection still surfacing in my mind.

Variant is a boy, by comparison. I was a fool to have ever thought he could stand at my side.

And he is a fool for ever admitting as much as he has to me.

He will never have Eilish, I vow to myself as I watch the rising steam from my bath. I will kill her while he watches.

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EILISH

Mercenary Stronghold

The sound of the quill pen scratching across the surface of the paper lulls me into a state of tranquility.

Each day I sit here and I write the story of what has become of my life, hoping there will be a time when these words bring enlightenment to others.

The flickering light of the candle beside me washes the room in an amber glow.

I'm serene. I'm floating, barely contained inside my skin. I'm at peace. Strange though it may be, I feel as if making love with Cambion has given me this... this euphoric vibration at the center of my being. At least until the knock on my door startles me out of my thoughts.

"Who is it?" I call.

"Aima," she answers. "King Galmer wishes to see you."

I set the quill down and fold the leather journal in a swatch of silk before placing it beneath my mattress.

The faint blue light peeking in behind the curtains signals the coming of dawn on the horizon.

I greet Aima on the other side of the door.

She leans against the wall in the corridor with her hip cocked. Her eyes take me in with a smile.

“You look like shit, glowbug.”

The nickname is new... and surprising.

“Aima... we should talk about...”

She lifts her hand and shakes her head. “Look, I was shocked when I saw Theren. But I’m a big girl, Eilish.

I’ve loved and lost before. My history with Cambion is proof enough of that.

” Sadness enters her inky black gaze as she stands taller.

“Looking back on the days when I first met Theren, I think part of me knew his heart belonged to someone else. He always looked like his mind was off in another realm. His father was... Elioth wasn’t a good man.

He tortured Cambion and Theren, disguising the mistreatment as lessons.

But after a while, Theren’s smile returned.

Most recently, I suspected he loved someone, but I never thought it was you. ”

“Thank you for your understanding words,” I offer as I walk beside Aima with my head high, not wanting to give the people of this sanctuary in the desert any reason to doubt me. “I don’t doubt that Theren loved you. I think it was simply a matter of him

meeting me first.”

The Unseelie woman snorts. “I like to think I know Theren enough to know that isn’t true,” she says as she looks over at me. “You don’t have to protect me, Eilish.”

“I’m not trying to protect you.”

She nods and gives me an understanding smile. “How did the two of you meet anyway?”

“It’s... complicated.”

“And it’s also a long walk to King Galmer’s hall,” Aima counters as if we’re sparring with words.

I nod. “I used to sneak into the Unseelie Kingdom. The Delendren Glade had many gateways leading to the other realms so my mother could heal those in need.” I grow quiet as the memories flood me.

“The Unseelie Kingdom was dark and exotic. I loved the noise and the vibrancy of the kingdom far more than the tranquil forests and fields of lavender in the glade.”

“How did the guards not notice a portal into the city?”

“It wasn’t in the city,” I explain with a shrug. “The gateway opened in a forest on the outskirts of Oronrel, a forest Theren once used as a place to escape his father’s cruelty. It was there that he first saw me. At the time, I hadn’t noticed him tracking me each day.”

“What happened then?”

“I remember always having mixed feelings about meeting Theren because my mother told me leaving the glade was dangerous, but, of course, I didn’t listen.” I sigh. “I was captured by a group of exiles that were taking refuge in the forest.”

Aima says nothing as we walk through the streets of the Mercenary Stronghold. The beautiful buildings and colorful flags marking the territories of each clan still fill me with awe.

“Theren tracked me that day, the same as he always did, but once he realized I’d been captured, he came after me. Elioth was in the forest too, searching for Theren. In saving me, Theren led his father right to us.”

“What happened then?”

I shrug. “I fought them. Theren warned me not to but it... did little good. I killed some of Elioth’s men when they attempted to tie me up.”

“You killed his men?” she repeats, eyes wide. “Did Elioth punish you?” she asks the last question in a way that tells me she’s been on the wrong end of the former Unseelie King’s rage before.

“He did. But I fought back.”

Aima seems proud when she says, “Of course you did.”

“I... was beaten, but Theren forced his father to stop. I thought Elioth was going to kill him right then, but I suspect he stayed his hand because his men were watching.”

Aima shakes her head. “It was because of Theren’s mother.”

“His mother?”

She nods. “Theren’s mother always favored Cambion, but she did what she could to save them both from their father’s wrath. And Elioth loved her as best he was able.”

“Elioth tied us to a tree and left us there for the night. I guess he didn’t expect us to grow close after that...

but we did. With Theren’s help, I managed to escape and afterwards, Theren visited the forest each day until he found the gateway to the Delendren Glade.

We continued to see one another, growing closer as I taught him to speak the other languages of the realm and he taught me how to laugh.

Theren became my friend and my protector,” I say with a smile tugging at my lips.

“And then one day our friendship grew into love.”

“Now I remember noticing Theren smiling more and I remember searching for him with Cambion. We could never figure out where he disappeared to for so long.”

“When his visits suddenly stopped, I thought Elioth had finally managed to kill him. And I grieved him as if he’d died.

That was... the darkest day of my life back then.

” I take a breath and push the memory away.

“Then one day, when I was walking alone in the places we used to share our secrets, Theren found me.” I walk up the stairs that lead to the Hall of Clans with Aima beside me.

“Theren told me Morrigan had saved him, that she’d made a deal with Elioth that

Theren would train to be king at the temple in the Cogost Mountains. ”

Aima pulls me to a stop and whispers, “Theren was never the same after that, he was... different.”

I nodded because I understood why. “I’d told him I had to live with the knowledge that he would leave me and drown in the guilt that I’d caused him so much sorrow. I begged... him not to love me.”

“And what did Theren say?”

I’m not sure I should answer because I can see the pain in her eyes. It’s not an easy thing to listen to a story about the man you love loving another woman.

“Eilish,” Aima says. “What did Theren say?”

Asking me not to love you is like asking the moon to stop chasing the sun.

The words drift through my mind and I shake them away. Then I push open the doors to the hall. “It doesn’t matter. Too much has changed since then. All we can do now is move forward.”

King Galmer casts his gaze on me and smiles fondly. “Lady Fulthain. I’m pleased you decided to join us for the meeting.”

“King Galmer,” Aima and I both greet him.

“We are at an impasse as to what to do with the former Unseelie King, Theren. I move for an immediate execution. Many of the creatures in my protection have suffered greatly at his hands.”

Imatriat, the Wraith Warrior and leader of the Thradsaryl clan, stands up to support King Galmer's decision. "Let us not forget the damage Theren did to The Veil, My Lady."

I listen as each of them voices their opinions.

To my surprise, some of the clan leaders are against King Galmer's bloodlust where Theren is concerned.

I look around as I address the room. "Theren was under the influence of the Midnight Queen and thus wasn't acting of his own volition.

Your own mages have spoken on his behalf...

letting it be known that her power no longer holds sway over him.

Theren has also vowed that his practices of taboo magic won't be used within the walls of the Mercenary Stronghold unless he's forced to defend himself and those who seek refuge here. "

"Will that be enough?" King Galmer asks, clearly believing the answer to be 'no'.

I turn to him. "Theren has been punished by his own Unseelie forces for much longer than he's been an enemy of the realms. I say he has more than atoned for his mistakes.

" At that, the group before me begins to speak among themselves.

Some in agreement and some not. "Theren is a victim of the darker powers that seek to destroy our worlds."

“So, you defend a man who has slaughtered fae and burned down villages?!” Novak, King Galmer’s son, shouts. “How can we trust you when the power that grows inside you gets stronger each day? How do we know you, yourself, are not under the Midnight Queen’s influences?”

“Because I’ve risked my life for yours and all others who call the stronghold their home,” I reply boldly.

“Anyone under Morrigan’s influences wouldn’t hesitate to kill everyone within these walls and claim their power.

I can admit Morrigan convinced me she was innocent for a while, but as soon as I learned of her treachery, she lost my loyalty.

Morrigan is the enemy here, not Theren and not me. ”

Others murmur in disagreement, but they’re overshadowed by the clan leaders who stand up for me and pledge their loyalty to me and my cause. I’m touched and yet this show of unity overwhelms me. I’m not sure why.

King Galmer raises his hands and looks at each of the faces assembled.

“I have reached a decision,” he says. Then he clears his throat.

“After weeks of deliberation, let it be known that the words of Lady Fulthain have spared a life most would seek to condemn.” The response from the others is mixed, as is to be expected.

King Galmer continues. “We shall look back on this day and ponder whether her mercy was a sign of strength or weakness.”

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I bow my head respectfully and once given leave by the king, I hurry back to my room. Aima doesn't join me, which is just as well. I want to be alone. Instead, she seeks out Pyre to discuss what he learned from Silvanus.

As to Pyre, I admit that my feelings for him have grown beyond that of a friend, but I don't wish to come between he and Aima, if he chooses to pursue the love of his reincarnated mate.

It was quite the shock when he announced that his one true love, who had perished so many years before, had been reincarnated in Aima.

And much though I care and admire Pyre, I would never choose to stand between true love.

The door to my room swings open and I see Theren sitting on the edge of my bed.

"Word travels quickly through the stronghold, Eilish," he says softly. "You've fought for me once again and yet we've barely spoken in over a week..."

THEREN

"I needed time," she whispers softly.

I watch as she moves through the room slowly, pulling off pieces of her armor as she goes, not knowing that she carries my heart with her.

She always has. My hands clench at my sides as I fight for control.

The pain in my body from everything I endured still lingers and yet I hunger for her. For her love... for her touch. For her.

She turns to look at me and there's a frown on her face. "What are you doing in my room, Theren?" she demands. "I told you we should take some time to catch our breath before we discuss anything." She seems hurried, annoyed even.

"I don't need to discuss anything, Eilish," I say. "My love for you never diminished over the years I was under Morrigan's spell."

"Aima," she starts but I interrupt her because it's a foolish argument she's attempting and she knows it.

"Aima... deep inside she always knew my heart belonged to someone else."

"She did."

Eilish's answer surprises me, but it changes nothing. "I know I hurt Aima and I have every intention of making amends with her," I start. "But you are the most important subject for me at the moment."

"Me?"

I nod. "I sit and I listen to the whispers about you and they anger me."

"What whispers?"

"The men in your company have often chosen to turn their backs on you because of something you can't control... they don't know your heart the way I do. They haven't

chosen to face an eternity in darkness to keep you safe.”

Her eyes meet mine and I’m ensnared by the blue of her gaze. “Chosen to face an eternity of darkness?”

I nod. “You knew about the bargain I’d struck with my father.”

“Yes.”

“I went with Morrigan to the Cogost Mountains because Elioth promised to spare your life as well as mine. I never cared much for myself, whether I lived or died, but I always cared for you.”

She wraps her arms around her middle and drops her breathtaking gaze to the floor. “Are you saying this to make me feel guilty?” Then she looks up at me and her lips are tight. “As if my mind isn’t confused enough already, you decide now is the time to bring this up?”

“I never meant to hurt you with my words, Eilish. Nor my actions.” I walk over to her and gently cup her chin, lifting her head so I can once again see her eyes. “I remember every single moment I ever spent with you.”

“Those moments matter little now,” she starts but I shake my head.

“Do you recall the time when I chased you in the rain and you slipped in the mud and twisted your ankle?” She doesn’t respond. “I carried you to the lake and cleaned you up...”

“That was before we were friends, Theren. You called me a Hatchling because my feathers were still downy at the time.” She glares at me and I smile in return. “I didn’t forgive you for three days!”

“But I carried you to that felled tree and you kissed me. You... kissed... me.”

“I recall,” she says in an uninterested voice.

“Thus, you must not have been that upset with me.” My hand slides from her chin to her neck where I feel the lifeblood flowing through her veins.

As an angel-succubus hybrid, she’s the last of many, but, most importantly, she’s the only woman I’ve ever truly loved.

“I made a vow to always protect you, Eilish, and I failed.”

She shakes her head, causing tresses of hair to flutter around her face. “I want to believe you’re more than what everyone says... that deep inside, you’re still the boy I fell in love with, but... all everything that’s happened stands in my way. And Aima...”

“Hush,” I whisper, brushing my lips against her forehead. “The past makes me feel horrible, and I have my own guilt to process regarding Aima.”

“Why did you play with her heart so carelessly?” she demands.

I nod, expecting this question. “I was with Aima because it was simpler than having to live alone while you turned to Silvanus.”

Eilish steps out of my reach, but I don’t allow her to retreat entirely.

“I can understand if you hate me,” I offer.

Again, Eilish shakes her head. “Hating you would be easier than what I’m feeling.”

“Show me.”

“Show you what?”

“Show me how you feel, Eilish.”

The hunger growing in her gaze calls to me.

I lean down and seal my lips over hers, tasting the tantalizing flavor of angelic grace mixed with brimstone.

Eilish moans and I reach down to grip handfuls of her lush ass, lifting her onto her writing desk.

She grips my shoulders with a need that surprises me.

I break the kiss and curl my hands into her hair, yanking her head back so I can see her.

“I offer myself to you,” I say.

“What?” she blinks away the haze that came over her, but doesn’t struggle in my arms.

“My servitude, Eilish. I offer my body, mind, and soul to you.”

She’s quiet for a moment as she looks up at me and years of struggle war through her eyes. Slowly, tears begin to take over and she pulls me into a fierce kiss. I can sense her confusion as it battles with my own inner turmoil.

Eager fingers shove my robes down my arms and I step away, only to show that I’ve

bared myself beneath the fabric for her ease.

The purr of a wild cat reaches my ears as her fingers wrap around the velvet steel length of my cock.

She tickles the slit with her finger and my seed spills, easing the slide of her palm along the shaft.

I hiss through my teeth. “I... need you out of your clothing, Eilish,” I whisper against her lips.

“No time.” The desperation in her voice makes me growl. “It’s already been too long as it is.”

I can’t argue that, so I don’t. Instead, I reach between us and tear open the seam of her pants.

The first caress of my cock between her folds is like coming home after too many years adrift.

Eilish gasps as I bring her to the floor and force her knees to her chest. I dip low to pass a teasing kiss against her clit before I enter her swiftly.

The flash of pain I see in her eyes is just as delicious as her pleasure.

Eilish is lost to it, just like she always was—all those years ago.

“Do the others fuck you like this, my love?” I ask, unable to keep the words in.

She trembles in my grasp as I trap her beneath my body, draping over her like a beast. The back of her calves rest against my shoulders and I fill her to the very depths of

her body.

I groan, feeling the tip of my cock kiss her cervix.

She can't take all of me, no matter how much she wiggles and rocks her hips.
“Please, Theren.”

I know what she wants, what she's asking for. “I won't hurt you, Eilish. No matter how much your body hungers for it.”

She lets out a little whimper, but I lick my fingers and reach around to the tight pucker of her anus. Eilish throws her head back with a throaty moan. “Oh...”

“Have you dreamed of being filled completely? Of having me inside you while another stretches you open, sliding inside?”

“Yes!” Eilish cries.

“Who? Who have you imagined with us?”

A soft blush touches the peak of her cheekbones. “Cambion.”

The thought of claiming Eilish with my brother ignites a fire within me I never expected. Eilish screams and convulses, clinging to me even as I cover every inch of her body. I ride the waves of her pleasure until I see the white-hot glory of my own climax.

“Theren...” Warm breath puffs against my neck and, once more, I'm undone by Eilish. I lift her from the floor and walk her over to the bathing room.

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BARON

Mercenary Stronghold

“We can’t trust him, Pyre. I know he did a lot to prove himself already, but we keep getting our asses handed to us every time we trust someone.

” I sit on the edge of the wall, staring out at the night sky that stretches out above the sands.

Pyre is beside me. The sightless necromancer rests with his back against a flag pole, eyes unfocused, but aimed towards the distant horizon. I turn to him.

“What are your thoughts?” I ask when he doesn’t offer anything.

He cocks his head to the side. “I think Eilish is right. Theren has suffered greatly already. There is no punishment that would ever come close to what he’s already endured.” Pyre shrugs. “Proof of his loyalty won’t come just by simply demanding it.”

“So, what do you expect us to do?”

“We wait and we watch. That’s all we’ll be able to do.”

“And then what? We wait until he decides to use that blood magic against us? That creepy shit is strong enough to take a toll on you, Pyre,” I stare at him as I say the words, making sure he understands their importance. “His magic pulls from the

Chasm.”

“I’m not worried, Baron.”

I toss a hunk of brick into the sand and watch it roll away. It’s no use arguing, not when Pyre was able to draw on the Veil to see the prophecies and most probably already has. “How is Aima?”

“She seems unaffected.”

“Bullshit,” I snort. “You dropped the bomb that she’s your reincarnated lover the same day she had to see Theren pining over Eilish like a lovesick puppy.” I pause. “Aima isn’t okay, Pyre.”

He nods. “I should have handled it better, I admit, but I have known Aima for quite some time and she deserved to hear the truth.”

“And what exactly is that truth?” I ask.

He sighs. “That there’s a possibility she and I could end up with our bodies being…”

“You’re not going to die,” I snap, cutting off his words. “Prophecies can be broken. All of us are living proof of that.”

“Hope, in this case, is dangerous.” Pyre reaches over and rests his hand on my shoulder. “You are a friend that I value greatly, Baron. We’ve formed a bond and I would be in pain if it were ever broken. It’s perfectly normal to feel emotional about these things.”

“It’s not just our friendship, jackass. What about Eilish?”

“What about her?”

I frown at him, not appreciating this silly game we’re playing. “It’s clear you two feel strongly about each other. And for fuck’s sake, stop with the ‘we’re just friends’ bullshit!”

Pyre scowls and returns to where he was leaning. “You think I harbor feelings for Eilish that go beyond friendship?”

“I believe you and Eilish are just friends about as much as I believe Kolvar loves Aima like a sister,” I scuff.

“What is this about Kolvar?” Pyre asks, eyebrows reaching for the night sky.

I chuckle. “Our satyr friend is in love. And I bet she’ll be sleeping curled up with him tonight, just like every other night.”

“I never noticed.”

“Because we’ve all been blinded to anything that doesn’t involve Eilish.”

Pyre looks down where his hands are clasped in his lap. “Is my affection for Eilish so apparent? I thought I’d been more careful in concealing my thoughts.”

“You’ve gone out of your way to save her many times.

She all but carried you to the Echoing Spire so you could replenish your power.

You broke your vow of chastity to lay with her.

She killed her father to save you. You mentor her as you do me, helping her become

the best version of herself.

” I take a breath. “All of those things... bond people to each other.”

“I assumed it wasn’t so obvious.”

