



Spells of Shadow and Blood (Realm of Istmere)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Spells of Shadow and Blood is a spellbinding Realm Of Istmere novella following the rise of Donikaqueen of darkness, wielder of death, and the villain who will stop at nothing to claim the throne of Istmere.

Donika wasn't born a villain...she was made into one.

At five years old, Donika knew she wasn't like other children. When her mother is summoned to serve as the royal healer to King Osiris and her magic takes a surprising turn, she is left in the care of her tutor, Cirilla.

What begins as innocent lessons leads to the discovery of an ancient magic that blurs the lines between power and corruption. Spell by spell, Donika's hunger for power grows.

But power always comes at a price. As Donika's soul blackens and her humanity fades, she transforms into a creature of absolute ambition, willing to destroy anyone who dares to stand in her way.

This is the story of how a girl became a villain—and how the shadows claimed her forever.

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FIVE YEARS OLD

My first memory of feeling true happiness was when I was a young girl, no more than five years of age.

I was swinging on the old willow tree out back of the cottage in Siraleth, my blue and white hair swirling in the breeze behind me.

My mother never knew why I was born with such strange hair, only that I was...

different. A giggle bubbled to my lips as I pumped my legs, faster and faster and faster.

My father watched me from the back porch, his arm wrapped around my mother, a coffee mug in his hand. She looked up at him in adoration, her blue eyes squinting against the morning sun as she gazed upon him. He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he watched me.

It was just me and my parents.

Little did I know...that unbridled moment of happiness would be fleeting.

I think that was the last time I had truly laughed. Truly felt it break free from my chest on its own accord, escaping my lips without a second thought.

The moment was shattered when a Shade I had never seen before approached from inside the cottage, her old face drawn with wrinkles. Her greying hair was pulled into

a tight knot at the base of her neck, her eyes a mystical purple I had never seen before.

Who was this woman?

I hopped down from the swing—jumping into the air—my gingham dress lifting around me as I dashed toward the cottage.

My father scooped me up into his arms, blowing raspberries against my cheek as he tossed me about, my hair whipping around us.

More laughter burst free as he tickled me, and despite my kicking against him, I didn't want him to let me go.

I think that was the last time I had seen Zion truly happy, too. The years that would follow aged him considerably. He had never been dealt an easy hand in this life, especially with me as his daughter.

My mother, Annelise, and the Shade I didn't recognize moved off into the living room. Their hushed whispers reached my ears from the doorway. The cottage was a small, humble home. The sound didn't have a great distance to travel, despite their lowered voices.

“Who did you hear this from?” Annelise asked, sitting on the green velvet settee against the large picture window. Her brow was creased with worry.

The Shade leaned toward her, purple eyes darting toward me.

She knew I was listening, but that didn't stop the words that spilled from her mouth.

“The Seer, Alastir. You know of his gift from the mother?” she asked.

Annelise nodded in confirmation. “I do.”

“Then you know that the news he brings is...imminent. This will come to fruition, sooner rather than later.”

Annelise shook her head, her gaze falling back on the Shade before her. “It can’t be. He might not be a forgiving king, a generous king, but we could do worse as a realm. He wouldn’t dare—”

The strange Shade leaned in conspiratorially. “That’s what I am worried about.”

Her gaze flicked toward me once more.

“You’re sure?” Annelise asked. “The king will be tainted with darkness?”

The Shade nodded solemnly.

They were speaking of King Osiris?

“That’s why I’ve come to you, Annelise. Osiris requires a healer of...great talent. You were the first to come to mind.”

Annelise shook her head. “I can’t possibly leave—” But her words were cut off when the Shade before her grasped her hand, pulling it into her lap and giving it a tight squeeze.

“I’m afraid it isn’t a request.” Her voice was barely above a whisper as her eyes drifted down to their clasped hands.

Annelise reeled back as if slapped.

I squirmed in my father's arms, desperate to be put down now.

He gave me one final kiss on the forehead before finally placing me gently on the floor.

I quietly padded across the hardwood to the archway in the kitchen.

I was tucked right behind the opening where they couldn't see me. Zion disappeared into the backyard.

"You mean...I am being summoned?" Annelise asked.

I dug my nails into the wood of the archway. I didn't want my mother to leave. How long would she be gone? The castle in Akra was...far away. When would she be back? Would I get to visit her? See the castle with my own two eyes?

I bit down on my lip as I listened, chiding myself. Of course, I wouldn't be able to go to the castle. I was merely a girl, and mother was being summoned to heal the king. She would be back in no time, I assured myself.

The Shade nodded. "Alastir has summoned you. You will come to The Stone Palace and you will heal the King Osiris."

Annelise nodded, biting her lip in thought. "Then I can return home."

The Shade's gaze fell to their hands once more. A long moment of silence passed as she studied their hands together in her own lap.

Who was this woman?

When the Shade didn't speak, Annelise leaned toward her, voice urgent. "Then I can

return home, right? Cirilla?”

Cirilla . That was the Shade’s name.