I sigh and glance at my friend. “When you seek the eyes of another just to feel the comfort of their presence, that’s a pretty good indication.” I watch as Pyre’s eyes widen and he chuckles.

Just then, Cambion climbs the ladder up beside me. I eye him suspiciously as he settles in, but won’t deny him the right to be near us. “My brother is tending to Eilish before the meeting,” he announces.

Pyre chuckles and I quirk a brow at Cambion. “That’s a cute way of saying they’re in there fucking?” The elf gives nothing away in his expression as an awkward silence falls over us. I can’t stand it. “Say what you came to say, Cambion.”

He chews his lip for a moment. “I’m sorry.” He grows quiet for a moment or two. “I should have apologized a long time ago, but I was arrogant. I thought if I waited long enough, my feelings for Eilish would diminish and I’d be free to carry out what I deemed to be our mission.”

Something stirs within me as I see the look of uncertainty in Cambion’s expression. He’s struggling and has been.

“My life has been trying since the day I was born. All I ever had was my brother,” he explains. “Theren stood tall to shield me from the worst of my father’s anger. And, still, that was barely enough. The day Eilish came to me for help...”

“The day you bartered sex with her for the safety of her family, you mean,” I correct

him, unable to keep the anger from my voice.

Cambion nods as though he accepts the ugly truth of my words, as though he's already made peace with them. "Yes... I knew she was the girl from the woods Theren often spoke of. At first, I envied him because he was able to live some normalcy while I was stuck in an endless cycle of expectations."

"Get to the point," I bark.

He nods. "Eilish had come to me, asking me to protect her family. I pushed aside my envy long enough to feel guilty for all Theren had done for me. So, I made the deal with Eilish, thinking I was finally bearing his burden."

"But you fucked everything up."

"Yes," Cambion admits, to my surprise. "I fucked everything up. And I thought going after Theren, when I left the Veil, was my chance to set things right and save my brother. Again, I fucked things up." He goes silent and his lips firm to a white line.

He faces us again. "I didn't come here to give you a sob story. I came to ask your forgiveness."

I stare at Cambion for much longer than I intend. He fidgets beneath my gaze and I finally look away. Humility has never been something I associate with the proud elf. "I accept your apology, but I withhold my forgiveness for now."

"You have both my acceptance and my forgiveness," Pyre mutters as he glares at me. I glare right back at him over my shoulder, resisting the urge to shove him over the wall for always one-upping me.

But Cambion seems more than alright with the turn of events and I feel some of the

tension between us dissipate.

Dragan shouts from the ground that Eilish is ready for the meeting.

While Pyre, myself, and Cambion have somewhat come around to the idea that Theren is here to stay, Dragan hasn't been so keen to accept the rightful Unseelie King.

In fact, he's downright murderous whenever he's in a room with Theren for too long.

EILISH

Theren opens the door to the meeting room and I move to the head of the war table.

Thanks to Pyre, there's an illusion on the map that allows us to view detailed replicas of each realm and kingdom by simply touching their location.

I stare down at it, where we recently added the Delendren Glade and Cogost Mountains.

Theren touches my arm. "Are you alright?"

"I have people restoring the Glade. They're making progress, but darkness has lingered there for a long time. I'm afraid it can't be reversed."

"Have faith, hassa ," he whispers, placing a kiss on my brow.

I look up at him, not recognizing the word. "What does it mean?"

The doors bang open and Dragan stomps into the room. “It means beloved in the ancient tongue no longer used by the fae,” the gargoyle hisses. Dragan stands at his full height as he takes his seat at the table. “He has no right to speak to you at all, much less to call you by that word.”

Theren steps in front of me and slams his hands on the table, getting into Dragan’s face. “I thought we were past this. You don’t get to condemn me for my mistakes. If you would like to settle our disagreement, then I would be happy to meet outside these walls...”

“Enough! Both of you!” My voice echoes within the room.

Kolvar and Aima enter the meeting room with Baron and Pyre following close behind them.

Flumph and Noni come in riding Cambion’s shoulders.

Cambion’s gaze locks onto mine and light begins to simmer beneath my skin.

I miss him. Dealing with Theren’s trial and the other politics between the clans means I haven’t had much time with Cambion.

And I need that time because I need his light.

It helps to keep me balanced, helps to keep the demon side of me from completely taking over.

Cambion sits in his seat, breaking our stare as he faces the others. I clear my throat and speak to Dragan directly. “You have no right to judge Theren. None of you do. Not anymore.”

“He is a traitor!” Dragan growls.

“Theren is now one of us and I will hear no more about it,” I spit back at him. He frowns but holds his tongue.

Dragan and Theren return to their seats. I stand as the others look at me. Now is the time for strength. “What we have to focus on now is stopping Morrigan. Aima, Cambion, and Theren, you all studied beneath the Midnight Queen. Is there any information you can give us?”

Cambion remains quiet, simply choosing to observe rather than take initiative.

Theren, however, stands and uses the map to display the Cogost Mountains.

“This temple was where Morrigan once dwelled. It has a gateway that leads to the academy where we were taught. She is strongest here, in the Cogost Mountains and in the academy, even without her power.”

“What are her weaknesses?” Pyre asks.

Theren looks at him. “Abedon. Her greatest weakness has always been Abedon.” He takes a breath. “Despite everything, she still loves him. Her actions, though inexcusable, were driven by love and fear of Abedon.”

“Theren is right,” Aima says.

Baron rolls his eyes. “Of course you would agree with him!”

Aima stands up, causing the legs of her chair to scrape against the floor. “If you have one cell left in your brain, then use it to tell your mouth to shut the hell up.” She stands over Baron until Kolvar eases her back into her chair. I can’t help my smile.

Cambion speaks up finally. “Morrigan trapped Abedon because she was afraid of him. She plotted for years to hide that fear, turning it into malicious intent until she convinced herself that she truly wanted to kill him and take his power for herself.”

Theren turns me around so we’re standing face to face.

“Hating him was easier than acknowledging her true feelings,” he whispers.

I know he’s thinking about what we discussed earlier.

Morrigan doesn’t deserve my sympathy, but I would be lying if I said I didn’t understand her.

Had we not all made similar mistakes out of fear and love?

Pyre’s voice forces me to look away from Theren.

“Morrigan was injured by Theren when they fought in the glade. She won’t be in Oronrel, but perhaps Earlann or the temple in the mountains.

Silvanus has left his sanctuary, as well, so we must assume that Variant and Morrigan have Silvanus at the forefront of their plans. ”

“Plans?” I repeat.

Pyre looks at me. “Plans that would allow Morrigan to restore her power.”

“Are we safe for now?” I ask.

“For now.”

A knock on the door signals Myerdoth's arrival.

He hands me a scroll from King Galmer. I unroll the delicate parchment and paraphrase the royal decree.

“King Galmer has written a law against blood magic and catoptromancy within the walls of the stronghold. Any spellcaster or mage suspected of dabbling in forbidden or taboo arts will be exiled indefinitely. The only exceptions to this law are: practice with the king's direct consent or in the case of an emergency. ”

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EILISH

Mercenary Stronghold

We are all assembled around a table in the war room.

Myerdoth stands behind Dragan, dark eyes boring into Theren, but I know he won't attack Theren out of respect for me.

The other gargoyle's loyalty to Dragan is growing stronger each day.

It seems as though each of my companions has companions of their own.

Dragan and Myerdoth, Aima and Kolvar, Baron and Pyre, Flumph and Noni, and now Cambion and Theren.

I know each of them have worries of their own, so I open the floor for them to discuss their progress.

"Aima, how are you dealing with your side of the prophecy?"

She shoves her chair back and stands up.

"I've found nothing in regards to my portion of the prophecies.

I think the key to saving me is saving Pyre," she answers.

“I know I’m supposed to be his reincarnated love, but.

.. I have known Pyre for many years and never felt those...

feelings surface inside me.” Aima gives Pyre a sympathetic look.

The necromancer’s eyes glow green with the light of the soul he uses to see. “If you recall, my long lost love did not belong to me. And, therefore, I expect nothing from you, Aima. You are free to live your life as you choose.”

A small bit of tension escapes the group and we take a deep breath as Aima nods and sits back down.

Even though the exchange is quick, it speaks volumes.

Pyre has set Aima free. Not that he could have forced her into any sort of relationship, but his words are well-received, all the same.

I turn to Dragan. “What about you? How close are you to finding the Stone Grimoire?”

The Stone Grimoire is the only way to ensure the return of the gargoyle population and, as is to be expected, Dragan is extremely eager to find it.

“I made a deal with Theren, one I hope he intends to uphold.”

Theren nods, maintaining a very cool demeanor with an impassive expression.

“Of course I will. If you intend to uphold your end. While you and I have our differences, I’m not ignorant to the value gargoyles hold in the realms. We will need fierce warriors to fight the dark entities that plot against us.

The continuation of all races is now more important than ever. Your stone guardians are no different.”

“Where was the last place you saw it?” I ask in Dragan’s stead.

Theren touches another place on the map and a location within the human realm appears. “A coven of witches were carrying the book through this region. The region was once known as France .”

“And who are these witches?” I ask.

He looks at me. “They were thought to be the coven of the witch who had first created gargoyles. If these witches possessed the Stone Grimoire at the extinction of the human race,” he continues as he turns to look at Dragan, “then it will be in your creator’s sarcophagus.”

Dragan and Myerdoth observe the map as though trying to commit it to memory.

They ignore the rest of us in the room and everything falls silent.

Underneath the table, Theren reaches for my hand and holds it in his, stroking the inside of my wrist with his thumb.

Cambion’s leg brushes mine and I swallow the urge to gasp.

The two of them so close fills me with a sense of peace I’ve never known. Light and dark surrounding me.

Baron stands up and deliciously dark energy swirls around him.

“Am I the only one who cares that Pyre and Aima’s lives hang in the balance?”

!” he shouts. “All of our plans seek to do one thing and that is to destroy Morrigan. But we can only defeat her by interrupting the prophecy and yet none of you are even talking about that.”

Aima stands up and faces Baron, matching his anger as she throws her hands on her hips.

“Don’t you think I’d be better off using the time I have left wisely, instead of wasting it away looking for an impossible solution?

! I want to go out fighting, not stuck in dusty archives, searching through tattered old scrolls and tomes that no one has touched in centuries. ”

Baron shakes his head. “It’s not impossible.

Just complicated as all fuck.” Baron paces the floor, some of his anger fades, but I’m curious as to what he means.

He rests his forehead against the wall for a moment as anticipation builds.

When he finally faces us once more, his eyes are shut.

“Pyre told us that creatures like Eilish and I are vessels for energy, that we feed off it. When Pyre and I were inside Eilish at the same time, I felt the pull of her magic.... and the force of The Veil trying to pass into me.”

I can feel the heat of my blush growing stronger as he speaks. I try to force the intimacy of his words out of my mind. Now isn’t the time for fond remembrances. “What are you saying?”

Those unsettlingly dark eyes flicker over to me. “I think if we... enter you again,

together, here in this realm, instead of The Veil, we may be able to bind Pyre to me. If you use your power to open a connection and channel the energy, we may be able to split The Veil's power between us."

Pyre stands, an expression of disbelief and.

.. hope crosses his features. "If you and I create a bond, Baron, if we share the power and the burden of Guardianship, Morrigan's prophecy can't come to pass.

She would not be able to tear open The Veil and use the power within the Echoing Spire if I am not the sole guardian.

And it would save Aima because Baron holds no connection to Aima outside of her being an ally and a friend. "

"Won't breaking that prophecy then change all of the prophecies?" I ask.

Pyre faces me. "Yes. It would change everything. The paths ahead would be... unknown." Pyre doesn't appear as if he's fully on board with this idea.

"Who cares?" Baron snaps, throwing his arms into the air. "Aima and Pyre will live if we do this. And that should be reason enough to follow through with it. Don't the lives of our friends and allies hold more value than some damn prophecy?"

"Baron, no one is arguing that," I reply, standing to walk over to him. Baron's gaze softens and he welcomes me into his arms. "We're merely being cautious."

Aima and Kolvar whisper for a moment. She nods a few times before facing me. "I think we should do it. If Eilish agrees, I think we should take the risk."

"We're stronger together," I reply. I look from Baron to Pyre.

“I vote we change this prophecy and ensure the lives of our friends.” The others wear smiles as I continue.

“Dragan and Myerdoth can begin their search for the Grimoire with help from Theren. Cambion can work with Zir on the communication devices. Noni and Flumph, I want you to look after the fae we rescued. Kolvar and Aima, I think you should handle the clan politics. Baron and Pyre should come up with a plan before we take that final step.” I pause as everyone nods and seems pleased with their roles and responsibilities.

“Let’s move slowly, please? No mistakes. We have to do this... right.”

BARON

Eilish leaves with the Cambion and Theren on her heels.

Kolvar returns to the streets of the Mercenary Stronghold as the others go about their duties, leaving me alone with Pyre.

I can’t hold back the stupid grin on my face as Pyre approaches.

He rears his arm back and pounds his fist into the muscle of my arm. Not too hard but hard enough.

“Where the hell did you come up with that?!” he chuckles. “You could have told me if you were planning this.”

“I hope you approve?”

He nods. "It's brilliant, Baron. I'm only envious I wasn't the one who thought of it first."

"Hey, I'm used to being the brains behind this operation."

Pyre's eyes become sightless once more and he leans against the wall beside me. "In all seriousness, my friend, how did you come up with such an idea?"

I nod and take in a big breath. "I was thinking about it for a while, but I didn't know for certain if it would work."

"It's dangerous and Eilish may not be able to conduct that much energy at once," I explain with a shrug, wondering if I should have brought up my concerns at the meeting. "I was afraid she could get hurt."

"I won't let the power of The Veil harm her." Pyre crosses his arms and sighs. "I would rather tear my soul to shreds for a second time before I put her in that type of danger. I promise to break the connection the second I feel something going wrong."

"How would it feel? I mean, how would you know when you need to break the connection?"

"The bond or hosting The Veil's power?" he asks.

"Both, I guess."

"I've already taught you how to draw on the energies and how to use the souls, but that was just a taste."

The feeling that fills you when you step inside the Echoing Spire is amplified tenfold.

It's the sweetest drug and, yet, it instills a real fear within you," Pyre says.

"I trust you with this, Baron, but this must be handled delicately. If you allow the power to consume you, it will be far worse than anything you could ever imagine. An unmatched darkness with unspeakable power at your fingertips. There's no greater power in this world than the power The Veil holds.

And half the Guardianship will fall to you.

As for our bond, not much should change."

Pyre's words hit me like a ton of bricks.

I have to believe I'm strong enough to stand beside Pyre and Eilish, as their equals. "I'm not Abedon or a god with power. I've been given the opportunity for ultimate power before and I turned my back on it. Everything has a price but I'm willing to pay this one if it means you live, Pyre."

"Never have I known greater friendship."

I can hear the sincerity in his voice and it takes me a moment to work up the courage to ask, "Not even with the woman you loved?"

Pyre shakes his head. "In the end, I was the one who made the sacrifices, not her. You and Eilish are the only ones who have ever given something so that I may live. For so long, my death has been something I've just accepted. But you've shown me I should have faith."

"You should always believe in yourself."

"I meant you, Baron," he snorts. "I should have had faith in you . You vowed to

rescue me from this prophecy and now I think we may have a way. You showed resilience when I was ready to bow to the will of the prophecy.”

“You would do it for me.”

“I would,” he admits. “But what about Eilish?”

“What about her?”

“Do you think she will truly accept me after knowing the soul within Aima is that of the woman I once loved?” He pauses for a moment. “If we go through with this, it will bond me to her and she to me. It will bond us as lovers.”

I shrug. “She accepts Theren. I don’t see why she wouldn’t accept you.” I grow concerned as Pyre shuffles uncomfortably. The necromancer is usually more confident in himself and this anxiety surprises me. “What is it?”

“The situation,” he answers. “I have not been with Eilish for as long as all of you have. I don’t wish to come between anything...”

“Listen,” I cut in. “We all love her. In our own fucked up ways, yeah, but we all love her. Eilish depends on you, Pyre. You aren’t getting in the way of anything. You’d be adding to it.”

CAMBION

Mercenary Stronghold

The sound of fighting in the barracks is soothing.

It's not real fighting, of course, just sparring.

But the sounds are soothing, nonetheless.

Scorching hot sunlight causes sweat to cling to my skin, but I don't have perspiration pouring down my face like the other soldiers.

My balance shifts and before I know what's happening, Aima throws me to the ground, holding her sword to my throat.

I knock the blade aside with a frown and flip onto my feet, circling her like a predator. "That was a good one," I offer.

"You're not on your game," she responds.

"Says who?"

"Says me."

I chuckle. "Oh, and why do you think I'm not on my game?"

“Because you’re too much in your head.”

“Too much in my head about what?”

She glares right back at me. “You need to go talk to your brother,” she says as she sidesteps one of my attacks.

“About what?”

“About everything that’s transpired between you two and Eilish.”

“What about you, Aima? Have you spoken to Theren?” I lunge for her and she shoves against my chest. I’m too distracted to spar, so I toss aside my weapon and sit on one of the benches. Aima joins me.

“No. I have nothing to say yet,” she replies. “Theren’s love for me was never real. It was just convenient. It was Eilish he always loved and Eilish he always wanted. I was just a way to pass the time.”

“I’m sure he didn’t intend for that to be the case.”

“Regardless, it is.”

I look at her and sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Cambion,” she responds. She gives me a small smile. “Dealing with the truth about Theren will take some time, but I’m not angry about it.”

“Why not?”

She shrugs and points to where Kolvar stands with the other soldiers. “The one

person who has always been there for me is standing right there.”

“Kolvar?” I ask, surprised at her insinuation. At least, I think she’s insinuating that the two of them... are together?

She nods. “I may not have the history with Kolvar that I have with you and Theren, but history is no longer important.”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

“That looking back won’t get you anywhere.

You can dwell in the torture your father put you through and the guilt that caused you to lose your way or.

.. you can find a new way to move forward that might surprise you along the way.

” Aima cracks her knuckles and pulls off the gauntlets she favors.

“What are you going to do if Elioth rises like Morrigan said? You know he’ll come after you. ”

“I wouldn’t even believe he was still alive if not for Theren saying he could still feel our father’s presence whenever he stared into the mirror,” I admit. “If Elioth returns, I’m not sure this world can survive it. And if his loyalty still lies with Abedon, then we’ve already lost.”

She shakes her head. Fiercely. “Don’t be so quick to underestimate us.”

I chuckle. “What are we really, other than just a bunch of wayward rebels all clinging to each other?”

She glares at me. “We’re stronger than you give us credit, Cambion.”