She bit her lip—hesitant to answer—before finally speaking. “I’m afraid the king may require...many healing sessions. Over an... extended period.”

Annelise reeled back once more in surprise. “Is that what Alastir said?”

Cirilla nodded. “I’m afraid the king’s condition is foreseen to be...of a chronic nature.”

Annelise released a heavy sigh, her eyes downcast. Her face was drawn, her eyebrows pulled together in concern.

“You could always bring them...” Cirilla said, nodding toward the doorway where I hid. “Bring your family to Akra, move out of this cottage and leave Siraleth behind.”

Annelise shook her head fervently. “The castle is no place to raise a family, Cirilla. You, of all people, must know this. War, politics, violence...I don’t want her to be subjected to it day in and day out.”

“I understand,” Cirilla replied, her tone understanding.

“Donika is merely a girl. She needs her mother. Will I be granted leave to visit her?” she asked.

“I’m sure the king wouldn’t mind if she came to Akra to visit —” But Annelise cut off Cirilla’s words with her hand outstretched as if she were going to physically stop her.

“No—no. The Stone Palace is no place for a child. Period.”

Cirilla nodded firmly.

“When do I leave?” Annelise asked.

“This day, I’m afraid,” Cirilla replied.

Annelise released a frustrated huff. My fingers curled around the wood doorframe in anger now.

This woman, whoever she was, had come here to take my mother from me.

Despite my better judgment, I trod into the room, throwing myself into my mother’s arms. She scooped me up into her lap, flattening my dress down against my legs in an affectionate manner as she buried her face in my hair.

She rocked me back and forth gently, holding me in her arms.

She had to have known I was listening.

The Shade stood. “The horses are waiting outside. The king and his hand wish us to make haste. Another set of horses awaits us on the opposite side of The Shadow.”

Annelise nodded, her eyes brimming with tears. She didn’t want to leave me, either. What about Father? What would we do without her?

I buried my face in her chest as she rubbed soothing circles into my back.

“You heard?” she asked, pulling away only enough to search my unwavering gaze. She placed a hand against my soft cheek. I nodded, tears brimming in my own eyes.

She pulled me against her, rocking me back and forth once more. “I will be back soon, my sweet girl. I promise.”

I nodded against her, the tears spilling over my cheeks and staining her tunic with wet droplets.

She rose, taking me with her toward the door.

She didn’t pack a bag, only stopped in the small bedroom off the entryway to grab the Kotova grimoire.

She walked through the doorway and placed me down on the front steps, securing the grimoire tightly into her jacket.

Zion was already there in front of the cottage.

His eyes were sad, but his countenance remained stoic. Annelise explained the situation to him, and he grasped Annelise into a fierce hug against his chest before placing a kiss against her forehead.

I watched quietly as Annelise walked down the front steps, mounting the chestnut horse that awaited her on the cobblestones. She mounted the mare, trotting off down the street after Cirilla.

She only looked back once, but that was all it took for me to break.

I grasped my father’s leg and cried as many tears as my body would allow as he patted my back comfortingly. I hadn’t known it at the time, but my parents hadn’t been lovers in quite some time. Since even before my birth, perhaps.

But they remained the best of friends.

Despite promising to visit me, despite my heart skipping out of my chest each time I heard hooves against the cobbled street outside, Annelise did not come back.

The king would not allow her to leave The Stone Palace for any length of time. Though she would write, it would be years before I would see her again.

When she finally did return, years later, she did not come home alone.

She was on foot, the night air carrying a chill that settled deep in my bones and set my teeth on edge.

I had rushed to the door and swung it open, my excitement at finally seeing her once again stifled when I saw what she had been carrying.

There was a bundle in her arms, wrapped tightly in a muslin cloth.

A child .

And as Zion joined me at the door in the middle of the night, the baby's cries pierced the air, a storm roiling angrily overhead.

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EIGHT YEARS OLD

I was five years old when Annelise had been summoned to be the royal healer.

When she had left and never looked back.

Zion raised me alone, doing the best he could, but he didn't have the most...

watchful eye. He was busy with his blacksmith business, often times not returning home until late in the evening.

I had been one of the youngest Shades to be conscripted into the king's army at the ripe age of eight years old.

One of the few Shades to join before my magic had awakened.

Due to my lack of years and experience, I was only allowed to visit the castle once a month for basic training.

I wouldn't be allowed to move there to train full time until my teenage years.

The days I did go, I begged and pleaded to see my mother. But she was always busy. Whether she truly couldn't step away from her duties or she was ignoring me, I wasn't sure.

Back in Siraleth, when left to my own devices, I became...

bored. I didn't have many friends at school.

I was an outcast. The other Shades made fun of me for my strange hair, and the fact that I hadn't been born a Stormshade.

My magic hadn't awakened yet, but they already knew.

I hadn't been born blessed with the storm magic of the Kotova bloodline.

All the Kotovas are Stormshades, didn't you know? they would say, taunting me.

I did know. I had unfortunately taken after my father in that aspect. I might be the first Nightshade of the Kotova bloodline, but little did they know, I wouldn't be the last.

I was eight years of age when I joined the king's service, and I was eight years of age when my magic finally awakened and I turned for the first time.

It had been an accident.

I had been in the schoolyard during our free time, swinging from the low branches on the oak tree, when the students decided to gang up on me. They always chose me to pick on. One of them pulled me down from the tree by my blue and white hair, throwing my small body into the dirt.

I hated feeling so...incapable.

So weak .

I scrambled backward, afraid for my life.

The last time they had ganged up on me, they had wielded a blade.

There were no school instructors in sight, and I hadn't come into my magic yet.

I was a late bloomer in that regard; most Shades came into their magic early.

Between two and five years of age. We had already been training with magic at school, and I had sat those lessons out, unable to apply that knowledge to my own magic.

Just another reason for them to make fun of me.

As I scrambled backward in the dirt, away from the group whose intentions I could only guess, I sensed something deep within me surge up. As if it were an ember within my core, it rose to the surface, simmering below my skin.

I had never experienced anything like it before.

I pulled on that ember, not knowing what would happen when I did.

One moment I was a young girl, dirty hair and skin, scrambling away from her attackers. In the next, I was a white wolf of sizable stature, towering over them.

They backed away, trembling and in shock as they saw my transformation.

I had expected it to hurt...the first time I turned. But it hadn't. It was as easy as breathing. One moment I was a girl, and the next I was a wolf. It was as simple as flicking a switch within myself.

Most Nightshade witches were black wolves. It seemed to be the default color for most Nightshade animals. Cats, crows, tigers, ravens, wolves...they were all black.

But not me.

I could see my stark white coat out of the corner of my eye, and I balked.

It was the same shade as the ends of my blue-white hair.

Had my own hair color played a part in determining my Nightshade form?

This was simply one more way in which I was different.

Another reason for me to stand out among the children my own age.

I had never seen a white wolf before. I had let go of that ember of magic and turned back into a girl, scampering home with my tail between my legs, so to speak.

Zion had reassured me that Nightshades came in all shapes and sizes, but I was still self-conscious about my stark white coat.

Why couldn't I be like all the other kids at school? This was one more thing for them to bully me about.

I was sick of being bullied for being different. For being smarter than all of them despite my magic remaining dormant. Sick of hearing them taunt me for my mother leaving us, as if it was something she chose. Sick of them mocking me and provoking me until, finally, one day I would snap.

And snap, I did.

I returned to school the next day, acting normal. As if my magic hadn't awoken yesterday in a moment of panic and terror. The instructors congratulated me on the awakening of my magic, placing me in the Nightshade studies class where I would

learn to control my magic and my change.

I had practiced all night, and I was confident I already had a pretty good handle on it. The magic came easily to me.

What I didn't know at the time was that when a Nightshade took on their animal form, they also took on some of the tendencies of that animal. If too long was spent in your animal form, you could become stuck in that form forever. You needed to learn to control the magic, lest it control you.

The next free period at school that day, I had wasted no time shifting into my wolf form, terrorizing the students who had ganged up on me the day prior.

I had been chasing them around the field, growling and yipping at their heels.

Most of them were only Shades, but those that were Nightshades changed form and ran from me.

One of them changed into a rabbit.

That was the moment I felt things...change for me.

The moment I had lost control a little bit...

but that I hadn't minded one bit. That I had enjoyed it.

I remember thinking that even though I had been late coming into my powers, the instructors should have prepared me better, regardless.

They should have taught me the dangers of our changed forms, and that what happened next wasn't my fault at all.

The moment I saw the boy change into a rabbit, my wolf cravings took over. I hadn't known that could happen, or that it even was happening at the time. All I knew was that I was hungry .

I took off after the rabbit, forgetting entirely that I was a girl and not a wolf. The change took over my every thought. It wasn't until I stopped running, sinking my teeth into the soft flesh of the rabbit, that an inkling of what I had done entered my mind.

At eight years old, I had killed my first Shade.

And I didn't regret it. Not one bit.

The instructors had brought Zion in to speak with him, and I could hear their conversation from outside the doorway where I sat. They had placed me in a chair outside the classroom, my hands clasped together in my lap, my head leaning back against the wall.

A smile on my lips.

Was I supposed to be sitting here feeling remorseful? I wasn't. The boy I had unintentionally eaten had bullied me relentlessly . He had teased me. Called me a freak. Pulled my hair. Pushed me into the dirt. He thought me fragile and weak .

But now...now I was anything but.

I remember sitting outside the classroom, my only thoughts consumed by how my belly was full and my enemies had been vanquished.

I was more powerful than all of those other children, and I only craved more.

It was the first time in my life I felt as if I could stand up for myself—protect myself—and I wouldn't apologize.

I only craved more power. I wanted to be the most powerful Shade my instructors had ever seen.

“She has enormous potential, but we fear her magic may be...unpredictable,” I heard the instructor say to Zion.