“Maybe so, but I hate the unknown. Pyre’s prophecies were all we had to guide us from one step to another.

” I run a hand through my hair and watch the others training in the barracks.

They’re improving. From day to day. “If we do this, none of those established and known prophecies will be able to guide our next move. We’ll be vulnerable. ”

“Then you’d rather Pyre and I forfeit our lives for the sanctity of old prophecies that might not come true anyway?” she demands.

I look at her and shake my head. “That’s not what I’m saying. I support this decision, you know that.”

“Then?”

“I’m just saying I’m nervous about not knowing what the future holds.”

Aima shoves me playfully. “I’m scared too, you know? If this doesn’t work, then I die on an altar, fucking a guy I don’t have feelings for. If it does work, then I’ll most likely get killed in the battle against Abedon.”

“You think Abedon will free himself?”

“I know he will,” she says as she stands to leave as one of our soldiers approaches me with a message from King Galmer—the king requests my presence. Why? I’m not sure. I tell the man I’ll be there shortly and with a nod, he returns the way he came.

“The Abedon I remember used to toy with people’s minds far worse than Morrigan

can and does,” Aima says, returning to our conversation. “I was always so afraid of being alone with him because his power... it’s like nothing I’d ever seen before.”

I study her with narrowed eyes. “Did Abedon ever try anything sexual with you?” I ask, surprised as the words empty from my mouth, but I ask them all the same.

She shakes her head and we watch as Kolvar catches a young soldier with a blow against the shoulder. I can see the pride in her eyes as she observes him. Then she faces me again. “No. His eyes were lecherous, but he kept his hands to himself. I can say that much for him. Little else.”

“I’m surprised and relieved, Aima. Some women were not so lucky.”

“What did you think of him back then?”

I thought about that for a bit, running through every memory I had of Abedon. “He was powerful, handsome, intelligent, and cunning. But his anger was like a raging wildfire that destroyed everything in its path. I was scared of him.”

“We all were scared of him,” Aima groans as she works out a cramp in her calf. “Any chance he may come out of his prison reformed?”

“Slim to none,” I reply with a laugh.

Aima and I return our gear to the armory before I head to the Hall of Clans.

Once there, I walk through the double doors and spot the king at the far end of the room.

He tosses his long mane and bellows at his son.

The young centaur storms out of the room.

I stand off to the side, not wanting to interrupt, but King Galmer notices me quickly.

“My son is headstrong,” he says. “He feels you and the others in your company will bring the destruction of our home. I tell him it’s merely a matter of time before our enemies find us and they will bring the true destruction of everything we’ve worked for.”

“Do you have a way to evacuate in case of an attack?”

“Yes. All clan leaders have their evacuation protocols,” the king answers with a clipped nod. “But that isn’t why I called for you.”

“And why would that be?”

“I understand you’ve been assisting the artificer with the new communication devices and weaponry?”

“I have.”

He nods. “Would you mind helping the Mage’s Guild with their arcane experiments as well?”

I bow my head slightly. “I will offer whatever aid I can.”

King Galmer nods and gives me a quick grip on my shoulder that turns into a pat before he goes after his son. Meanwhile, I leave the Hall and head down the road, toward the guilds. Zir has been given an office above one of the smithing shops.

When I walk in, Zir tosses me one of the upgraded communication rings that allow

the wearer to locate and speak with someone else using telepathic frequencies. The design is sleek and more durable than the last prototypes.

“Did the schematics I gave you work?” I ask.

“Yes, all of the com-rings are active.”

I feel accomplished and proud that my research into the technology of the ancient humans is finally useful. Zir and I pour ourselves over the plans for the vehicles. The com-ring chimes in my ears and suddenly Dragan’s voice begins to spew an endless stream of profanity at Flumph.

I suppose all technology has its downfalls.

THEREN

I grip the edge of the window and fight against the sheer terror that comes each nightfall.

It’s too quiet and far too cold. I don’t wish to be in the darkness any longer.

Morrigan held me captive within my own mind for far too long.

That and my body still hasn’t fully healed from everything I’ve endured.

My healing comes day by day but it’s slower than I’d like. I feel weak and I don’t like it.

My fingers dig into the terracotta beneath my hands. Muscles jerk and twitch until I

cramp. The urge to scream for help rises. And then the door opens...

I release the windowsill with shaky hands and follow the sound of a clattering dinner tray. The young house brownie, Noni, sets the table and pours a bit of tea.

“Noni knows you like this kind,” she supposes. “She watches you when she visit the Unseelie Kingdom.”

“You... watched me?” My voice is hoarse, but she hears my question on the second try. She nods. “Why would you do that?”

“Master tell Noni all the time, he say ‘You listen, Noni. You go there and make sure the naughty fae isn’t hurting nobody.’ And Noni always listen to her Master.”

“Your master is Pyre?”

She bobs her relatively large head, causing her curls to bounce as she blinks her large eyes up at me. “He tell Noni to watch, but not to sit with you. Noni do that on her own. She watch you sleep so monsters no come and steal your dreams. She bring you tea.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“It was long time ago,” she says with a wave of her hand as if the particulars don’t matter. “Noni help you, but she still angry.” The house brownie climbs onto the table, gesturing for me to sit.

“Noni, did you ever see a dark male that looks fae but isn’t?” I ask. “Someone who shifts into the form of a hideous beast?”

“Oh! You mean the cockadoodle?”

“The cockatrice, yes,” I snicker as I lift the tea to my lips.

“Noni seen him.”

“What do you know about him?”

“Him reads from a big book and say scary stuffs in the dark. Noni get scared, so she leave. When Noni return, she see him on your throne and think he big stupid chicken. Then all the Unseelie Court have different leaders and Noni hurry to tell Master. Noni love her Master.”

“Can you describe what the book he was reading from looked like?”

“It big.”

“Anything else?” I ask with a tight lipped smile.

“Black and purple on the outside. Red words on paper.” Noni sits on the table and pouts in deep thought. “Oh! It make smoke when he say the words.”

I set the tea aside and reach for the food, not wanting to offend the tiny creature even when I have no appetite.

“My suspicions are true, then,” I say, more to myself.

“The cockatrice has my father’s journal.

” I take in a deep breath as the truth dawns on me.

Abedon and Elioth were working together before Morrigan and Silvanus trapped Abedon within the Hall of The Gods.

It was once a light place, but it was later known as the Tomb of The Gods, because it was the same place where the gods were slain by Abedon during his first siege.

Noni scurries around the table nervously, causing the teacups to rattle.

“What else did you see Noni?” I ask. “I need to know so I can make sure nothing bad happens again.”

Noni sits on the edge of the table. Much closer to me than before and twirls her finger around a chestnut curl. “Noni see them hurt you. She see the Midnight Queen do bad stuff and tell the soldiers what to do and then talk to the naughty king about hurting us little fae.”

“The naughty king,” I repeat. “You mean Variant?”

She nods. “Variant.”

“Did the recipe for the talisman and the Threst come from the book?”

She bobs her head once more. “And the ice knife used to hurt Mr. Vampire and the mirror Silvanus got to hold Morrigan’s power and... some other stuffs Noni can’t remember.”

“The spell used to trap Variant and me? Did that come from the book?”

Her eyes open wide.

Morrigan has been using the teachings of my father’s dark magic as if it were her own. She used the very thing she swore to protect me from in my youth to control me.

“Morrigan is a fraud and a liar,” I say as I stand up and move towards the window to get air as the panic overwhelms me once more, but, instead, dizziness takes over and I fall to the floor.

Searing pain in my abdomen moves through my body.

I am still unwell and my services to Eilish may have pushed my healing back by a few days.

Noni hurries over and takes a look at my injuries.

“Why you no ask Noni to heal you?”

“The mages already...”

She sticks her little tongue out at me. “Silly mages don’t heal like Noni.”

I stand long enough to collapse onto my bed. Noni climbs up using handfuls of bedding to get a firm grip. She pitter patters over and prods along my ribs with her tiny fingers. “Tell me more, Noni. Tell me what has been happening here before I arrived?”

“Well, they all been learning about what happened to them before they all came to The Veil. Fae was being killed so Morrigan can make her necklace with the big stone. The naughty king’s soldiers catch all of them and Master the only one who could save them, but saving them hurt him.

When they in the palace, the pretty angel get taken by the naughty king.

She cries a lot when she talk about what happen. He took away her control.”

I feel each word like a slug to the chest.

“Soldiers raid houses and take the angels’ wings, fae kept in cages, folks getting killed cause they don’t bow.”

“Killed?” I repeat. “For not bowing to Variant?”

She nods. “Noni not talking about knife killed or rope killed. They soul killed,” she snuffles. “Even Noni was hurt. Master saved her, though. Other fae not so lucky to have a Master like Noni’s.”

“Did I... ever hurt the fae?”

She bites her bottom lip for a moment, hands glowing as she holds them over my body. “You hurt lots of fae. But mostly the pretty Unseelie lady, Aima. She was hurt real bad and blame you for her sister.”

“Her sister?”

“The Midnight Queen kill Aima’s sister for her magic. It was used to make tricky dungeon spells and bad magic. Aima blame you because her sister was given to the naughty king as a slave to keep the peace.” Noni finishes up the spell and sits cross-legged on my chest. “She is hurting inside.”

“I thought she was upset with me because of Eilish...”

Noni shakes her head. “Aima confused. You did not mean to get her sister killed and she know that, but she angry and her heart bleeding. Only the giant satyr help her.”

I reach up and take Noni’s little hand. “I am so sorry for the pain my ignorance has caused. And I will try to correct the mistakes I’ve made.”

“Noni forgive you under one condition.”

“Yes?”

“You has to promise her that you gonna free all us fae when this is all over.”

“I promise to free all fae once the balance is restored and honor those who lost their lives to Morrigan as heroes.”

Noni hugs my hand. “Then Noni forgive you.”

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DRAGAN

Desolate Border

Myerdoth slams two pints of Brood Ale onto the table where we sit at the back of the bar.

I roll my neck to ease the tension in my shoulders as I gulp down the whole glass in one go.

Myerdoth takes a more civilized approach as he sips his ale.

I stare around at the nymphs, vampires, golems, elves, and other creatures that call the stronghold their home.

Someone plays a haunting melody on a cello that sits center stage.

“You know this isn’t exactly a place our kind tends to dwell,” I mutter as the server brings over another round of drunks.

“I like it here,” he answers with a shrug. “It’s dark like the Gorge, but there’s just enough light and life that I don’t feel as if I’m trapped in my stone figure.”

I wince, remembering just how big of an absolute asshole I was after breaking free of the Succubus Queen and her daughters. “I abandoned all of you to seek my revenge against Variant...”

“Perhaps.”

“Fuck. How can you even stand to look at me, much less be willing to fight beside me once more? I don’t deserve your loyalty.”

“The past we lived in is gone, Shadow King. We must think about the new future. Already you have changed the road ahead when you became the first gargoyle to walk in daylight.”

“Not all will want to follow these new ways. Some will want to return to the way things used to be... before Variant came to absolute power.”

“That is true. But without the ability to withstand the sun, we are at a serious disadvantage.”

“For the record, it isn’t very pleasant. Too bright and it makes everyone sweat so much, that everything tends to smell like sweaty balls.”

Myerdoth laughs through his nose. “Even so, when we find the Grimoire, perhaps Pyre or Theren can add the daywalking spell into the ritual so we aren’t confined to darkness forever. I would very much like to see a sunrise that won’t turn me to stone.”

“We should not lessen the true meaning of our creator’s gift of life by becoming something we aren’t.” I take my time on the next pint.

“Yes, but you were not there the day the Gorge was attacked. They allowed in rays of sunlight that kept us wrangled like sheep for slaughter,” the other gargoyle says with agony glistening in his gaze.

“Our numbers were either turned to stone and shattered or they were slaughtered by

our brethren we thought had died in the first war.”

“I have seen the corrupted gargoyles who fight with Variant.” And they sicken me. I despise them.

“So, you see, we are vulnerable in daylight.”

“I wasn’t arguing that point.”

He nods. “I’m not suggesting we give up our nocturnal lives, but we should be given the opportunity to defend ourselves properly should another attack happen.”

My soul is heavy with guilt. “I should have been there to fight for you all.”

Myerdoth cocks his head inquisitively. “You would have been killed beside us. That would have resulted in the extinction of our race entirely. The sole reason I fought to survive was because there was still hope in the Gorge that you were still alive,” he confesses.

“And don’t you think the continuation of our race is more important than winning a fight? ”

I stand up with my glass. “Of course. Let’s uphold our end of the bargain.” He clicks his glass against mine and we walk out of the bar.

DRAGAN

We find a patch of stone on the ground surrounded by the sands of the Desolate Border.

I kneel on the still warm rocks and Myerdoth kneels in front of me.

I spread my fingers and rest my palms against the ground, pulling them back up slowly as shadow begins to well beneath my hands.

Myerdoth channels his energy into me, fueling my power as I begin to forge the mirror of pure shadow.

I speak slowly in a voice barely a whisper.

The language is ancient and, though I don't know its origins, the words still flow from me with ease.

I feel the frame solidifying, morphing into an ornate pattern so intricate, my sensitive eyes begin to blur if I look at it too closely.

Though I am the one wielding the power, the shadows are an entity in their own right.

The secrets of the mirror are not mine to know.

Myerdoth breaks into a sweat as the shadows pool into the center of the frame, becoming so black, I fear I may fall into the darkness and never return. There's no reflection. I can't see myself in the surface of the mirror. Theren will be pleased.

I break the spell and Myerdoth falls back, bracing himself on his hands. "Is it always that exhausting?"

"Yes," I answer with a chuckle.

He continues to heave in breaths. "Not even a fight to the death has left me so winded."

“Now imagine maintaining that energy in order to shadow walk while carrying Baron’s heavy ass.”

The gargoyle scowls. “I’d rather not imagine anything involving Baron’s or any other vampire’s ass.”

I chuckle at Myerdoth’s dry humor and lift the impossibly heavy mirror from the ground.

With a lunge, we vault into the sky. Our wings spread wide as we glide towards the stronghold.

However, I sense Theren outside the walls.

Instead of hunkering down for the night, it seems the former Unseelie King has gone for a stroll through the camp where the soldiers recover from the last fight.

I motion to Myerdoth and we both land beside Theren with hardly a sound. Theren appears surprised. But not as surprised as I am to find he’s been aiding the soldiers’ healing. “What the hell are you doing?” I demand.

He stops at the sound of my voice and the radius of the healing spell returns to his body. Theren almost looks embarrassed by his act of kindness. “Noni and I were discussing...”

I lift my hand to cut him off. Myerdoth and I move closer to him and he raises himself to his full, impressive height, as if he’s afraid we’re both going to attack him. Not that I blame him. I’ve had to discourage such thoughts more than once.

But, seeing as how we’re outside the walls of the stronghold, we’d be foolish to attack him when he can freely rely on his taboo magics. “Easy, asshole. We come

bearing gifts,” I say as I present him with the mirror.

Theren narrows his eyes at me and I smirk to myself as I hand it over, wanting to see him crumble beneath the weight. My satisfaction never comes as the large mirror seems light as a feather in Theren’s hold.

He looks at it and is clearly impressed. “It’s a quality mirror. Such power would have been greatly honored in Oronrel before all the corruption.”

Something inside me snaps at the look of sadness in Theren’s eyes and a flood of sympathy washes over me. “You were controlled for much longer than we all knew, Theren,” I offer. “Only Eilish was able to see the real you.”

“She did.”

I nod. “And not only that, but, you woke to find you were no longer the king of your people, but someone you trusted had taken everything.” I take a deep breath and amaze myself at the words that come from my mouth next.

“No one understands you more than we do. It may take time for everyone to come around, but you’ve earned my sympathy for now. ”

He looks at me in surprise. “And you have mine. I’m aware of what’s become of your home as well, Dragan,” he replies. “I hope with the help of the Shadow Grimoire, your kind will be able to prosper once more.”

Theren turns away from me and sets the mirror upright on the ground and it begins to float. A dark ring of magic surrounds the mirror as Theren stares into the surface. His reflection appears, but his eyes are black and hollow.

I take a step back and watch the strange interaction. When Theren breaks the spell,

something flies out of the mirror and lands in his hand. He turns back to me and offers an unusual skeleton key.

“What is it?” I ask.

“It will allow you to open the crypt where the Grimoire is hidden.”

I hold my hand out and accept the key. The very second it touches my hand, a sense of rightness swells in my chest. “This was... made from stone?” The smooth, polished surface of the key shines like glistening marble. At the base of the handle, rests a gargoyle’s silhouette with eyes of jewels.

“Yes,” Theren answers.

A flood of emotion wells up within me. And I suddenly feel like I’m home again. It’s a feeling I struggle to explain and one I’ve never felt before. I look over at Theren. “Why do I feel this way?”

“Because the key was fashioned from the same stone that birthed you.”

FLUMPH

Mercenary Stronghold

The barracks is hot beneath the scorchin’ sun.

I ain’t smell nothin’ but the stench of sweaty asscrack and musty pits.

For fuck sake my wee little nose all scrunchy-like cause I feelin’ like I might fuckin’

spew my breakfast all over Noni boots.

As if the rays o' light weren't already hurtin' my fuckin' eyes, now I gots to deal with the other giants kickin' dirt up into my face while they's fightin'.

Noni an' me... we be fightin' too.

She all sneaky-like when I tries to pin her. She hit me right in the throat an' I falls over, gaspin' while my poor lungs burn cause I can't fuckin' breathe. When I finally gets some breath back, I sweeps my legs under Noni so she fall on her ass.

We was sparrin' with them other little faes, but now I want revenge. Too bad Noni much quicker than I thinks. She roll away an jump up, glarin' at me with them freaky ass eyes o' hers.

The other faes get all ups in our faces cause they knows I a badass.

They push us apart an' we all takes a break.

I dig 'round in Noni bag for them cookies she always makin' an' I gobbles them up till my fuzzy little belly full.

Noni give the rest o' them cookies to the other faes.

It nice to be round little guys like us.

Motis lay on the ground with his face all red an' whatnot. He a weird sort a fae with a big 'ol mane 'round his face, but he ain't no lion critter.

"I heard someone say that vampire eat fae like us," he say. He be talkin' 'bout Baron.

“Maybe he eat you, but not me. I show him that Flumph ain’t no snack. I a warrior now ‘an he show me lotsa respects.”

“That ain’t what I hear,” Motis say like he know.

“Then youze might wanna clean yer fuckin’ ears ‘cause you ain’t hearin’ good,” I snorts.