“Unpredictable?” he asked, his voice raised. “She killed a classmate. Have you ever seen this happen before?”

A moment of silence passed, and I imagined the instructors were sharing carefully guarded glances, though I couldn't see their expressions from outside the doorway.

They appeared to be unequipped to handle such a delicate situation.

I imagined they would have struggled for words in the same way that they did now when Gregor's parents were called to the school after I was sent home.

“What am I supposed to do?” Zion asked, his voice clinging to a desperate note.

“We suggest pulling her out of school,” the instructor replied.

I could hear Zion running his hand through the scruff on his face.

He had been working late at the shop these past few weeks and each night when he returned home, he had bags beneath his eyes.

He was raising me alone, providing for us alone, and it was wearing on him.

He was doing the best he could, and I didn't want him to think that my actions reflected my upbringing.

It had nothing to do with Zion at all. I was simply taking back the power they had taken from me.

"You don't think that will only make things worse?" he asked, releasing a heavy sigh. "She needs to train with peers her own age. She needs to learn to control her magic."

"While I agree, I'm afraid it's too much of a risk to the other students," the instructor replied.

"Too much of a risk to the other students," Zion murmured. "What about Donika? She is just going to be cast aside? Didn't it occur to you that is the very reason this happened in the first place?"

The instructors stirred uncomfortably.

"They bully her. She has stopped telling me about it, but I know it happens still. I believe this is a sort of...retaliation. I'm not sure her actions were vindictive in nature."

"I have to disagree," the instructor replied. "She didn't show a fragment of remorse for Gregor. In fact, when she turned back into her human form, the first thing she stated was that she was still hungry."

Zion pushed the table away, and it screeched across the floor. "You didn't protect her. That boy has been torturing her for the last three years and you have done nothing to prevent it. Just yesterday they pulled her down from that tree by her hair!" His voice was on the edge of shouting.

“We can’t have eyes everywhere...”

“Bullshit.” Zion stood, his chair screeching away from him against the tiled floor.

“This is just as much your fault as it is hers. You didn’t protect her.

She should have been in the Nightshade advanced class from the very beginning, despite her not having shown a lick of magic yet.

You know how powerful I am, and how powerful her mother is.

You knew she wasn’t a Stormshade, and there was no possibility of her being merely a Shade.

You didn’t protect her from the relentless torture those children put her through, and now you want to blame her for finally standing up for herself. ”

The instructor cleared his throat to speak, but Zion stopped him.

“I would take her from this school, regardless. You have done a poor job educating her, and this is not her fault.”

“You can’t always protect her—” the instructor began.

“She is my daughter. I will do exactly that.” Zion replied through clenched teeth.

He tore from the room in a visage of fury and scooped me into his arms, though at this point I was far too tall to still be carried.

We left the school that day and didn’t look back.

That is...until the time with my tutor came to an untimely conclusion. Zion did his best to home school me at first, but he didn't have the time or the energy for it. He needed to hire a full-time instructor for me.

That was when I went to Cirilla's house for the first time.

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EIGHT YEARS OLD

Zion had contacted Cirilla in hopes that she would be available to teach me, and she had agreed. Cirilla was a friend of Annelise's, and a powerful Shade. Zion thought I could learn to hone my magic beneath her tutelage.

She lived in Siraleth, right down the street from our cottage. Zion had brought me to the stone house—quite sizable compared to our own—and knocked on the door.

Cirilla answered, they exchanged a few words, and he had left me there to study with her that very day.

When she had first opened the door, I had noticed her purple eyes were markedly darker than I remembered. More of an aubergine compared to the bright amethyst from my earlier childhood.

At the time, I didn't think anything of it.

Looking back, I should have realized right away that she had been dabbling in dark magic. It wasn't long before she began teaching me, too. She had said that I was unique in a way she had never seen before, and that my magic might need an extra...advantage.

She hadn't wanted to at first, especially after hearing about what had happened at the school with Gregor. One day I was rifling through the books in her attic and found one that particularly intrigued me. Cirilla often let me go through her books, so this day was unlike any other.

Until I opened the binding.

Most of her books were leather-bound pieces that were handwritten, but she had quite a few that were commercially made, too.

I tended to gravitate toward searching through the leather-bound tomes, hoping that I would find her family's grimoire.

She had told me that it was hidden away, though I was desperate to hold one in my own hands for the first time.

I had only seen the Kotova grimoire once , and hoped desperately that it would choose me as its ward one day.

It had snapped closed as soon as my eyes had laid upon it.

My mother had taken it with her when she had left to go to Akra, and I had not seen it since.

At the time, I had been too young to recognize what it was.

But now that my magic had awakened, I craved the spells hidden within its pages.

The book I found that day in Cirilla's attic was a grimoire of sorts.

It was filled with all types of clandestine spells I had never seen before and hadn't expected to find the grimoire of an upstanding family hidden away in the attic.

How to create a potion to make someone fall in love with you—something that was taught to be strictly forbidden.

Spells shouldn't alter free will. How to change into a form that was not your own mother given form.

I could turn myself into a lion with this spell instead of a wolf.

How to cast a curse that would give you complete control over someone.

How to incur physical pain with merely a thought.

How to siphon magic.

That last spell had intrigued me greatly. I might not have been born a Stormshade like every other Kotova born to the bloodline of my mother, but perhaps I could wield storm magic after all.

With a spell like this...it might be possible.

I had tried to hide the book in my knapsack and escape the house with it, but the book seemed to expel an energy all its own.

Just as I was about to pass through the doorway on my way home that night, Cirilla had reached out.

She grabbed the loop on my bag and pulling me back.

The bag slipped from my shoulders easily and I had turned around in indignation, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Tsk, Tsk, child. You cannot take this book from the house," Cirilla had said.

She placed the bag on the kitchen chair, pulling the book free with a shake of her

head.

“How did you know it was in there?” I asked, cocking my head to the side and narrowing my gaze at her.

She was a powerful Shade, but even she did not have the prophetic sight from the mother that the one they called Alastir had been gifted.

She was a Nightshade, like me.

“This book has a dark energy all its own.” She held it within her grasp, her gaze roving over its weathered coverlet. “It is palpable. I thought I had hidden it well enough, but it figures that it would have sensed you, sensed your magic. Called out to you.”

“A book can do that?” I asked, uncrossing my arms and leaning against the back of the kitchen chair.

Cirilla nodded. “Indeed, but only the most powerful of books.”

I squinted my eyes as I peered up at her. “And this is a powerful book?”

“A powerful book, indeed. That is quite the understatement. This is the grimoire of Grishina, an old and powerful family. A bloodline that ultimately fell to dark magic and was snuffed out.”

“How did you come into possession of it?” I asked, skeptical.

Cirilla let out a sigh as she rolled her darkening purple eyes. “At an auction, of all places. I always go to find bits and bobs, rare potions or the like. I never imagined I would find something so valuable.”

“An auction? They sell books at them?” My gaze fell to the book once more.

She nodded. “Only very expensive books.” She placed her hand atop my head in an affectionate manner. “I’m not sure they understood the translation. The power that this particular book held. They never would have sold it otherwise. It is worth a far greater sum than what I paid for it.”

She removed her hand to caress the gilded letters engraved on the front coverlet.

Grishina.

“Would you teach me spells from the Grishina grimoire?” I asked, standing on my tip toes and eagerly smiling up at her.

She thought for a long moment before speaking. “There are a multitude of spells and incantations in this book that could be of use, but there are some that are...dangerous.”

I waved my hand as if to say, ‘those didn’t matter.’

“We will simply have to stay away from those,” she answered conspiratorially as she leaned down to place a kiss against my cheek. “But the book stays here.”

I nodded in understanding.

“Now run along home, dear. Zion must be waiting for you.”

On the walk home that night, I couldn’t stop thinking about the Grishina grimoire and how it could make me the most powerful witch to ever live.

How those kids who had bullied me back at school wouldn’t be able to stand against

me ever again if I could learn all the spells in that book.

That I would surpass all the instructors.

My father, even. I wouldn't even need the Kotova grimoire if I had the Grishina grimoire.

I couldn't stop thinking about how I had uncovered my own arsenal of powerful spells, and I wasn't about to let it go.

Each day from there on out I was excited to go to my lessons. Zion would lift his eyebrow at me from the doorway as he watched me skip off toward Cirilla's house. He had never seen me excited about school before, and he had chalked it up to not having to deal with those tormentors anymore.

Little did he know the Grishina grimoire had awoken a thirst for knowledge within me. I had never set my hands upon a grimoire before. And this one, unlike the Kotova grimoire, actually let me read it. It didn't appear sentient, like the one that belonged to my family.

I would sit with Cirilla for my regular lessons during the day, and then she would let me study the Grishina grimoire at night.

I didn't return home until well past sundown, my eyes bleary and tired, and I would fall immediately into bed.

I fell asleep instantly those nights, exhausted from the long days of studying.

I began spending the entire day with Cirilla, even eating dinner at her house. I was seeing Zion less and less, but he didn't seem to mind. I was excelling in my schoolwork, far surpassing where I should be by this age. He didn't mind my extra

hours of studying and reading.

I had mastered my change completely, and no longer felt the urges of the wolf, even when I spent hours and hours in her form.

Little did I know...that was because the wolf and I were becoming one.

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TEN YEARS OLD

By the time I was ten years of age, Cirilla's eyes had turned from the amethyst I once remembered, to the dark aubergine of when we had first begun studying together, to entirely black.

There was no pupil.

No iris.

Just a darkness I had never seen before. It was depthless.

I found it beautiful in its own way, though I doubt others felt the same. It was a sign of how powerful she was becoming. Of how much she had devoted herself to her studies.

I had asked her what had happened to her eyes, already knowing the answer.

She had never given me a straightforward response.

She had stopped going out, sending me on all of her errands and to do all of her shopping in town.

I didn't mind going to the market for her.