“That not true. I hear lots. We little fae know everything going on in this place. King Galmer tell us to go peek on you lot.”

“Bunch o’ lies,” I says.

But Motis shake his head real determined like.

“No lie. I even know that all of ya are looking for bunches of prophecies, but you isn’t telling the king ‘bout them prophecies. He don’t trust nobody that keep secrets.

” Motis stick his tongue out at me, but he a fool.

Now I gots to go tell my companions that the king sendin’ him little spies to look in on us.

Noni an’ I shares a look and scurry off all secret-like.

When we gets to the compound, I go lookin’ fer Pretty while she go lookin’ fer Pyre.

Fang Face an’ Mask arrive a lot quicker than Pretty.

These days I wonderin’ if Baron and Pyre attached like them spooky fuckin’ snakes with two heads. Pretty finally show up.

“Galmer got them itty bitty faes sneakin’ n peekin’ on us...” I say.

“What?” Baron demands.

“What Mr. Flumph trying to say,” Noni interrupt. “Is that the horsey king has small fae spying on us. He don’t trust secret-y people and we got lots of secrets.”

I glare at her, all mad like. “Don’t speak fer me!

” Then I look at the others. “What I is tryin’ to say was that the king don’t trust secrety people an’ we gots lotsa secrets, so he sendin’ a bunch o’ critters like Motis.

But the king be real stupid-like ‘cause Motis told us he was doin’ the spyin’.”

I looks up an’ see my companions all got real angry looks on their faces.

EILISH

Mercenary Stronghold

Baron and Pyre follow me into my chambers.

There is tension between us already and I force myself to look away from Baron's thick, muscular neck.

And Pyre... God, Pyre is so large, nearly brushing the top of his head against the high ceilings as he steps inside the room.

Their presence fills my sanctuary with a dominant energy that makes me feel so small and fragile.

"Galmer is spying on us," I say as a way of distraction. They've heard the news just as I have.

Pyre sits on the edge of my bed and removes the mask from his face.

His breathtaking appearance is always a shock at first. The runes and sightless eyes don't take away from the harsh beauty of his angular face.

Those sensual lips part to speak and, for a moment, I find myself entranced by the movement of his mouth.

"Galmer is simply showing caution. He must put the needs of those within the walls

above our needs. We have an alliance with him, but he feels threatened by your growing power.”

“Mmm,” Baron groans as he swipes his tongue along the curve of his top lip.

He looks at me as if he’s a starving man and I’m...

supper. “If Galmer were smart, he would try to earn Eilish’s trust. The gods know I’d give anything to keep tasting from the well of her power.

Sweet... succulent... like ripe fruit dripping down my chin. ”

I shift in my seat and accept a goblet of wine from Pyre’s hand. “I have no interest in Galmer.”

“Good,” Baron answers.

“But I think Cambion and I are getting closer...” sharp laughter interrupts my words.

I arch my eyebrow at Baron and he holds his hands up in surrender.

He walks to me and leans in close to my face, hands bracing the chair where I sit.

His wolfish grin causes my thighs to clench even as I feel the urge to spread them for his claim.

“I’m sure you and Cambion are closer,” he purrs. “Did he fuck you or did you make love ? Tell me Eilish: Do you shred his back and scream at the rafters with him too?”

“Easy, Baron.” The sharpness of Pyre’s tone breaks through Baron’s intensity. “You sound as if you’re mocking her and we both know you like to think of her being taken

by many lovers... at once.”

My heart begins to pound feverishly. “Cambion is repenting for his actions against all of us. He and I just... share a different connection. Not stronger or more loving, just different. And, to be honest, what Cambion and I do on our own time is none of your business... unless you want it to be.”

Baron gets right into my face. I’m not sure if my words have challenged him or turned him on or both. “I do. And I want to watch the next time he fucks you.”

Pyre chuckles and stands up to remove his coat.

He hangs the long, black garment on a hook beside the door as I watch the muscles of his arms flex.

“I, for one, am proud of the progress Cambion and Theren have made thus far. Their willingness to acknowledge their mistakes is impressive. All of us have gone through many changes since our paths crossed.” He hands Baron a goblet and the vampire doesn’t waste any time downing its contents. But first he steps away from me.

Being alone with them feels different somehow, more intimate maybe?

I finish my wine, needing the courage, and allow the side of me that yearns for them to take over.

My feet carry me over to Baron. I take the goblet from his hands and set it aside.

He smirks and stares down at me with his lip pulled between sharp teeth.

Heat flashes in his eyes as I reach up and unbutton the long line of buttons that trails down his torso.

The silk shirt slithers down his shoulders and hits the ground with a soft flutter.

My hands move to the belt at his waist and make quick work of the buckle.

I gasp as the front of his trousers dips, giving me a glimpse of the rigid curve of his cock.

He winks and steps out of his pants. But when he reaches for me, I push him towards the bed.

“If you want to watch so much, then get on the bed. Don’t look away.

” His grin grows tenfold and I feel the weight of his gaze on me as he crawls onto the duvet.

Baron situates himself shamelessly on his back, legs splayed in a lavish display of toned flesh.

I turn to Pyre and the necromancer steps towards me in a way that is more instinct than anything else.

I circle him, loving the way he towers over me.

I feel powerful as I reach around and untie his sacred robes. The brush of my fingers against his throat as I stand on my toes to press a kiss to his jaw causes Pyre to inhale sharply. Baron leans forward on the bed a bit, getting comfortable.

“Without his sight, his senses are more intense,” he explains as Pyre shivers. I look over at Baron as my lips brush Pyre’s ear and I wonder if Baron is enjoying himself as much as Pyre.

He growls and flashes his fangs. “Don’t tease us. Show him what that pretty mouth of yours can really do, Eilish. Make me proud.”

I feel warmth spread through my body and move to stand in front of Pyre. His blindness puts him at my mercy. And the fact that I can render this powerful being incapable of speaking beyond a moan or a heated sigh is invigorating.

BARON

Pyre’s rune covered skin is bared to my eyes and Eilish’s hands trace each and every contour of his muscular form.

Her nails gently scrape over his nipples and he hisses, arching his back as she explores his body.

I adore the contrast of my mentor’s darkness against her brilliant light.

It’s awe inspiring. I can’t tear my gaze away.

Eilish sinks to her knees and Pyre’s robes fall.

I gulp loudly as she paws at his enormous erection.

My own cock twitches against my thigh, stiffening as the blood in my body rushes to my loins.

Pyre meets my gaze just as Eilish tugs his leathers down his thighs.

I know he can’t see me, but the pleasure written on his face the moment Eilish wraps

her fingers around his prick is exquisite.

I hear her swallow before taking Pyre into her mouth. He bucks and buries his length down her throat in one fluid motion. He gasps and grabs the back of her head, pausing for a moment as if asking permission. Eilish squeezes his thighs and holds on.

I close my eyes for just a moment, listening to the sounds of Eilish's throat working as Pyre fucks her mouth. The sound makes me shudder. I can't hold it anymore. I crawl towards the edge of the bed and yank them down with me.

Eilish snickers. "Impatient."

I shut her up with a kiss. She slips her tongue into my mouth and I taste Pyre there.

For a moment I recoil, but the strangeness disappears as I realize he tastes similar to myself.

Pyre moves to take my place on his back on the bed.

Eilish crawls up his chest and straddles his lap.

Pyre grabs her hips and I reach between to stroke her clit.

Warm juices trickle between my fingers. Eilish tosses her head back and moans loudly. The bulbous crown of Pyre's cock brushes my fingers and I ease him into Eilish's weeping slit. She grips Pyre's shoulders so hard, red welts appear. He smiles and traces a line up her neck with his tongue.

"Open for him, Eilish. You can take both of us." She's done it before.

I tease her opening with the head of my prick. She bites her lip and barrels down. I feel the give and thrust into her. Pyre swallows her scream in a searing kiss that causes her to shiver. A new flood of wetness pools between us and I bury myself inside her with a satisfied groan.

Eilish begins to rock her hips. I feel each squelching slide and every fluttering kiss of her womb.

My fingers pet her folds. I feel her clit graze my hand each time she drops onto our cocks.

She chases that delicious pleasure that waited on the other side of the pain that comes each time we claim her body.

Pyre starts thrusting up to meet the rhythm she set with her pulsing hips.

I tangle my hand in her hair and pull her back against my chest. Their movements stroke my cock beautifully.

I watch Eilish lean down and whisper into Pyre's ear only seconds before his hands find their way to my hips. My rhythm falters, but not for long.

I watch them kiss deeply, tongues swirling and fighting for dominance.

My instinct is to turn away, to refuse myself this sight, but I find myself dipping my head towards them.

Eilish groans deeply when she feels me join the kiss.

Her thrusts become more violent as she slams herself down over and over, impaling her tender flesh on our erections.

Pyre's thrusts are quick and shallow while mine are deep and punishing. I feel the lush darkness within her rising just as her channel squeezes around us. Her climax causes hot, rippling muscles to caress our sensitive cocks.

"You have no idea how good you feel," I manage.

"Baron!" she screams. "Pyre... I..."

"Use your power, Eilish." Pyre's bruising grip intensifies.

Eilish places one hand on his chest and I place my hand over hers.

The roar of power rises. That crimson smoke of her succubus power surrounds Pyre as he arches off the bed.

I kiss her neck and feel the probing power of the angel as she opens the connection.

She acts as a conduit of magic, pulling The Veil's power from Pyre and filtering it into me.

"Do it!" Eilish shouts, breaking through that wall of pleasure once more.

Pyre lifts off the bed and I sink my fangs into his neck and the familiar burst of magic hits my taste buds.

I lose control and my cock twitches one last time before I spill my seed inside her.

I feel the transfer. Pyre has given me part of his guardianship of The Veil.

And with it, he's given me part of his soul.

Darkness swarms my vision...

The bond... the bond is strong between Pyre and I. And my affection for Eilish has grown as well. I feel her heartbeat in my chest as though we share the same heart. Hands stroke my hair and I open my eyes to find her staring down at me. She smiles and traces my lips with the pad of her fingers.

“I don’t want to overwhelm you, but I think we should do that again. It was... liberating,” she says.

Pyre chuckles from his place beside us. The necromancer looks a little too comfortable sprawled across the sheets in the nude, scarlet hair fanning across the pillows like some sort of renaissance painting.

I feel heat rising to my cheeks as Eilish cranes her neck to lick the bite mark I left on him.

She moans and peers at me through a curtain of white hair, an impish smile curling her lips.

I’ve never been more in love in my life or death.

FLUMPH

Mercenary Stronghold

“Fuckin’ hell!”

An explosion rocks the entire fuckin’ universe an’ I flys up to the big wall to see what the hell up with all the noise.

The sentries scramblin’ ‘round to see if they see somethin’, but they ain’t got eyes like me.

I stares off into the distance an’ spy a huge asshole ridin’ a stag.

.. er is it a moose? Either way, it be fuckin’ ginormous. An’ I knows who it is.

I recognize Variant anywhere. He lookin’ all smug-like as he ride towards the stronghold with his army behind him. Them stinky fuckin’ orcs an’ goblins runnin’ ‘round like a bunch o’ crazy chickens.

I hurry over to blows on the horn that lets everyone know we’s under attack, but my little lungs ain’t strong ‘nough to gets the job done. Variant leap from him’s mount an’ fly over the wall, landin’ on top of the Hall of Clans like some perverted version of a gargoye.

He stand there all high an’ mighty with hims hair blowin’ in the wind an him’s wings spread.

The others ain't got no idea what goin' on!

I run quick as I can an' try to get to them, but it too late.

Variant raise him hands an' I see lots of fuckin' magic flowin' from his palms. Big ass chunks o' the wall start fallin' off.

It happen so fast, the guards don't know whats to do.

The barracks begins to crumble like a cookie left in milks for too long.

I hurry to find Noni 'cause she my friend an' all. But I can't fuckin' find her. She ain't in the kitchens or the hospital.

My poor wings can't go no faster. I dodgin' spells an arrows, but I don't gots my crossbow to fight back. I hate feelin' so helpless again. Finally, I see some o' the other clans fightin' against Variant's forces. Kolvar and Aima at the front, o' course.

"Hey! Ass Face?! You seen Noni?"

The satyr shake him's horny head an' tosses Aima towards a horde o' enemies. I real tired o' them orcs lookin' at me like I their supper or somethin'. Another fuckin' explosion nearly blow my ass clean off my body...

I hits the wall an' my eyes go all blurry-like for a minute. Big hands reaches down and pulls me up from the ground. I starin' into the eyes of a slobbery goblin prick. Them isn't 'pose to comes out of their caves, but here they fuckin' are!

I jump on its face an' dig my hands into him's eyes, pushin' in real deep 'til the pus oozin' out an' he drop me. I try to fly, but my precious wing ain't movin'.

“Noni! Where the fucks is you?!” I really hopin’ she ain’t hurt. She real annoyin’ an’ all cuddly-like but I don’t hate her none. “Noni!”

I turn the corner an’ shuffle toward the fuckin’ mage tower where two o’ my other small fae friends is.

Motis an’ Isabelle... I sees the tiny little bodies o’ the fae critters lyin’ in piles.

Their faces is starin’ at me with no life if they eyes an’ it hurt worse than I thought it ever would.

I lost lots of friends, ‘specially when Anona used to get real mad. I thought here was different, but here an’ there is all the same.

I ain’t got nothin’ else to do but crawl in the pile an looks for Noni.

EILISH

Mercenary Stronghold

The walls shake with a thunderous force.

Pyre leaps out of bed and summons his robes as Baron and I change back into our gear.

I scramble for my boots as a bow appears in the necromancer’s hand.

Being in this realm already makes Pyre a bit weaker than normal, but severing half of his power has drained his energy severely.

Baron tosses me the boot I was missing and dashes for the window.

He peels back the curtain and curses under his breath.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Orcs, demons, and goblins mostly, but there are a few fae among them.”

I look to Pyre.

He reaches into the still healing Veil and peers through the eyes of a spirit. Gone is his white stare. Instead, a set of violet orbs stare back at me. He presses a kiss to my lips.

“I’m heading up to the roof. Be careful. Both of you. Variant is here.” And then he disappears into the corridor. Smoke and debris cause me to cough and sputter into the sleeve of my tunic. Baron is right beside me.

I push my way through the collapsing hall and into the war room.

Baron shouts my name in the distance, but I must get the map.

The dagger in my hand grows heavier with each use as it absorbs the souls of the wicked.

But I grip it firmly as I fight my way over to the table and snatch the map before a large orc can reach it.

The orc pulls its lips back and releases a chilling sound.

I sprint back towards the door, only to stop short when the orc gives chase.

When we collide, I bury my blade in his belly.

The orc writhes on the ground as I hurry back to Baron.

He's not where he was when I went to get the map. But I don't have time to look for him.

The stronghold trembles.

I exit the collapsing compound and run out into the streets.

Dark tendrils of fire coil towards the sky.

The stench of rotting flesh and burning corpses batter my senses and I nearly heave.

But the sound of arrows whistling through the air keeps me on my feet.

Pyre stands tall on one of the towers, firing arrows in rapid succession.

His hands move in a blur of motion and he hits his targets with deadly accuracy.

His mask is back in place, obscuring his features from my sight, but I know he's worried.

Creatures fall from the sky with arrows embedded in their skulls or protruding from their chests.

I sense Baron and search for him among the orcs, slashing through any of the hideous beasts that cross my path.

Hot blood sprays across my face as Baron cuts down a troll.

He catches my eye and runs to me, checking to make sure I'm okay.

I tell him I am and he shoves me into the mage's guild house.

"Pyre," I start.

Baron shakes his head. "He was too far away to see us. If he gets into too much trouble, he can disappear into the ether." He gives me a cold, hard stare. "Don't worry for Pyre. Worry for yourself."

Dragan and Myerdoth burst inside a second or so later. We slam the door and pause to catch our breath.

"The walls are barely standing. Our soldiers are trying to hold on as long as they can, but many are still injured," Myerdoth announces. "There should be one last gate that hasn't fallen, but if we're going to defend the people here, we'll need to buy them time to escape."

"There are too many of Variant's forces and we weren't ready for a fight of this magnitude," Dragan adds.

The decisions fall to me.

"We need to split up. Use the communication rings and stay within range. With three towers down, we'll be limited, but they'll still work. First, we have to find our people."

The door opens. Dragan is the first to charge into the fight. Myerdoth takes to the roof to glide down on his enemies from the blackened sky. He doesn't have long. The sun will rise soon and Myerdoth will turn to stone if we don't hurry.

Baron is next to leave, but I'm close behind. The orcs corner us. Baron moves to cover me from behind as I hold my blade at the ready, watching as bloodlust enters the eyes of Variant's minions.

"Got any ideas on how we're getting out of this?" Baron asks dryly. "Think they'll go away if we ask nicely?" He twirls his daggers, silently taunting the orcs.

"Is this always how you are in a fight?"

"How is that?"

I smile at him. "Annoying."

He tosses his head back, booming with laughter in the narrow passage of the alley. "Pyre and the others think I'm batshit crazy. They aren't wrong, but it's still fucking rude to point it out."

Baron fights with an energy I envy. I know the three of us are weaker after the transfer of guardianship, but the vampire fights as though he enjoys himself. One by one, the orcs begin to dwindle. Screams float through the air as homes and shops are raided. I see someone from the corner of my eye...

Variant.

Baron uses his shadows to move swiftly through the fray, leaving behind a trail of gutted corpses. I see an opening and lurch through. I knock goblins out of my way as they snap their jaws at me. Pyre begins to shoot down anything that blocks my advances towards the Hall of Clans.

Demons.

Large demons charge in my direction only to be dropped by Pyre's arrows. I blow him a kiss and race towards the doors as he gives me a silent nod of approval.

The moment I step through the door, a battalion of Unseelie stand before me.

They raise their weapons and demand my surrender.

I can't help but smile as I toss my dagger.

It strikes one of the soldiers in the chest and he lets out a tortured howl.

Two soldiers attack me at once, but I evade the first and take a harsh blow to the ribs from the second.

I roll when I hit the ground and run towards one of the open archways.

Spears fly through the air and imbed themselves in the wall behind me, just inches from my head.

"Surrender to the king!" they shout in unison.

I duck behind a column for cover.

And just beside me, a soldier materializes from the air and stabs me in the shoulder.

The wound burns fiercely before it fills me with unbearable cold.

My lips turn blue as I gasp for air. When he comes in for the killing blow, I hoist my hands up at him and thrust my energy at him.

The Unseelie is taken aback when my power throws him off his feet.

Taking a deep breath, I rip the knife from my shoulder and use it to stab another soldier.