I wasn't sure if it was because she was getting older in years, or because she was embarrassed about her newfound appearance. She didn't like to speak of it.

If I were her, I would show off my new black eyes with pride.

As her progression into dark magic continued, her hair had gone from grey to white, all color leached from it.

Her face had always borne prominent wrinkles before, but now it sagged with age, her bones growing tired with the years.

All I could think was that I hoped she left the Grishina grimoire to me when she passed.

I chastised myself for the thought, but that didn't stop it from repeating as if it were stuck on a loop in my mind.

I cared for her...in a way. But I cared for the grimoire more.

It had a power over me. I was enamored with it. Enamored with the idea of it. That it could grant me endless power. That once I was the most powerful Shade in the entire realm, nobody could bring me down. Nobody would make fun of me.

Torment me.

I would be invincible .

One day when I was on my way to Cirilla's house, I could sense something...

different in the air. The snow was packed against the cobbled road to the point where it had become slick.

As if there were a sheet of ice atop the road.

It took me twice as long to get to her house with how careful I had to be.

It was still fall in Istmere, and I hadn't yet broken out my winter boots.

When I had arrived, I prepared for my lessons at the small table nestled in the nook of the dining room. Cirilla had entered the room in a frenzy, a cloak tightly fastened around her neck, her white hair bundled into a hat.

"Don't unpack—" She moved to stop me from taking my books out of my bag. "We are going out."

"Out?" I asked, confused.

We never went out. Cirilla never left the house anymore.

"Out," she confirmed with a nod.

When I noticed the Grishina grimoire tucked under her arm, any questions that bubbled to my lips were stifled. I swung my pack back onto my back, borrowing a cloak from Cirilla to keep the chill out.

It was much too long for me, dragging along on the floor. I kept stepping on it, groaning in frustration. I pushed it back and followed Cirilla out the door, down the front steps and toward the outskirts of Siraeth.

I had never left Siraeth before and was surprised when we trudged past the city center, toward the plains beyond. We continued on in silence, and I tried my best to keep up with her long strides.

She was fast, despite her age.

We passed through two long stone spires that reached up into the sky, so far that they disappeared among the cloud cover. When townhomes came into view in the distance opposite a bustling port, I realized we must be in Prins.

Did my father know that she was taking me out of the city? Where were we going ?

My questions were answered soon enough when we climbed a steep hill that switched back and forth against the mountain, homes lining each side of the road. We came upon a worn navy painted townhome, the cedar shingles falling off and leaving parts of the roof bare.

Cirilla rapped against the door furiously, the Grishina grimoire still tucked tightly under her arm. Her black eyes swept up and down the street, ensuring nobody spotted us here. The door swung open, and we entered.

The home was exactly as I had expected inside. It was worn down, unkempt, and filled to the brim with things . Brooms, books, dishes. There were trinkets on every available surface.

“Come,” Cirilla ordered, ascending a creaky staircase that was missing a few steps entirely.

I had to stretch my legs to make it to the next step and not fall through the gap to the floor below.

“You brought her?” I heard an unfamiliar voice say from around the corner.

“Indeed. The little witch is here. Come, come, Donika. Let us not make Persephone wait.”

The stranger, Persephone, was much younger than Cirilla.

She had to be about thirty years of age, twenty or so years my senior.

She had a deep, ocean gaze. Her mousy brunette hair was pulled back in a plait down her back.

The apron she wore across her tattered dress was stained with all sorts of substances.

She ushered me into the room, a long table stretching across the space. It took me a moment to realize that a body lay across the table. It was an older man, his arms crossed over his chest, his skin devoid of all pallor.

He was chalky white.

I reached out with a tentative finger and poked him. “Is he dead?”

Both women turned to me at the same time, answering, “Yes,” in unison.

I shrugged, unfazed. I plopped my book bag down on the ground, the floor groaning beneath the weight of it.

Cirilla moved toward the table at the center of the room and lay the Grishina grimoire atop it, hastily thumbing through the pages until her muttered “aha!” indicated she had found what she was looking for. She ran her finger across the page, murmuring the spell under her breath.

Why were we here? And who was this dead man?

He had to be as old as Cirilla, if not a little older. It had only been five years since I had met her, but she appeared to have aged at least fifteen in that short period.

My brow furrowed as it occurred to me that it might be the magic. The Grishina

grimoire.

Was that why she was aging rapidly? Was that why her demeanor had...changed? She was much more...brusque than she had once been. Much less affectionate.

Our lessons had taken on a darker nature, but I had surmised that was because I was older now. Coming into my magic more. I had already proven to be quite powerful, and if I wanted to be the most powerful Shade in the realm, I needed to take my studies seriously.

“That fucking Stormshade will pay for this,” Cirilla muttered.

My head snapped up. I had never heard her swear before, and her language had taken me by surprise.

“I’m ready,” she finally said, running her hands down her skirt to wipe the sweat from her palms.

“Good,” Persephone answered, crossing to stand on the other side of the table.

“Donika?” Her voice was a question.

“Yes?”

“Please move to the head of the table,” Persephone replied.

There was no introduction between us, it appeared we were getting straight to work.

I moved to the head of the table, where the white hair of the man before us was cascading over the edge. His lips were so white they almost looked...blue. I stood there, waiting for instruction.

“Place your hand on his forehead,” Persephone instructed.

Cirilla continued to murmur an incantation under her breath, rocking forward and back, her eyes pressed closed in concentration.

I did as I was told, pressing down the instinct to recoil when my palm met his cold, dry skin.

“Now give me your other hand,” she instructed next.

I outstretched my right hand toward her, and she grasped it. Cirilla moved her right hand to clasp my shoulder, and when she did, a shock of magic coursed through me.

And it was like nothing I had ever felt before.

It was...exhilarating.

Intoxicating.

I relished the power as it ran through me, my back arching, my feet lifting off the floor. My head was thrown back, my eyes falling closed as it coursed through my blood inside of me. I had never experienced something so incredible in my entire life.

“Chant with us,” Persephone instructed.

I peeled my eyes open once more to see Cirilla’s hand not currently clasped on my shoulder any longer, but grasping a knife off the table. She held it out to Persephone’s open palm, the one not currently in mine, and cut her open with a brutal slash.

Blood welled to the surface quickly, pouring forth and spilling over her palm, coating the chest of the man below. She pressed her bloody palm to his heart, right between

the opened buttons of his tunic.

Cirilla's endless black eyes snapped to mine. "Chant."

I nodded, chanting along with them.

"Hoc sanguine resurget."

"Hoc sanguine resurget."

"Hoc sanguine resurget."

As we chanted, the energy that had filled me began to pass through me, out of my core and fueling out toward my hand. I could sense the magic passing from me into the man beneath my palm.

"Wait—" I protested, a hollow sensation welling in my core as the magic passed through me. Left me.

I felt...empty. Lonely. As if a void had been left behind.

As if I had never been alive before this...I was only alive now that I had tasted that magic. And if I didn't taste it again, I would simply die.

"You'll have more soon enough, girl," Cirilla ground out.

She had never spoken to me so...coldly before.

I nodded in response, swallowing down the anxiety that simmered inside of me as the magic passed through me like a funnel.

The chanting changed, and I continued to murmur the words alongside the two women.

“Cor nondum infectus.”

“Cor nondum infectus.”

“Cor nondum infectus.”

It hadn't occurred to me, exactly, what we were doing. Not until the eyes of the man before us peeled opened, and they too, were black. He gasped, his back arching off the table as he took a big, gulping breath. My hand fell back to my side in surprise as I stepped back.

My mouth fell open in shock.

“This is necromancy.” The words escaped me before I even had a chance to think about holding them back.

Cirilla's head snapped toward me in a mechanical manner. “Yes.”

Who was this man we had resurrected? Who was he to Cirilla? I had no idea that there was a spell in the Grishina grimoire for necromancy. But then again, I couldn't read half the spells. I was marginal at reading Latin, but getting better with each lesson.

Cirilla moved forward to embrace the man, and he held her fiercely against his chest. Persephone reached out a hand to clasp around his shoulder.

Only moments ago, when I had first seen her, her eyes had been a deep ocean blue.

Now, they were black.

Just like the man we brought back to life.

Just like Cirilla.

Had her eyes been darkening with the use of the black magic? Was that the effect this kind of magic had on the body? Was that the price paid?

There was always a price to black magic.

Always .

Persephone spoke, her voice deeper than it had been before. “You are alive. Changed, most certainly, but alive.”

When the man turned to her with a grin I gasped, my hand flying to my throat.

“What happened to him?”

I had never seen anything like it before. The pallor of his skin was much the same as it had been in death, pale and chalky. His eyes were black tourmaline. But his teeth...

They had been sharpened into fangs.

“Is he...is he a vampire?” I asked, stepping back until I was pressed against the wall and could go no further.

Cirilla grinned, and the sight sent a chill running down my spine. I pressed my palms flat against the wall behind me.

“Not a vampire,” she answered, shaking her head. “So much more.”

I wasn't sure what that meant, or that I wanted to find out. The fanged creature before us seemed so...unnatural. But the more I studied him, the more it also seemed...right. I had never felt so whole as I had when that black magic had been coursing through my veins.

I craved another taste of it.

I needed it to survive.

That night when I had returned home, I fell into bed utterly exhausted. The magic we had performed that day had taken a toll on me, and I wanted to sleep for at least three days to recover. Maybe more.

Zion had come to my room to tuck me in. He had slid the sheets over me, tucking them tightly beneath the bed. When he sat beside me, pushing my white-blue hair back from my face, he startled.

“Donika? Are you all right?” he asked, concern in his voice.

“Of course, father. Why wouldn't I be?”

He paused for a moment, his gaze never leaving mine in the dimly lit room. He shook his head, as if dismissing the thought. “Your eyes...I just thought. Never mind.”