Frost drake blood is often used to create potent venoms to lace weapons and that's exactly what was covering the blade. Baron often carries a vial or two in his pouches. I recognize the unsettling sensation immediately as it slows my movements.

My back aches as I lean against the column. I can't stay here forever.

I lay my hand over the wound in my shoulder and the familiar crimson smoke fills the hole.

I search deep inside for the pain that still lingers and I leech it from my blood.

The sound of footsteps come from my right.

I spin around and channel the pain into the Unseelie soldier.

He stumbles back with a startled expression on his face.

The others look on in horror. I use their shock as a distraction and reach towards the ancient weapons that King Galmer displays in the walls.

They tremble as my magic weaves itself around each blade, hammer, and spear.

When the soldiers charge me once more, the weapons fly off the wall and pin them to the floor.

Blood pools all around them, soaking my boots.

Finally, the way ahead is clear. I don't know how long it will last as dark creatures

continue to spill into the stronghold.

I summon my courage and hurry towards the staircase that leads to King Galmer's quarters.

It's the only way to access the roof of the Hall of Clans.

The door at the top of the stairs bows outward before rippling.

I touch my hand to the wood gingerly before yanking it back.

The tips of my fingers are blackened with magical residue.

The sound of scraping claws and shrill cackling reaches my ears.

The fight isn't over.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 4:22 pm

CAMBION

Mercenary Stronghold

The beaker cracks and sizzles. Liquid pours onto my hands and I toss yet another failed experiment into the refuse pile. Zir doesn't seem to be making much progress either as we stretch our minds to the limit to find solutions for the...

BOOM!

The sound is deafening. Dust falls from the ceiling. I drop to the ground as the mortal realm quakes beneath a relentless force. Zir climbs to her feet first and helps me to mine. We hurry to the ladder at the far end of her lab that leads back to the streets.

Noni runs right into my legs. A hobgoblin toddles along beside her. The house brownie bounces up and down, gripping my pants tightly.

"Mr. Cambion! Mr. Cambion! The Stronghold is under attack. Master and the others are fighting. Noni no find Mr. Flumph!"

I drop to my knees and lift Noni into my arms. The hobgoblin climbs me like a tree without invitation.

I recognize him as Bombri, the assistant of the head scribe at the archives.

His job is to keep track of all history pertaining to the ancient humans.

Instead, he spends most of his time adapting to their old habits.

The hobgoblin perches on my back and strikes a match to light a tobacco roll hanging off his lip.

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell you everything!” the little creature squeals.

He has tiny eyes and a hook nose. Bombri’s thick eyebrows cover most the top half of his face while the other half is dominated by a protruding chin.

His body is slender, but his feet are much larger than any normal hobgoblin’s.

Jagged teeth—stained with whatever he last ate—flash as he speaks above Noni.

“There I was minding my own business in the tombs, when all of a sudden, I hear a low growl. It stops me in my tracks and I’m shitting myself at this point.”

“Get to it,” I demand.

“Fine. Fine. That was when I saw the ass end of something out of my nightmares. You ever see that 2004 Hellboy movie? Not good, not bad, but just sorta meh.”

“No, seeing as it doesn’t exist anymore.”

“I have a copy in my room next to the stack of yellowed nudie mags I found in the archives,” Bombri snickers.

“Anyway. There’s this freaky demon in the movie.

It’s sorta blue with a bunch of spidery eyeballs and tentacle things.

It's real ugly and probably smells worse than Flumph after that bean stew the cooks make.

Anyway, the thing is unkillable and can regenerate. ”

“How is that relevant?”

“Cause if whatever I just say is the same thing I saw in the archives, then we got a big problem! I'll sacrifice all of you tall ones to strike my name off the lunch menu of that thing.” Bombri tumbles from my back as I hurry down the passageway without much thought on his demon.

The hobgoblin follows.

Noni points me in the right direction and I see more forces approaching the stronghold in the distance.

She squeals and hides in my jacket. I race back down the alley and throw open the door to the Mage's Sanctuary.

So caught up in their studies, none of the mages realize the fortress is under attack.

“All of you come with me. We have to stagger the attack so we aren't overwhelmed.”

The mages follow me to the walls that haven't been touched by Variant's magic. We scale to the top and climb over, placing ourselves between the massive forces and the Mercenary Stronghold.

“On my mark, funnel your power into my shield!” I shout above the bang and clang of iron armor that races towards us. The orcs and demons get closer. Beasts with

wings and pointed ears swoop down from the sky. I wait until the very last second.
“Now!”

With the strength of the guild at my back, the force of the shield knocks the army several meters away from the stronghold.

They bash their hammers and axes against the invisible barrier with seething anger.

I can feel the powerful shield spreading all the way around the decrepit walls.

The archmages step forward to lend me a hand.

I use the brief moment of relief to tap into my communication ring.

Above me, I see Myerdoth and Dragan fighting the winged demons.

“What the hell is it? Can’t you see I’m busy?!” the former King of Shadows barks at me over the device.

“I see no end to Variant’s forces,” I respond. “He’s using Oronrel’s soldiers and Morrigan’s army. If the angels show up, then we have no hope of surviving. We must act now.”

Dragan sighs over the com. “What do you suggest?”

“We must evacuate any survivors and pray we find refuge elsewhere.”

The others tap into the channel one by one. Baron’s snarls are an equal match for Dragan’s grumbling. “Even if half the people in the stronghold have been killed, that’s still a lot of people to walk through the desert without a portal or a gateway nearby,” the vampire cuts in.

“It’s a risk we’ll have to take if any of us are going to make it,” I respond.

“How do we get all of those people out of here without Variant detecting us?” Dragan asks.

I grit my teeth and push more power into the shield.

“We’ll need a distraction. If I get a potion from Baron to rejuvenate my power, I can drop the shield long enough for Theren and me to force the army back while Pyre casts a portal.

Even if it won’t take us far, it’ll buy us enough time to get as many people to safety as possible.

Once we find a place where we can hunker down, we can send scouts back to search for survivors.

But we must act now. I’m getting weaker. ”

Zir’s voice rings through the com louder than all the others. “The southern gate has been breached,” she reports.

“I’m nearly drained, but I think I can do it,” Pyre says. “I’ll need Baron’s help.”

THEREN

Mercenary Stronghold

The conversation in my head comes to an end.

I look up to where Pyre fires an endless stream of arrows.

Though I don't know how my presence will be accepted, I kick a demon back and leap onto the roof of a building near me.

Several of the winged creatures drop down beside me.

I sprint, jumping from one roof to the next as I use my magic to attack my pursuers.

The tower is there in front of me. I jump, catching the edge of the brick with my fingers.

Pyre reaches down and pulls me up. A heartbeat later, the necromancer notches another arrow and fires it at the creatures hunting me.

He lowers his mask and stares me in the eyes with an unnatural violet gaze.

"You need to use your magic," he hisses. His face is ashen. The spirit eyes disappear and he is once again sightless. Pyre replaces the mask and yet his aim is just as accurate.

"Why do you use eyes if you don't need them?" I ask as I use the end of one of his arrows to slice open my palm.

"My bow is one with my body. It knows all. But... my eyes can't see Eilish.

I needed to be certain she was alright before I redirected my power.

" Pyre covers me as I summon the Staff of Scorn.

He watches with surprised eyes as the staff responds to me.

“I must admit I’m shocked to see you’ve mastered blood magic to the extent that the staff obeys you.

It’s a feat not many have accomplished.”

I smile at him. “Did you just compliment me?”

“Your magic, not your personality,” he quips. “There you could still use improvement.” Pyre’s off-beat humor causes me to laugh quietly. He is... unusual, but I feel as if he understands me more than others do. Actually, I’m quite sure he understands everyone.

“I find it inspiring that you broke your vows of chastity for Eilish. Furthermore, you’ve given up half of your guardianship to Baron.”

Pyre leaps over me, where I crouch beside him, and fires three arrows at once. I stand with the Staff of Scorn in my hands, bracing myself for the flood of magic preparing to erupt from my body.

Pyre summons a storm. It brews overhead, washing the desert stronghold in a curtain of rain. It obscures the orcs’ vision as they slam into one another. A clever trick, I must admit.

Pyre looks at me then. “The Sons of Elioth have been given gifts tied directly to your father’s bloodline. If Elioth dies, that power will leave you.”

“You think my father will rise?”

Pyre falls silent as we fight. Variant’s gaze is on us. He thrusts his palm towards the tower and lightning strikes the stone, causing it to buckle. The tower falls slowly at first and then so quickly, I act on instinct alone.

I toss Pyre with a burst of magic and he collapses to the sands below.

I am quick to follow but an excruciating pain explodes from my leg as part of the tower crushes me beneath it.

Pyre straps his bow to his back and lifts the stones away from my leg as I try not to scream with the agony.

I look down at the damage and instantly wish I hadn't. The bone protrudes from the skin.

"Don't use all your power to heal me," I tell him through pained breaths. "Save it for the portal."

An Unseelie spellcaster sneaks up on Pyre.

I grab Pyre and spin, taking the blow to my back.

I grab the staff from the ground and use the bladed end to slice open my stomach.

Blood pours from my middle, but the mystical wound brings me no pain.

Hundreds of orcs fall as blood flows like a river.

I absorb their life forces to heal the wounds on my body.

"The radius of your spell is too wide," Pyre says. "Taking out that many enemies will drain you too quickly."

He covers me once more. We fight side by side in a way that summons memories of Cambion and I training in our youth. Pyre's words about my father bring forth a lot of

questions I haven't asked myself. Meanwhile, Pyre sets to healing me as quickly and potently as he can.

The area around us is clear. "Go to the others," I say to him. "I'll find my. We have to start the evacuation soon or else it'll be too late to save these people."

"Farewell, Theren."

He disappears before my eyes as if he never existed.

No puff of smoke or shroud of shadow, just nothingness.

I run along the remnants of the wall in search for Cambion.

My brother's magic is hard to detect in the middle of all of the mages, but I follow the blood in my veins that always tries to lead us back to each other.

My heart nearly stops when I see an orc blade piercing through his weakening shield, missing Cambion by just a few inches. He looks up and meets my stare.

Desperation fills his gaze.

I know now that my brother doesn't think we will survive.

EILISH

Mercenary Stronghold

Flumph flies through the window and climbs onto my shoulder. He uses his crossbow to shoot down the horned beasts. My arms tremble from exhaustion, barely able to hold up the weight of my blade.

“These fuckers keep on comin’. Where the shit does Variant get all o’ these assholes?” the foul-mouthed sprite pants in my ear. He jumps each time the lightning flashes.

Rain batters the side of the building as the storm rages on. I need to get to the roof. Variant is up there. If I can just talk to him, help him break through Morrigan’s spell, if I can just make him understand that she’s the reason he’s acting this way...

I stab my dagger into the head of a demon and twist as I pull it free from its skull.

The last of Variant’s guards falls by my hand. Flumph vomits onto the floor when he finally sees the thick puddle of blood around my feet. The smell of death clings to me. “I have to do this on my own,” I tell him.

“Pretty,” he starts, shaking his head.

But, I’m firm. “If I need you, I’ll call. I promise. But... you can’t fight Variant.”

“The hell I can’t!”

I grab Flumph and toss him out the window. He catches himself mid-flight and I close the window so he can't follow. He flies up to it and taps on it with his dirty fingernails. "Don't you do this, Pretty!"

"I have to. Go help the fae get out when they call for the retreat."

I don't stay long enough to hear his reply. I throw open the door that leads to the roof. A ladder is propped against the wall. I have no choice but to sheath my blade. The rain causes my grip to falter as I climb. I grip the roof and pull myself up, arms burning from exertion.

I look up to see Variant standing there, like a god of mythos.

Pale hair sticks to rain-slicked muscle as the King of Light imposes his mighty figure.

A flash of lightning reflects in his eyes as he raises his sword high, wings spread in a glorious arc, and he severs King Galmer's head from his shoulders.

"Variant, no!" I scream, just as the thunder roars in a wicked applause to Variant's brutality. Variant kicks the centaur's head off the roof and turns towards me.

I could never have imagined that the eyes of an angel could hold such malice.

I struggle to my feet. Variant charges right at me.

I deflect his sword strike with my dagger.

Metal chimes off metal, causing sparks to fly.

"You're better than this Variant!" I yell at him through the sheet of rain. "Morrigan's spell can be broken! You don't have to obey her! "

“Morrigan is my queen,” he snarls.

“She’s not your queen! She used you.”

He swings at me. My succubus wings shoot out my back and shield me, but not before his sword cuts my hand. I manage to catch the dagger before it falls and in one fluid motion, I bring it up and thrust it forward. The dagger buries itself to the hilt in Variant’s stomach.

His beautiful gaze widens as shock overcomes his features. He looks down and takes stock of the blade inside him and then looks back down at me.

“I’m... sorry,” I say, feeling my throat tightening. This wasn’t supposed to happen. It wasn’t supposed to end this way!

In the depths of the soulful orbs of his eyes, I see sudden awareness and recognition. “Eilish...” Variant says as he drops to his knees and one hand wraps around the pommel of the blade.

“I’m sorry,” I say again as I stand up and taking a deep breath, I brace my boot against his thigh and shove him off my dagger. He’s killed King Galmer and for that, the king’s people will demand blood. Now I’ve given it to them. Much though I didn’t want to.

You had no choice, I tell myself. Variant was coming at you. He would have killed you if you hadn’t killed him first.

Variant tumbles over the side of the roof and falls on top of the former Mercenary King’s body. The dark clouds break and rays of light extinguish the shadows. Pyre and Baron fight in the streets to gather survivors. And then it becomes all too much for me to take. I didn’t want to kill Variant.

I didn't want to kill Variant!

Screams rip a hole in my chest and expose the raw flesh of my heart as it shatters.

Fires burn on as the rain stops and the static in my ears from the com are too much to bear.

"Retreat!" I call out to my friends and soldiers.

They protect as many innocent lives as they can as they run for the open gate.

I can't stand here and watch them flee. I'm unsure whether it was courage or foolishness that told me to fight my way to the others, but I jump from the roof and use my wings to glide to the ground.

A troll grabs me by the throat. I kick and punch his heavy body, but his grip is firm. My fist finally connects with the side of his enormous head, at his temple, and the troll drops to one knee. It's enough for me to free myself and bring my blade down to sever his head from his shoulders.

I see Baron out of the corner of my eye. He tosses a goblin through the air and drives his own dagger into another. I catch his eye and we fight our way to one another.

"King Galmer was killed," I tell him, panting.

Baron's smile drops. "How?"

I don't speak, but my silence speaks volumes.

Baron's anger manifests itself. The goblins and orcs attacking us fall back.

“When this is over, don’t expect me to forgive him, Eilish,” he says brokenly.

“Variant has crossed one too many lines. Even my own sins aren’t as heinous.

” His eyes narrow. “I understand he’s under Morrigan’s influence but that excuse... ”

“Variant is dead.”

His expression drops. Shock takes over. “Dead? How? King Galmer?”

I hold up my dagger because I can’t find the words.

“You... you killed him?”

I nod.

“Eilish, talk to me,” Baron says as he grips my hand. “I need you to explain to me.”

I take a deep breath. “I stabbed him.”

“And you’re sure he’s dead?”

I nod again. “It’ll take nothing short of a miracle to bring him back.”

“Did he hurt you?”

My injured hand reaches out for Baron of its own accord. Baron touches the wound gently. He digs into his pouch and pours the contents of an unlabeled bottle over the torn flesh before tearing off the sleeve of his shirt to wrap it. “It isn’t that bad, but thank you,” I say.

“We need to get these people out of here before the whole place comes crashing down worse than it already has.” Baron grabs my uninjured hand and leads me to where Pyre is fighting Unseelie soldiers.

Pyre smiles when I touch his arm. He catches my hand and presses a kiss to my palm.

Flumph lands on my shoulder again and a rippling boom forces Variant’s army back.

CAMBION

Desolate Border

The wave of magic conceals the dark army in a swirling vortex of scorching sands. I peer over my shoulder and see what’s become of the stronghold. Theren summons his mirror and the Staff of Scorn returns to his body. There are no more towers standing. Our coms send static in our ears.

Screams still ring from the distance and I feel a stab of guilt so potent, it’s as if I was the one who issued the attack. Theren grabs my sleeve and pulls me down to his level where he crouches in the sand. He places his palm flat on top of mine, allowing me to see through his mirror’s gaze.

Eilish stands before Variant with her wings curling around her protectively. Variant’s fury is overcome by shock. He hesitates. Eilish fumbles with her blade, but catches it before it hits the ground. With a flourish of her wrist, she guts the false king...

Theren breaks the connection. “We have to make sure Variant’s dead. If we don’t, then we risk him coming after us. Eilish could be in danger.”

I grip my brother's shoulder and stare into his eyes. "Eilish is with the others, Theren. She will fare much better with them than us, at the moment. There's nothing we can do for any of them right now." I scan the sands for the little fae that followed me here. "Noni?"

Her tiny head pops out of the sand. Bombri peeks out from under another pile, his hair matted to his head as he coughs up a cloud of dust.

"Since when does it rain in the desert?!" the hobgoblin complains. Noni climbs up Theren's robe and Bombri climbs up mine. I envy my brother the light weight of the house brownie, for Bombri weighs twice as much as Flumph and Noni combined.

"You guys were some of them elves in the Lord of The Rings, right? I thought you looked familiar," Bombri continues.

"What the hell is he going on about?" Theren asks with a frown.

"Human things," I answer.

"No wonder it makes no sense," my brother grumbles. Then his thoughts turn to other things. He faces me and nods. "Pyre created the storm. It was a clever way to mask our scent and obscure the orcs' vision."

I nod and start walking towards the location Pyre had said he would cast the portal. "If we hurry, we can make it to the others before the portal closes. It's a shame that none of our magics are at full capacity in the mortal realm."

"Why the hell's that?" Bombri asks.

I look at him. "There's too much energy left behind by the first Singularity and the tears in the ethers make it difficult to navigate by scrying. We must use the sun."

Theren says nothing as he follows me through the Desolate Border.

He pats Noni on the head and the house brownie climbs into his pocket for a quick nap.

Bombri hangs off my shoulders like an unenthusiastic sloth, smacking his lips as he describes what he thinks ice cream would taste like.

When the small ones are asleep, Theren finally speaks up. “Galmer has been slain.”

I pause in my stride and turn to him. “Variant?”

Theren nods, looking very grim for someone who only met the rebel king not long ago.

“It was a theatrical display on the Hall of Clans. Galmer’s head rolled in front of his son.

Novak is beside himself with grief. Unlike us, he had a father who was a good man as well as a good king. For that to be taken away from him...”

“It will change Novak forever, that’s for certain. Hopefully for the better.”

“It’s very rare that change is for the better,” Theren responds.

“I don’t believe that. The gods know my love for Eilish wouldn’t be so strong if she hadn’t taught me what it means to be a good man.

Through her resilience and her compassion, I’ve learned to appreciate our ability to change.

And I believe more people would change if they were given the opportunity to prove themselves worthy of redemption. ”

Theren laughs and it's a sinister sound. He faces me and frowns. “And what of me, Cambion? Am I worthy of redemption?”

I hear the sincerity in his questions and I wish I had the answers he seeks. “That's something I can't answer, Theren. I don't possess the power to offer redemption. Especially when I'm still searching for my own.”

We walk for miles until our feet hurt and we're far away from any orc stragglers. I see movement in the distance and pick up the pace.

“The portal is closing!” I call out.

Eilish sees me. She calls out for Pyre to hold the portal. Sweat beads on Baron's brow as he assists Pyre in transporting the survivors.

“Hurry,” I tell Theren and, luckily, we reach Eilish in time. Theren makes it through the portal beside me. Noni giggles. Bombri screams in my ear until I fear I might go deaf. That unsettling chill from the tear in the Veil prickles across my skin.

Nausea and dizziness render me useless.

The battle has taken too much out of me and I fall to the ground.

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VARIANT

Mercenary Stronghold

Sunlight breaks through the curtains of my chambers. I roll over to find she's still beside me, loving me even as she sleeps. I know her face. I know her scent and her taste, the rhythm of her heartbeat and the way her lashes flutter when she grows tired.

I am tired. So... so tired. My mind is weary and broken, torn asunder only to be put back together by hands that seek to craft me in their image. I fight her... not Eilish, no. Never her. Morrigan.

Morrigan holds no power over me and that is how I know this must be a dream, for reality would never allow Eilish to sleep so peacefully in my presence.

I've betrayed her in ways she never deserved.

I've betrayed them all... blood soaks my hands as I kick the Mercenary King's head over the roof of his home.

His son screams in horror, followed by a sharp cry of "No!!"

I turn to face her, to beg her to release me from the Midnight Queen's spell, but she doesn't hear the screaming in my mind.

I attack her. The swoosh of my blade as it glides through the air is far too loud.

Eilish protects herself. Large, leathery wings block my advance.

I feel a rush of pain, but freedom quickly follows.

Clarity... sweet, sweet clarity awaits on the other side of consciousness... .

Here the sun isn't a soft glow, but a fierce ball of fire. I gasp, sucking in a breath of hot air flavored with the rancid odor of cooking flesh. Dead bodies surround me as I lay in a pool of sticky, drying blood. It's my own. I press a trembling hand to the large gash in my abdomen.

Eilish may have killed me, but she's also freed me and my freedom will be worth my death. Just to know I'm no longer subject to the whims of the Midnight Queen... It's enough.

I push myself up and sit back on my heels, kneeling in a pile of severed heads. Heads I had intended to take as trophies.

Tears spill from my eyes. It's a beautiful thing to hear a voice in my head that's my own. Finally my own. Morrigan's words have poisoned my mind for far too long.

I lift my hand and whisper a spell beneath my breath.

Through the waves of heat that float from the ground, I see the great stag.

My mount bows to me and I grip the reins, using them to climb to my feet.

More blood pours from my middle. I don't have much time.

I slide my hand over the saddle horn and toss myself into the saddle.

Pain threatens to consume me once more, but I fight through it.

Black spots dance in my vision as I cluck my tongue.

The gateway to Earlann isn't far, but I still find myself wheezing by the time I reach the palace.

Guards rush over to assist me, pulling me from the saddle in order to carry me to the throne room.

Instead of easing me into a seat, the guards thrust me to the ground.

I kneel before the throne as Morrigan stares down at me with just a hint of worry in her eyes.

“Were you successful?” she hisses.

“The... stronghold has fallen.”

“And Eilish? Has she been captured?”

A guard answers for me. “He arrived alone, Your Highness. The army has retreated.”

Nails slash across my face, adding more blood to the endless stream of red that spreads over the floor.

“You disgust me! An inbred dog would follow my orders better than you have. I give you the last thrones in the realms, I give you legions to command, and I give you power beyond anything you could have imagined.... and still you're useless!

I should have turned Cambion! At least he's good for more than a decent fuck from

time to time. ”

I look up into Morrigan’s sneering face and smile. “Decent? Even when you berate me, I can scent your arousal, Morrigan. Your mouth says one thing, but...” I trail my gaze down her figure. “Your body says another.” Just as I suspect, the heat flares in her eyes.

Morrigan reaches towards me, placing her hand on my chest and pulls magic from her talisman to heal me. There’s no light in the tainted magic the Threst gave her. I can practically hear the screams of the souls she’s taken.

As I heal, I drag myself to my feet. My hands slide up the curves of her hips and yank her against me.

Her arousal isn’t hindered by the blood that smears across her abdomen.

If anything, I can scent her even stronger than before.

I move one of my hands to the front of her robes and follow the trail of intricate embroidery until my palm rests against her throat.

The healing is complete. Morrigan grips my hair in a fierce hold and tugs me down into a kiss.

The breathy moans that escape our lips cause the guards to retreat from the throne room.

That was a mistake. But one I’m grateful for.

Morrigan’s lust for me makes her blind. I reach back with my free hand as I deepen the kiss and flip a small blade from a hidden sheath in my belt. Morrigan begins to

climb her way up my chest, rubbing herself against me like a feline in heat. Her fingers curl around my shoulders for purchase.

Not much longer, now.

I force the blade into her with an anger that surprises me.

Yes, I hate her, but this... this goes beyond hatred.

I feel her gasp against my lips as the blade plunges into her heart.

Morrigan's muscles constrict and she knocks me back.

She pulls the knife out of herself and drops it.

The blade clatters to the ground. She stares at me in horror.

"You... how dare... you?!"

"You no longer hold sway over me, Morrigan," I growl low in my chest. Real fear reaches her gaze as it finally dawns on her that she doesn't have the power to heal herself. And she doesn't have the magic left to renew the link between us.

MORRIGAN

The Castle In The Sky

The blade pierced my heart deeply.

If I can defeat Variant, I may have the strength to call on a healer to fix the destruction he's done to me.

Anger, betrayal, and fear stir within me.

Variant prowls like a predator in the wild as he watches me closely.

He's no doubt waiting for another of my tricks.

.. but I have none. Variant has bested me.

I can't show him as much, though, for I hope to win this battle.

And, though, I'm wounded, I'm not yet defeated.

A strong vibration radiates in my bones as I tap into the talisman's power.

Now that Silvanus has risen and the Raven Forest has been destroyed, there's a chance I may still get my power back from the despicable god.

But first, I must defeat Variant and take the castle and Earlann for myself.

It will require all of the remaining forces to defeat Silvanus.

"Do you have any last words before I kill you?" I demand.

Variant tosses his head back and releases an obnoxious bout of laughter. Ever the arrogant king, he saunters around with a ball of roiling magic in the palm of his hands.

"You can't imagine how good it feels not to feel your power inside me." He shivers

in repulsion. “It was like a million spiders crawling beneath my skin as your voice whispered in my mind each and every day since I took that fucking oath.”

“I regret not... placing my efforts... elsewhere. Clearly, I made... a mistake.”

“Yes, you did,” he sneers. “You made many. And today is the day of your reckoning.”

Variant attacks.

I counter with a spell of my own. It isn't enough. He evades my attack easily and I take a hit to the arm, dropping to the floor. I scramble back on my hands and knees as I try to put some distance between us.

Variant leaps into another attack, but I manage to blast him off his feet with a well-placed spell.

He shakes his head and stands as if the charm had no effect on him.

I hurry to the other side of the throne room and grab a sword from the wall, facing Variant without hesitation.

“We did great things together, Variant.”

“No, we did horrible things. You did horrible things and I was just your vessel. Vile things that make me wish for death,” he says softly.

There's a world of sadness and guilt in his icy blue gaze.

“We slaughtered fae... we burned down cities and celebrated as the realms fell into disarray. The precincts toppled to ruin just like the Mercenary Stronghold. We allied

with beasts and creatures I once scorned. Orcs, goblins, trolls, hounds, demons..." His voice fades but the anger in his eyes grows.

"I am an angel, Morrigan. I have the wings, but my fall from grace happened the day I trusted you."

It's my turn to laugh as I recall the naive little pledge that once basked in my shadow. "You were so eager to please. So ready to change the realms for the better that it took absolutely no effort to convince you that darkness was rising again. Do you remember what I told you?"

Variant flies towards me, but misses as I dodge his attack. He grabs a spear from the wall and advances still. "You told me Baron and Dragan were working together to bring Abedon back, that Theren had convinced them to join Abedon's dark priests to start the singularity once more."

"Yes and you believed it. Pathetic, isn't it?"

You still saw light and darkness as something simple, something black and white.

A child's naiveté, really. You should be embarrassed.

"I encase the sword in enchanted flame and use it to block Variant's attacks.

Already I'm winded, but I don't allow him to see just how weak he's made me.

"How does it feel to be a puppet, Variant?"

"Empty," he snaps. "I went to you that day to find purpose. The realms were peaceful and yet they were barely surviving. Something never seemed quite right. We were warriors of our races, but not kings. You gave us crowns, knowing we'd weaken the

realms so you could take advantage.”

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“I gave you purpose . Do you think the realms would have remembered Variant, King of Light? You were no more than a pretty face before I gave you power, true power. Now history will remember you as the Commander of Armies, The False King, and Conqueror of The Three Realms. And you have me to thank for that.” I send a volley of spells hurling towards Variant.

He bats them out of the air easily. My anger rises as he continues to toy with me.

“Where will you go if you kill me? The realms will never accept you. Eilish will never accept you.”

“I know.”

I’m surprised by his admission. “And yet you still fight me?”

“Eilish’s blade broke me free from your spell,” he spits at me. “It’s an enchanted blade that uses necromancy to absorb souls of those it kills. The enchantment was strong enough to rid me of your wickedness,” he chuckles.

“Then it didn’t absorb your soul?”

He shakes his head. “No. It absorbed your influence over me.” He laughs then. “And your plan to force Pyre and Aima into a tantric ritual in the Cogost Mountains?”

“What of it?”

“It won’t work. Baron saw to that.”

I narrowly avoid getting my head severed as he throws the spear he's been holding. My heart hammers in my chest, causing more blood to ooze from the wound in my back. "You lie."

"No. Not anymore."

"Explain."

"I had a spy within the walls of the Mercenary Stronghold, one that told me of Baron's plan to bond with the necromancer."

My informant saw everything. He watched as the vampire and Pyre thrust into Eilish as one.

She used her magic to create an endless cycle of magic between the three of them.

"Variant's tone turns lecherous as though imagining them in the throes of passion."

"At the height of their pleasure, Baron sunk his fangs into Pyre to complete the circuit."

"It means nothing..."

Variant tsks, shaking his head. "Actually, the bond changed Pyre. He now shares guardianship of The Veil with Baron through their bond. They are now equals in power and carry the same burden." He starts to laugh again.

"So, you see, your plan with the ritual won't work."

Baron holds no connection to Aima, so the prophecies have been rendered.

.. obsolete. You can't tear open The Veil and use the wellspring of magic within the Echoing Spire to free Abedon and take his power for yourself.

You can't do anything, Morrigan. You are the one who should be embarrassed. ”

I lunge towards him.

Variant is a fool and I'm disgusted by Baron's act of defiance.

But my magic is useless and before I reach Variant, he casts a spell to hold me captive.

VARIANT

The Castle In The Sky

“My how the tables have turned,” I sneer mockingly.

Morrigan fights against her restraints, but I feel no sympathy.

I watch as she wiggles and kicks her legs, unable to go anywhere.

The spell tightens around her and she lets out a startled scream.

I tremble with the need for vengeance as I stalk over to her.

“Do you have any last words before I kill you?” I ask, using her own words against her.

“Killing me won’t solve your problems. It will only bring more suffering. You don’t understand what you’re risking...” Tears flow freely from her eyes.

“Tears won’t help you,” I say through clenched teeth. “Think about all the lives you took. How many of them cried before you ended them, Morrigan? How many of them begged for their lives?”

“Their deaths were sacrifices for a greater future.”

“No. Like me, they were innocent lives that you tortured until the very last drop of their souls were extracted.” I summon a dagger of pure ice. One that resembles the blade Morrigan forced me to stab in Baron’s heart on that fateful day when my betrayal against my allies had been birthed.

She stares at the glowing ice with wide eyes. I walk towards her, breaking through the barrier of the spell that holds her hostage. “I want to take back everything you took from us. I’m going to do to you what you did in the laboratory.”

Her eyes go wider. “You can’t do this.”

I snap my fingers and she falls to the floor as though her body is weighed down by lead. She can’t do anything but watch and feel as I take away her ability to speak, wanting only to hear her screams and none of her manipulative words.

The first cut is like a drug, sinking into my system until I know nothing but numb bliss. The warmth of Morrigan’s blood splashes on my face and hands. I bask in the sticky gore that spreads on these once immaculate floors and I stare into Morrigan’s eyes until she takes her last breath.

Her death is beautiful in its brutality in a way her life wasn’t.

I remove my hands from the gaping wound in her torso, leaving her open like a decaying carcass in a slaughterhouse.

Her talisman still hangs from her neck, mocking me with its tainted magic.

I tear it from her and use my power to set it aflame.

I can almost hear the screams of her victims. The talisman turns to ash in my hand and I feel as though I'm finally free.

But I don't have long to celebrate as the doors to the throne room shatter.

I use the same flame that disintegrated the talisman to burn the shards of wood flying through the air before they reach me. Silvanus stands in the wreckage as a figure of seething rage.

"What have you done?!" his thunderous voice booms. He advances towards me, but I lift my other hand in a spell to ward him off. Though I have beaten Morrigan, my magic is no match for the ancient being that stands before me now.

"I've killed her!" I say, not understanding his anger. "Just as she deserved."

"The timing is all wrong... Morrigan wasn't supposed to die yet, you fool!"

"She got what she deserved."

"Whether or not she deserved anything is none of my concern. What is my concern, however, are the prophecies that you just destroyed with your ignorance." Silvanus is different than last time I saw him.

He paces the floor with bare feet that give way to powerful legs and narrow hips.

Muscle covers his back and shoulders, etching fine lines towards a rippling abdomen.

He appears before me like a Spartan soldier of the ancient world—powerful and mountainous.

He wears nothing but a pair of leather breeches.

A full beard covers the lower half of his face and those unsettling eyes seem to glow brighter than usual.

Silvanus's hair isn't as long as mine, but it reaches the center of his back. He looks ready for war.

“What are you talking about?”

Silvanus pulls out the enchanted mirror that once held Morrigan's power. He drops it to the floor and it shatters without consequence. “It is gone. Dried up because of you.”

“Stop talking as if I was aware of your plans.”

He shakes his head with a scuff. “We could have fed Morrigan's power to Eilish, to help her in the final battle against Abedon.

Now we will have to find a way to give Eilish enough strength so she can mature to her full potential.

With Morrigan alive, I knew every outcome to the prophecies at play.

.. now... now I know nothing. ” Silvanus clenches his jaw as he fights back his rage.

“Everything I have worked for up until this moment has been for nothing, Variant. The future is unknown... nothing is certain.”

“All I can say is welcome to my world, asshole.”

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ABEDON

The Tomb of The Gods

Morrigan is dead. Soon I will be free...

I stand on a hill scorched with hellfire, watching the sky roil and churn as drops of crimson blood rains down.

Elioth, Unseelie King and Knight Commander of The Chasm, stands by my side.

He hands me a gilded box wrapped in silver chains.

My hands tremble, for I feel the darkness within it.

I trace the tip of my finger along the rune spells that have been carved into the box.

“This is the weapon? You managed to bring a piece of the Chasm to the physical world?” I ask in awe.

Elioth bows his head respectfully.

I walk towards the Hall of The Gods where I had been denied my right to ascend to their divine ranks. “Did I ever tell you what happened the day I found my purpose?”

Elioth shakes his head. “No, my lord.”

“I knelt before the gods with Morrigan and Silvanus at my side. We were the eldest of our kind, keepers of magic. I was the strongest and most talented in the arcane arts but, when it came time for the gods to decide which of us was to join them, they chose Silvanus. He was no better than a magician with cheap tricks at the time.”

“And Morrigan?”

“She had potential to be great, but she feared those stronger than her,” I explain.

“She accepted the will of the gods for what it was. Morrigan chose her side when she began to conspire with Silvanus.” My heart aches for Morrigan.

She could have been a magnificent queen.

“We only have one chance to do this, Elioth. May they tremble at the mention of our names for eons to come.”

“And weep in endless darkness.”

I lift my hand and force the doors open.

A blinding light spills from the chamber where the gods had barricaded themselves during the invasion.

My boots scuff on the white marble floors as I make my way towards the center of the room.

Dozens of celestial beings stare back at me.

I release the box, allowing it to float before me.

Elioth closes the door with a loud bang. I can feel the tension rising.

“The realms are in chaos. The Singularity has begun. Darkness shall reign.”

“What is the meaning of this?!” someone shouts.

“There can only be one god of the new world!”

The silver chains sever and clatter to the floor.

As the lid opens, black smoke slithers out and floats towards me.

I breathe it in deeply, filling my lungs with the thick substance until there is no more.

The box drops like dead weight. “You had your chance to see my greatness and you rejected me. Now you will bear witness to my ascension.”

Darkness... sweet darkness.

But the scent of dank wood and black mold assault my senses.

My power reaches out, prodding the shadows for signs of life.

There is none. Only the bones of fallen gods keep me company.

Morrigan’s death weakened the spell on the door that keeps me locked in this horrid place.

She could never have come up with such complicated magic on her own.

I admit I underestimated Silvanus, for his power was much greater than I anticipated.

He did not have the power to kill me even with Morrigan at his side, but he outsmarted me. A mistake I intend to rectify soon.

My power already grows stronger with each passing second. The link to the Chasm is still intact.

“Elioth, my friend, can you hear me?” I ask.

No answer comes, but I sense his presence.

My eyes open as they slowly adjust to the darkness of what was once a place where life flourished. “I know you are awakened in the Chasm, Elioth. Morrigan’s death has allowed me to finally speak. I have orders for you.”

I feel Elioth stirring in the place no other physical being has wandered.

“We must gather my followers.” I continue.

“There may be a way to free me with or without killing Silvanus.” I reach deep inside, tugging on the tendril of darkness that still lingers there.

My senses delve into the Chasm. Elioth reaches for me.

A swell of power surges forward and Elioth swims his way towards the surface.

I hold the barrier open long enough for him to slip through.

The stale air parts like a curtain and Elioth stumbles through the gateway before it snaps shut like elastic.

Elioth stands before me with unfettered hatred on his face. “They betrayed us...”

“Yes. And they will die with the rest of the pitiful creatures that call this world their home.” I stand up from the throne, hearing my bones pop and crack after centuries of being immobile.

“I killed the gods with my bare hands and they thought locking us away would keep us from rising, but here we are. Already I feel the brink of war on the horizon. Go. Gather my followers and bring them to me.”

“The brotherhood still lives?”

“So long as a heart beats within this chest, there will always be those willing to fight for the darkness. The ones who don’t bow or join us will perish. The heavens are scarred. Let us tear it open once more.”

EILISH

Mortal Ruins

The portal spits us out in a different section of the mortal realm.

I smell the salt of the sea and feel the wind on my face, but I see nothing but dense fog slithering along the ground.

It obscures everything in sight. Dragan is at my side, sword ready to defend me as we walk the people of the Mercenary Stronghold towards a new future.

I can’t help but think we brought this on them.

Variant would have found Galmer’s fortress eventually, but we led him right to it.

“Enough, Eilish,” Dragan whispers harshly. “You aren’t to blame for the fate of these people. Morrigan is to blame.”

“Silvanus too,” Baron adds.

“Silvanus isn’t to blame.” I know what they think of me when I defend my lovers, but I know Silvanus has his reasons for not getting involved and they will come to light soon enough.

“Things are complicated. We’ve only had to deal with Theren, Variant, and Morrigan so far.

We have no idea what else is going on. Silvanus is occupied with something I’m sure we wouldn’t want to get caught up in”

“He’s busy getting his beauty sleep in the Raven Forest.” Baron’s dry retort is supported by Dragan’s chuckle. They aren’t being fair to Silvanus. He has yet to tell his side of the story.

“We should wait to hear what Silvanus has to say before passing judgement,” I say. Then I shove past them. “Let’s keep moving.”

Dragan and Baron seem taken aback by my reaction, but I’m tired of defending every decision I make.

I remember the days before we joined Pyre, Aima, and Kolvar.

Back then, I was too weak to do anything more than get in the way and their arrogance got us into more trouble than necessary.

Their bickering and ranting didn’t help matters.

Running from bounty hunters, soldiers, and Anona while three enormous men have a pissing contest isn't the safest way to travel.

They all felt entitled to be the leader, yet none of them knew the first thing about responsibility despite their former roles as kings.

They are different now.

I see the progress they've all made, but there are days when their old habits begin to creep up once again.

Pyre follows me to the head of the group. He's silent at first, which is a welcome change from Dragan and Baron's constant banter. Pyre playfully nudges me. I glance over at him and wish he'd forgone the mask. His scars and runes make him unique and beautiful. There's no need to hide from me.

"How are you? I know that took a lot of your strength back there," I say.

"It wasn't easy, but I'm growing used to it.

After sharing my burden with Baron, I feel lighter.

And yet, for the first time since I took the guardianship, I don't know what to do next," he answers with a shrug.

"There is no foresight, no more prophecies to guide me. I still have my knowledge and experience..."

"But it's not the same. I understand."

"Do you?" he asks. I can hear the smile in his voice.

“I spent many years thinking I’d be stuck in the Glade looking after my sister and mother.

I thought I’d grow to be a healer like her and carry on the legacy, but I knew I was different.

The day I killed the Unseelie noble’s son, Prince Yanhir, I knew I was no healer.

After whispers had traveled through Oronrel and Earlann about his death, I poured all of my focus into keeping the Glade isolated so my family would be safe,” I explain.

“Silvanus hadn’t appeared to me in months and I shouldered the blame, thinking somehow he knew what I’d done.

It wasn’t until I went to Cambion that I felt relief as well as uncertainty.

I was no longer my family’s only protector, but I didn’t know what the future held for us, now that I’d gone to a fae for help. ”

“All of the events that have taken place were set in motion for a reason, Eilish,” Pyre says.

“I could tell you not to hold on to the guilt of what happened to your family, but I won’t.

You made a foolish mistake and you dragged Cambion into it.

You made the decisions that led to the tragedy of your family’s death and you took the life of a young man.

” Pyre pauses for a moment before he continues.

“If you didn’t feel guilt, you’d be no better than Morrigan.

It’s these moments in our lives that shape us.

You learned lessons from your mistakes and they’ve kept you from repeating them.

It’s all part of life, Eilish. Hold on to that guilt and use it. Fight with it.”

“You’re telling me to accept it?”

He nods and points in the distance. I follow the length of his arm and the tip of his finger until I see what appears to be a city hidden in the fog. Beyond the tall buildings, I see mountains and yet I also hear waves crashing on the sands of a beach.

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“Where are we?”

“Welcome home, Eilish,” Pyre chuckles. “They once called this the City of Angels. Humans risked so much throughout their history to come here. It all seems silly now.”

We walk along the roads, weaving between immobile cars and ancient bones.

Ivy crawls up the buildings and half the city appears to be flooded by the ocean.

But some of the history has been preserved.

There are no signs of fae or the precincts that had been established after the Singularity.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” I utter in disbelief.

Pyre pulls his mask away and I can finally see the smile on his handsome face.

“There are a few buildings I wish to show you.” He leads us to a building that seems much older than the ones around it, but more structurally sound.

“Earthquakes nearly decimated the entire city during the Singularity. This is a campus that was built in the nineteenth century and yet it still stands while the modern world crumbled around it.”

“It looks large enough to hold all of us.”

“My thoughts exactly,” he says.

I turn towards the others to give orders.

“Cambion, I want you to take the mages and clear out the three buildings still standing. Make sure no demons or other creatures have made homes there. I want beds for everyone and a medical wing set up first. Then work on finding a lab for Zir.” Next, I look to Dragan for his assignment.

“Dragan, establish a perimeter with Myerdoth and the guards. I want this place secured and protected.”

He nods and waves to his companion, disappearing into the crowd.

“Baron, I need you and the other clan leaders to get people to start erecting walls. With the other buildings falling apart, there should be plenty of materials to use. Work swiftly, but don’t tire them out completely.

We have a long way to go before this can be called a home.

It’ll take all of us.” I wait until Baron is out of range before I speak with Theren.

“I need runes. Blood magic strong enough to keep anyone with malicious intent away from our people. Can you do that?”

Theren nods even though I can see how pale his face is. He’s still wounded and needs time to heal himself.

Pyre places his hand on my shoulder. “He will be fine. Cambion can heal him later.”

I nod and face the smallest of our group. “Flumph and Noni, I want you to gather the

fae in the courtyard. I need you to start making enough food and blankets to keep people comfortable.”

Flumph salutes me and Noni blows me a kiss.

“And me?” Pyre asks.

“Send the scouts on a supply run into the city to see what they can salvage. Then create your own quarters in one of the towers. When that’s finished, I want you to come find me. I’m going to need some company after I make my announcement.”

“Just the two of us?”

I pull up onto the tips of my toes and press a kiss to his lips. “Just us.”

Pyre reaches for me, but I duck out of the way before we get too caught up in one another.

I climb up a pile of rubble until I can see what’s left of the rebels and the refugees.

I have to say something to them—to welcome them to this new home and to offer them words of encouragement.

I just feel so drained, physically and emotionally, that I’m not sure how to even start.

But I start anyway. “I know you came to the Mercenary Stronghold to start anew. I know you felt safe in the knowledge that Variant and his forces couldn’t touch you.

But until the real enemy is dealt with..

. the truth is that none of us are safe.

Anywhere.” I take a breath. “That much was already revealed when Variant took the Mercenary Stronghold. But... we can rebuild here. Build walls that are stronger and taller than the last.”

“But it won’t make a difference!” someone calls out.

I nod and lift my hand to silence the discord that starts among them. “King Galmer was slain in battle. His family fled. What we must decide now is who will lead you into a new future.”

Kolvar moves towards the front of the crowd and climbs up beside me. The satyr looks out at the people who lost everything. “The Banefire Horde will continue to stand with Lady Fulthain. I now ask the other clans to vote for our next leader. Olveroth Clan, who do you stand behind?”

Hemoteph, leader of the lycans and beast shifters of Olveroth steps forward. “We stand with Lady Fulthain. She has led us to many victories since she joined us. I believe she is a worthy warrior and will make a fine leader.”

Kolvar nods his approval. “Adamante Clan, who do you stand with?”

Belroth of the Adamante, leader of golems and rock trolls, steps forward. “We too stand with Lady Fulthain. Her treatment of the fae has proven she is also a merciful soul.”

“Imatriat of the Thradsaryl, who do you stand with?” Kolvar calls out.

The wraith warrior steps forward as well and bows his head to me. “Lady Fulthain.”

“Mournblades, who do you stand with?”

I flinch when the brooding vampire looks my way. “We stand with Lady Fulthain.”

“And Sunder’s Might. What leader will you pledge your sword to?” Kolvar asks.

King Galmer’s son Novak isn’t present, but his commander took his place.

“I am Titan and I speak for all of Sunder’s Might. We will join Lady Fulthain.”

Their responses are... enough to renew my drive and fuel my fire to continue. Kolvar raises my hand high with a victorious smile.

“We lost many of our own in the fight to escape,” he calls out.

“But we would have lost many more if we’d listened to King Galmer’s orders to abandon the fortress and leave those behind that could not fight for themselves.

He was a good king in the days when we needed a leader, but he was a man full of fear in the moments before his death.

Lady Fulthain and her companions fought beside us and they delivered us to safety so we were not forced to wander the cursed desert until we dropped dead from thirst.”

Heads within the crowd began to nod in unison.

Kolvar looks towards me with tears in his eyes.

“From this day forth, the clans shall unite beneath one flag. No more are we separate entities, but a people. We are The Vindication and we will prosper beneath the light of our leader... Queen Eilish Inoa Fulthain, daughter of Gildlorthoine, the lost King of The Succubae, and Maeline Fulthain, Healing Light of The Angels.” Kolvar’s words are met with a thunderous applause.

Queen .

The title is... unnerving, but I don't have time to dwell in my thoughts long. Kolvar yanks me off my feet and spins me around in his arms. "Congratulations! I always knew you had it in you."

THEREN

Mortal Ruins

I can hear the roar of the people's cheers from where I kneel on the sodden earth.

Beads of blood pebble from the cut on my hand before I shove my fist, wrist deep, into the mud.

For eight glorious heartbeats I feel no pain, but the agonizing burn begins to flare as I whisper the spell to activate the runes. Only three more left to go.

Sweat trickles down my temples and drips onto the ground. A shadow eclipses me and I smell the bitter aroma of smoke. I glance over my shoulder and find Aima leaning against a large stone. "Aima," I start as I look up at her. Her timing could be much better. "Was there something you need?"

Aima scoffs. "I need a lot of things, Theren, and I doubt you can give me even one."

"You... you're angry." I don't know why I'm surprised. I shouldn't be.

She shrugs. "You know me. I can tell Pyre and Baron and Kolvar that I'm unfazed by your presence, but we both know that's untrue."

"I never meant to hurt you." The words ring hollow.

"That's funny because Pyre said the same thing to me," she sighs. "Did you know

that I'm the reincarnation of his first love?"

"I had heard, yes."

She nods and I can see there's more. "And yet Pyre has no feelings for me beyond that of a friend."

"And you... harbor feelings for him?"

"No," she says and waves away my concern. "No. I feel nothing but friendship towards Pyre. And he loves Eilish."

"Has he said as much?"

She shakes her head. "He doesn't have to say it... none of you do. It's written on your faces—in the way you look at her. The way you talk about her."

"I'm sorry, Aima." It's the only thing I can think to say to her.

"I know." She takes in a big breath. "I don't blame Eilish for any of this. It's not her fault she's perfect in every aspect."

"Eilish isn't perfect. None of us are."

"Regardless, what's not to love about her? Hell, Kolvar just made her queen." Though Aima is clearly upset, there's no anger in her voice. There's only sadness hidden behind a wall of confidence.

"Kolvar doesn't love Eilish in that way, Aima," I tell her, wondering if her anger is reserved for her friend. "His heart already belongs to another." I pull my hand from the mud.

“How do you know that?”

I shrug. “Because I’m a man and I understand the way men are, the attachments they make.”

“Maybe you’re just trying to calm your own heart. I’m sure you don’t like the fact that every man within the vicinity wants her.”

“Eilish doesn’t have Kolvar’s heart,” I repeat.

“But how do you know?” she insists.

“Because I’ve seen the way he looks at her. It’s no more than friendly love and the need to protect her. And I’ve seen the way he looks at you. His expressions are entirely different.”

Aima shakes her head as I move to the next rune. “Are you sure you aren’t just saying this to encourage me towards Kolvar so you can ease your own guilt where I’m concerned?”

I look at her. “I do feel guilt towards you. I won’t pretend I don’t. But, I also consider you my friend and my equal and I wouldn’t lie to you. Kolvar loves you and if I’m not mistaken, you love him too.”

She swallows. Hard. “I loved you, Theren. To stand here and listen to you encourage me to find love elsewhere... it hurts. I thought I was different from the women you took to your bed each night.”

“You were, Aima. You still are. You were my friend and my advisor for years. None of the others ever saw me after the sun came up each morning.”

“Then why,” she starts.

“The evil inside me didn’t allow me to love anyone in the way I loved Eilish.”

“I know your story with her, Theren. I don’t blame you either. Perhaps there’s just a part of me that always hoped my insecurities were wrong, that I was worth more in your eyes.”

“Aima.” I touch her cheek with my unsoiled hand. “You have to stop lying to yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I remember the days of our youth as though they were yesterday. You rejected Cambion’s affection and you told him it was because you loved me.” I pause. “That was a lie, wasn’t it?”

She gets flustered and steps away from me. “You doubt I loved you?”

“You loved me, just not the way you claimed to. I think you always knew I couldn’t love you the way you wanted me to and so you chose to love because I was safe.”

“Safe?”

“Because I couldn’t love you back so your feelings would never truly be on the line. You can’t truly love someone who is incapable of loving and that’s exactly what I was... back then.”

She swallows and grows silent for a few seconds. I can see the truth swimming in her eyes and it offers me some level of relief.

“And Pyre?” she asks. “What’s his excuse for feeling nothing towards me?”

I shrug. “You fought beside each other countless times and neither of you noticed anything binding you. If he hadn’t told you who you were in your past life, you would have just carried on with your life as if you’d never known there was a link between the two of you.

Stop being desperate for someone to fall in love with you and focus on the man who already has. ”

I know Aima loves Kolvar. She’s just afraid of getting hurt again.

“I,” she starts.

“Give him a chance.”

She breathes in deeply and then just nods. I pull her into a hug, careful not to touch her with the hand I’m using to cast the runes.

When she leaves me to my task, it goes much faster than I anticipated. However, the sinking feeling in my stomach persists. Something bad is happening, something that triggers my body’s natural urge to run.

Fear.

I feel as though waves of fear are crashing over me. My eyes dart around, taking in the sight of my surroundings.

Eilish.

I must return to her. When I do, I find her standing with her hands on her hips,

swaying back and forth as she shifts her weight from one heel to another.

She hums under her breath and stares down at the map.

“Have something to say or are you going to stand there and keep staring at me?” she laughs.

I take the distance that separates us and grab her by either of her arms, forcing her to look at me.

“Theren?” she questions.

“Can’t you feel it?” I ask.

“Feel what?”

I shake my head, surprised she can’t detect the same thing I can. “Something dark is rising, Eilish.”

“I don’t feel anything like that. I’m a bit overwhelmed, but...”

“We need to tread carefully,” I warn her. “I don’t know why but I feel... there’s something looming.”

Eilish brushes my hair back from my face. “Thank you for telling me, Theren. Something as seemingly small as intuition might be the thing that makes all the difference.”

I nod because she’s right. “I haven’t felt fear like this since my father succumbed to the Chasm,” I find myself admitting.

“Theren,” she starts but I shake my head. I’m not through yet.

“I sent him there, did you know? I was afraid he’d kill us and I had to protect my brother. It was either lose my father or lose Cambion.”

“That must have been painful.”

I nod. “The others can hate my brother and me all they want, but we will always choose each other. That was why Morrigan’s betrayal hurt us so much. She turned me against him.” I shake my head and wrap my arms around Eilish. “But enough of that. What else do you need from me?”

She smiles at me and leans up to give me a kiss. “If the runes are finished, I need you to go to the Glade and make sure it’s secure. It may be our only hope of sanctuary if this all comes crashing down again.”

I smile down at her. “Anything for you.”

EILISH

Mortal Ruins

Theren leaves only seconds before I sense Pyre’s return.

I glance up and see Pyre disappear through a narrow door along the hallway.

My tongue darts out to wet my lips and I follow him into the darkness where I know he’s hiding.

It's some sort of closet filled with cleaning supplies.

He stares at me as I wordlessly step inside, leaning my back against the door once it's closed.

I need him and he knows what his stoic silence does to me.

I want to break him free from his control, feel him lose his inhibitions.

Pyre cocks his head to the side and I watch blazing emerald orbs replace his sightless white eyes.

Is he watching me through the eyes of a dragon or some other creature?

It doesn't matter. Not when his sensual lips curl into a lopsided grin that makes me quake.

I reach for the hem of my tunic and lift it over my head before dropping it to the floor.

Pyre watches my trembling fingers unbuckle my belt before it falls to the hard concrete beneath our feet.

"I don't want you to make love to me," I say, watching the destructive fire of Pyre's lust ignite in him. I can practically taste his pheromones in the air.

"You want me to fuck you until you forget everything that's happened, even if only for a moment?"

"Yes," I hiss.

He nods and chuckles deeply. “I can do that for you, Eilish.”

His words make me shiver as I step out of my pants.

Pyre walks towards me then, slowly as the air between us thickens.

I breathe deeply as my chest brushes against his abdomen, causing my nipples to harden.

He licks his lips and unbuckles his belt.

His eyes never leave my face even as I drop my gaze to watch as he pulls his engorged flesh from the folds of his trousers.

I stand before him, bared completely, while he remains clothed—all except the part of him that causes my mouth to water.

I can’t tear my eyes away as Pyre strokes himself. “Do you want my cock, Eilish?”

I nod, feeling as though I’m hypnotized by my own hunger for him.

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He guides my hand to his rigid member and grips my ass in his large hands, hoisting me up his mountainous body before slamming my back against the metal racks.

Pyre wastes no time. I feel the stretch like a burning hot iron brand as he thrusts into me with a jolt of his hips.

Two fingers force themselves into my mouth.

I gag a little, but I feel the wetness of my body easing the friction of his pounding.

Pyre groans as I suck and lick his fingers teasingly.

Cold metal digs into my back, but I don't care.

Each brush of Pyre's cock against my pleasure points is enough to drown out the noise in my head.

This is how I want him. No preparation. No gentleness.

I only want his raw hunger, his brutality.

And I know he wants my softness, to claim it for himself.

Pyre leans back and I whimper, wordlessly begging him to keep going.

He turns me around and forces me against the door of the closet.

I look at him through strands of sweat-dampened hair and watch him spit on his shaft before pressing into me with so much power, my feet come off the ground.

I clench my teeth as my body fights his intrusion.

“Keep going... it feels so good.” The truth is that it hurts a little, but I like it.

I feel the moment he hits the very depths of my body and it submits to his rough claim.

Pyre’s bruising grip tightens even more as he pulls out halfway before slamming back in again, grinding his hips as he expertly caresses the places inside me that cause my eyes to roll. I wrap my legs around his waist and hold his shoulders to keep myself steady.

“I love you, Eilish,” he growls. My legs flex at the sound of his deep voice. “You may come to hate us as the days grow closer to the war, but never doubt that I love you.”

It’s a strange thing for him to say and I wonder at his words. “I could never hate you, Pyre. I love...” the breath leaves my body as he picks up the pace. We don’t need the words. We have this .

I begin to meet his thrusts and Pyre’s back arches as he impales my trembling body on his thick cock.

Pyre’s hand wraps around my throat in a dark threat.

There’s pressure, a sweet gasp of panic, but no pain.

My hold on his shoulders falters, but I hold tight with my legs.

He releases the pressure and licks his way into my mouth.

It's as though my pleasure awakens a beast at Pyre's core.

Every semblance of his control snaps. He tears me away from the door and bucks his hips into me like an animal breeding some whimpering female. But I'm no fool. I know there's more he's holding back and I want it all. "... more... harder.." I breathe.

"I don't want to hurt you, Eilish..."

"I need you. All of you."

PYRE

A whirlwind of lust and affection snaps in her icy gaze.

It's desperation and raw need, but also love.

I feel it as surely as I feel the warmth of her flesh stretched around my aching member.

Though I don't wish to hurt Eilish, she continues to beg me and demand that I satisfy her carnal urges.

She deserves more than being treated like a moaning whore.

But if that's what she desires, I shall provide it for her.

Panting breaths caress my neck and I'm broken by them.

I lower Eilish to the floor and she stares up at me as though I'm a god among men.

I let her feel a crackle of my power and watch as those eyes open wide with interest. My hand moves to the small of her back and tilts her hips upward.

With my other hand still around her throat, I can feel her heartbeat against my fingers.

Eilish's back arches off the floor. She's close... so close and yet I don't give in just yet.

"Can you feel the way your body clenches? The way it squeezes around my cock?"

"Yesss...."

"You're so tight, Eilish. I can't believe you can take me like this..."

Each time I speak, her pulse kicks up a notch. My fingers massage the muscles of her neck, feeling the vibrations each time she moans or swallows or begs me to fuck her just a little bit harder.

She gasps.

"You feel so good, love." I kiss the corner of her mouth as I use the tip of my cock to tease the sensitive glands along the walls of her opening. Her eyes roll into the back of her head. "Good girl..."

My hips snap. I know the pain from the sudden thrust mingles beautifully with the tension building towards her climax. She rocks her hips, squirming beneath me like helpless prey. It's all too much and yet not enough to give her that push.

“Look at me,” I order and she obeys.

I squeeze her throat harder and use my other hand to pinch and toy with her clit until I feel the throbbing of her pleasure against my cock. I drown in the endless sea of blue in her eyes and whisper a single demand that causes her to spasm.

“Cum.”

She squeezes me like a vice, forcing my own release as I thrust into her violently. The fluttering heat of her clamps down even tighter as I spill my essence deep within her womb. I remove my hands from her throat and kiss her as tears of pleasure roll down her cheeks.

Eilish frames my face with her hands and kisses me back, flicking her tongue against mine until I use my power to restrain her against the floor. “I’m not finished with you yet.”

I move down her body, kissing my way. She shivers, drifting back into that place where she values only her own pleasure.

My teeth scrape against her skin as our gazes lock.

She knows what comes next. She can see it in my eyes as I spread her legs to feel where our juices have mingled.

My fingers stroke between her folds. She’s sensitive, but I can feel the anticipation coiling in her muscles already.

“Pyre?”

A dark ruby flush covers her face and neck.

She quivers in my hands. I dip my fingers inside her channel.

My large body is bent at an uncomfortable angle in the small closet, but I wish to give her this pleasure.

She bites down on her lip as I press a soft kiss to her mound.

My fingers curl up, stroking in sensual circles until her hips buck against my hand.

I kiss her thighs and her hips, loving every inch of her before that crackle of magic returns.

Energy flows through me and into her like a river of electricity.

Eilish struggles beneath the spell that holds her to the floor. “Oh my... oh God! Pyre!”

I open my mouth to show her the same blue light crackling around my tongue before I taste her.

The scent and flavor of my own seed is lessened by the sweet, gushing liquid that pours from Eilish.

It covers my lips, my chin, my neck... dripping down until a beautifully fragrant puddle of her pleasure lay beneath us.

I release her hands from the spell and she forces my head away.

“Stop! Please... I can’t take it anymore.”

A delirious giggle bubbles up from her lips and I stop my relentless attack. She looks healthy, glowing from inside out after feeding from our pleasure. Eilish slaps my

shoulder and I cock my brow at her.

“Why didn’t you tell me you could do that?!” she insists, still trying to catch her breath. “That was amazing. I’m surprised you stayed true to your vows for as long as you did.”

“Perhaps I just needed the right person.”

“I’m flattered.” She leans over and kisses my cheek. I cast a quick spell to clean us up and I help her stand to change back into her clothes. I catch her wincing out the corner of my eye and walk towards her until her back hits the shelves once more.

“I told you I didn’t want to hurt you.” My hand slips between her thighs and I cup her intimately with the palm of my hand. The warmth of the healing spell causes her to whimper. “Next time we’ll be more careful, no matter how much you beg me.”

“But it hurt sooo good,” she whines. “Besides, you’re always so collected. It’s good to see the other side of you sometimes.”

I can’t help but pull her in for a deeper kiss.

My scent still lingers on her and it excites me to wonder what the others will think.

I open the door for Eilish and allow her into the corridor first. She returns to her duties with a smile on her face and that’s all that matters.

For a while she will know peace and for that I’m grateful.

Baron and I cross paths. He pauses mid-stride and shakes his head. “You couldn’t have waited for me, you bastard? I’ve been thinking about her all day.”

I feel a smirk coming on as I respond. “What our queen wants, she gets.”

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DRAGAN

Mortal Ruins

“Is the perimeter set?” I ask Myerdoth. Belroth stands just beside him.

The loyal gargoyle grunts his response and follows me into the new war room.

Eilish stands beside Theren as they whisper between themselves.

My anger surges, but I don’t wish to upset her with any aimless argument.

She’s been through enough and the days ahead are going to be even more difficult.

Luckily, however, she smiles as she catches sight of me entering the room.

I snarl at Theren and snatch Eilish away.

She falls against my chest and I stake my claim with a kiss.

Baron and Pyre chuckle. The necromancer grins unabashedly and leans forward in his chair.

“Tell me, Dragan... how do I taste?”

I release Eilish as she cowers behind Theren to hide her blush. Pyre and Baron’s laughter grows obnoxiously loud as they fall over themselves. I kick Pyre’s chair and

glare at him. “Keep your filth to yourself, Death Speaker,” I sneer.

Pyre is unfazed by my irritation. “Do you like to join in like Baron or watch like Cambion?”

Eilish groans and covers her face, but I hear her laughter.

Flumph makes a face that’s reminiscent of a stomach virus and gags towards the floor.

Noni covers her ears, gasping at her master as though seeing this side of him for the first time.

Pyre rarely banter with us, usually keeping to himself or running off with Baron or Eilish.

It’s a nice change. But something tells me his question of my preferences is more genuine than he lets on.

I place my hands on the table and lean forward, meeting his challenge.

“Both.”

Pyre doesn’t balk or smirk. He simply nods and turns back towards Baron.

“The perimeter is set. Myerdoth and I wish to petition you, My Queen.” My words get the reaction I desire as Eilish glances at me over her shoulder.

Gone is the meek blush. In its place is the fiery temptress I’ve come to love greatly.

“We require a small band of soldiers to accompany us to retrieve the Stone Grimoire.

A golem or two would help as well.”

She nods. “Take as many as you need, but don’t leave us defenseless,” she answers a bit breathlessly.

I reach over and grasp her hand, bringing it to my lips for a kiss.

Eilish graces me with her beautiful smile and I saunter back out of the room.

Myerdoth and I barely make it halfway down the corridor before Theren comes after us.

“What do you want?” I grumble.

“To help.”

We stop in our tracks. “Eilish won’t let you come with us.”

“I don’t wish to come with you, only to get you there quicker.”

“How?”

“Mirror gate. No blood magic involved.” Theren crosses his heart mockingly.

“And getting us back again?” I ask.

He nods. “Luckily for you, I’ve already considered that question.

” He hands me a new communication ring. Mine had been broken in the fight.

“Zir managed to get them working without using towers or energy frequencies. They

connect us directly now. Just speak my name and I'll be able to hear you perfectly, as if you were standing in front of me. ”

“Give the artificer my praises.”

Theren chuckles. “Give them to her yourself. She’s practically begging to tell someone about her water filtration ideas and how to turn the power back on in the buildings. With her help, we’ve already gotten four cars mobile for the runs into the city. The more we salvage the better.”

I send Myerdoth to gather the soldiers and meet with Theren in the courtyard where little fae creatures hand out bowls of food and blankets.

Theren casts a spell to widen his mirror and an image appears in its reflection.

Rolling green hills and open pastures. Twinkling stars in a peaceful night sky as a herd of sheep roam the lands.

“Just make sure you’re back here before daylight,” Theren says. “We wouldn’t want Myerdoth to turn to stone in an unknown land.”

“No, we wouldn’t,” I echo.

He nods. “Be swift and I wish you well on this journey, Dragan.”

“Your kind aren’t known for showing this sort of kindness, Theren.”

“I guess we’re all exceptions to the rule. If I recall correctly, allying outside your own race wasn’t something gargoyles were known for.”

Myerdoth turns me away from the confrontation and steps through the mirror gate.

I'm the last to go, watching as my soldiers venture safely to the other side.

When I cross through the mirror's surface, I realize it's much different than shadow walking or using one of Pyre's portals.

The sensation is warm but not uncomfortable.

I expected the glass to be cold and unyielding. Even so, it does what Theren promised.

I can feel the brush of wind against my skin and smell the dewy grass beneath my feet.

Belroth jerks his head towards four stone structures on a hill.

"That look a bit witchy to you?" the golem asks.

We walk along a stone path towards the structures.

They are large columns formed from stone, etched with fine markings that are much too intricate for me to see clearly.

At the center of the columns is a gaping hole that seems like an endless pit.

I jump without hesitation. My form straightens until the last minute when I spread my wings to break the fall.

Water. Deep water that goes on for miles.

But I see light that indicates another tunnel.

One by one, the soldiers, Myerdoth, and Belroth drop into the water beside me.

The golems glowing veins illuminate the way down.

Deeper and deeper we swim, all the while, I feel an uncomfortable burn in my lungs.

We reach the second tunnel and see that it arches upward to a pocket of air. I swim for it, leading the others as they trail behind me. I break through the surface of the water and smell blood.

Myerdoth turns to me. “We aren’t alone down here.”

Yes, I sense them too. Something dead and yet not.

“Tread carefully.”

DRAGAN

Crypt of The Moonlight Coven

Water drips from my limbs as I summon my blade of shadow.

One step at a time, I inch my way through the narrow passage.

It opens to a room filled with doors that could lead anywhere or nowhere at all.

I don’t know what sort of trickery these witches have enspelled into their resting place, but I feel the magic in the musty air.

Myerdoth stands beside me, awaiting my orders. I step towards the middle most door and place my hand on the markings. They burn slightly against my palm. I move to the next, doing the same as I did before, but the sensation is different.

Finally, I reach a door with markings I recognize. "Soul Runes."

"What?" Myerdoth asks.

"Back in Oronrel, there were doors that wouldn't open unless someone possessed darkness within their soul. These runes are similar. We need to push our arm through the lock and..."

"Wait," Myerdoth shouts. "You may be right, but I doubt there's enough darkness within you to complete such a trial."

"You doubt the darkness within me?" I ask, surprised.

"I don't doubt that you still possess the power to be the King of Shadow, but darkness.

.. Lady Fulthain has changed you. The more she feeds from your darkness and fills you will love, the less malice exists in your heart.

I don't think darkness is what they're measuring, but evilness. None of us is entirely evil."

Belroth shakes his head and points at the runes. "These are encrypted. They aren't what they appear. We must decipher the runes."

"That could take days or even weeks." I tap into the communication ring. "Pyre."

It takes a while for the necromancer to answer. “What is it, Dragan?”

“I’m sending you an image. Do you think you can figure out the encryption of the runes?”

I wait patiently for his response. If, in this case, patience means pacing across the floor with my upper lip curled. Pyre doesn’t answer for some time. The soldiers begin to inspect the other doors.

Finally, he responds. “You need four other runes hidden in the other doors. They will all have something to do with stone or the soul. Put them in the correct order and spin the dial on the lock. After you turn the key, you’ll hear it catch. That should open the crypt.”

Pyre walks me through deciphering the key.

I reach the door and turn the first dial until it lands on the proper rune.

The second dial requires more force to turn, but I force it into place.

Belroth and Myerdoth flank me as I reach for the third and final dial.

A quick twist of my wrist spins the locking mechanism.

It clicks and a loud thud rings through the chamber.

The door opens with a gasping plume of dust and the stench of rotting corpses. I hear shuffling and take a step back.

“Who is there?!”

No voice or intelligible words follow my call, only the nasally snarl of something vile.

I forge on. A ghostly glow of opal light fills the room.

Four sarcophagi form a circle at the center of the room.

On an altar rests the Stone Grimoire. Myerdoth holds his axe out in front of him as the creature we heard reveals itself.

Chunks of flesh cling to broken bones. Pus oozes from lesions of diseased skin and an awful blech escapes lips that are peeled back into a macabre grin of sharp teeth. Soulless eyes and mangled features shuffle towards us.

The sarcophagi slide open.

One by one, corpses in tattered gowns climb from their resting places.

“Hold them off while I grab the book,” I order and lunge towards the Grimoire, only to be struck by a spell.

My body hits the wall of the chamber and my companions charge the undead witches. I feel the spell break free and I lunge for the book. The moment my hands touch the Grimoire, the book disappears along with the witches. An illusion is broken, but I don't know where the Grimoire is.

Belroth calls for me. I make my way to his side as he pushes open the last sarcophagus to reveal the Grimoire clutched in the arms of a beautiful woman.

Untouched by time, her loveliness is almost enchanting. I remove the book from her arms and leave her to rest peacefully. Glancing over at Myerdoth, I see he's just as

shaken as I am. Why? Because we have now seen the face of our maker.

“Let’s leave this place. I don’t wish to disturb her any further,” I say.

We make our way back through the ancient crypt and into the first signs of dawn. Theren’s mirror gate remains open.

I owe the Unseelie more than I care to admit.

EILISH

Mortal Ruins

“How far have we come with the plans for the orphanage?” I ask, leaning over the table as I stare down at the list of things that still require my attention. Cambion and Baron hover nearby, pouring themselves over the objectives of the day.

Baron hands over a rough outline for what’s still needed for the orphanage.

Beds are difficult to come by with half the city flooded, so it was the first thing on the list. “Check the taller buildings and a few of the places Pyre pointed out that aren’t under water.

There could at least be materials we can use to build new beds. ”

I point out the areas on the map to Baron before I turn to Cambion.

“Is there anything we need for the experiments?”

“Zir and I were working on cloaking devices before the attack. We’re still looking for a new place to rebuild so we can pick up where we left off,” he sighs.

“Pyre and the wraith warriors believe there may be dark spirits lingering in the labs that were once used by humans. If they can clear out the other buildings, Zir and I can gather whatever resources might be left intact to help us with testing.”

I chew the inside of my cheek as I wonder what other threats might be lingering in these ancient halls. “Any signs of demons so far or anything else we’ll have to worry about?”

“There were a few stragglers along the west end of the city,” Pyre says. “The waters seem safe for now, but I wouldn’t venture too far into the ruins, unless we’re prepared to encounter a conflict. Though it may seem quiet now, there’s no guarantee it will stay that way for long.”

The doors to the war room open and Dragan steps in.

“Dragan,” I say in relief as I hurry to him.

He lifts me into his arms and spins me around.

He kisses me on top of the head and sets me back on my feet.

Myerdoth hands him a bundle of leather and Dragan unfolds the Stone Grimoire from its center.

I congratulate him with another kiss and he wraps his arms around me, holding me close.

I moan into the kiss until I hear an irritable growl.

Dragan releases me and I shake my head at Baron. I know he's teasing as usual, but Dragan has a short temper as it is. Pyre and the others congratulate Dragan on his success and we take our seats at the table to discuss our worries and the plans going forward.

"So, we know what we're doing about the new Vindication, but what about us?" I inquire. "There are major threats that could attack any minute. Variant's army is bound to recover soon, as well."

"Variant might be dead but Morrigan is still alive," Aima nods in agreement.

"Once Zir and I get those cloaking devices finished, we'll be able to hide this location from anyone," Cambion offers.

"Whether they use magic or technology, this place will be safe from prying." Cambion sets the remnants of one of the devices on the table.

"If we can finish it, this device may be the key to saving all of our people from further attacks."

I open my mouth to ask Cambion a question, but a burst of light blinds me. I hear the expressions of shock from everyone else assembled as I bring my arms up to hide my eyes.

It takes me a second or so to open them. The light is so bright, it's garish. Near impossible to even see. But I'm able to delineate two forms within the center.

Silvanus and... Variant?

Dragan immediately hoists his arm back and tosses a blade of shadow and it whirls towards Variant. Silvanus blocks the attack.

Baron hisses with a flash of fangs, lunging for the King of Light's throat, only to get knocked back.

"Calm yourselves," Silvanus orders, his voice echoing through the room. "Abedon has awakened."

The End

CHAPTER ONE

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 ads.

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.