He smiled down at me, placing a kiss against my forehead. “Sleep tight.”

And I did. I had slept for two days after that spell, waking only when Cirilla came to fetch me for my next lesson.

When I had moved to the bathroom that morning to brush my teeth, I glanced in the mirror and reeled back with a start.

My eyes had once been glacially blue, like my mothers. But I didn't remember her eyes any longer. Didn't remember her face. Maybe I had imagined that they were so blue before. Maybe they never had been.

Maybe mine hadn't either.

I had never taken the time to study my own reflection, after all. Maybe I was mistaken. My own hand moved to run across my cheek as I stared at my reflection for a long moment. My hand was cold against my flesh, but I didn't reel back from it.

I didn't flinch at the cerulean blue eyes that stared back at me.

Because they were mine .

Between the time I had left for my last lesson and now...my eyes had darkened.

ELEVEN YEARS OLD

That year following my first foray into dark magic I learned everything I could from Cirilla and the man I came to know as Emil. Cirilla and Emil had once been lovers, and her close friend Persephone had vowed to help her bring him back one day.

And she had.

Persephone had preserved the body with dark magic from her own grimoire, which I was anxious to get my hands on. I hadn't seen Persephone since that day in Prins, and I hadn't been back to that city, either.

We studied the spells in the Grishina grimoire on top of my normal studies, and I continued to grow more powerful each day. My eyes hadn't darkened any further yet, they had stayed that cerulean blue since that first night I had performed a dark magic spell.

Cirilla told me a Stormshade had killed Emil, and one day when she came back to the cottage covered in blood, her hands shaking, I knew she had sought out that Stormshade and slain them.

Good riddance.

I would much rather have Emil around, anyway. I had grown close with him, and he had taught me all kinds of spells I had never tried before.

Cirilla told me he was something called Noctani.

The first of his kind. Or that is what the Grishina grimoire called them, at least. Part vampire part witch.

The family had noted in the margins of the grimoire that the spell had never been used before.

But that didn't stop Cirilla and Persephone from putting it to use.

Emil required blood to live, but the drinking of blood sometimes also stole power from the victim.

It was up to the control of the Noctani who did the taking.

Due to this, Cirilla only let him drink from her.

The days passed and slowly I could see the magic leaving Cirilla. Emil didn't take it all at once...it slowly left her body and seeped into his in a slow but steady trickle. She was aware of what was happening, but she didn't care.

She loved him.

But he hadn't asked. Hadn't gained her permission. He had simply taken it.

Her love for him had made her weak. And if there was one thing I detested, it was weakness. All those years of studying, all her work poring over the Grishina grimoire, and she was going to allow Emil to simply take it from her?

I caught him drinking from her one night, her limp body splayed across his lap. When he picked his head up, blood dripping from his fangs, he only smiled at me.

He could feel Cirilla slipping away each time he drank from her, but he didn't care. I

was convinced he was doing it on purpose. If it was up to the Noctani to control the amount of magic that was taken, he could have chosen to steal none .

But he hadn't.

I told myself if Cirilla needed to be brought back to life, I could simply use the same spell we had used to make Emil Noctani. But as the days slipped by and Cirilla grew weaker and weaker, I became resentful of Emil.

Who was he to take Cirilla from me? Who was he to steal her magic? If it should belong to anyone, it should belong to me . He was just as bad as the Stormshade bitch who had killed him in my eyes.

When he had fallen asleep one night I had gone to the kitchen and taken one of the blades Cirilla used for our blood spells. They were sleeping together in the bed, side by side, Cirilla curled on her side.

When I approached the bed, the floorboards creaked and Cirilla peeled her eyes open.

She saw me there, standing before the bed with a blade in my hand, but she said nothing.

I moved to the other side of the bed, and before Emil could open his eyes, I took the blade and slit his throat while he slept.

I couldn't give him the opportunity to fight back, or I would lose.

I took my second life that day.

As it turns out, Noctani were equally as susceptible to being killed as any other Shade. I helped Cirilla bury the body in the narrow backyard of her home in Siraeth.

Everyone thought he was already dead, no one was going to come looking for him.

Despite Emil no longer drinking her blood and therefore siphoning the dark magic out of her little by little, Cirilla did not recover. She had grown weaker and weaker each day, until one summer night she passed away in the narrow bed in her home.

She had been a mother to me, in a sense. More of a mother to me than my own mother had been, anyway.

I wasn't able to bury the body myself, but that was the least of my worries. I had the Grishina grimoire all to myself now.

Cirilla had taught me well, and I was skilled enough in my studies and in Latin to study the spells on my own now. I knew Zion would want me to continue my schooling, but I didn't mind. The more I learned the more powerful I became. And that was the end goal, after all.

I wanted to be more powerful than anyone. I wanted to taste that dark energy surging through me every day until my last.

That night I returned home to the cottage in Siraeth, the Grishina grimoire in tow.

It had never left Cirilla's home before now, to my knowledge.

I had told Zion what happened, leaving out the nefarious details.

That Cirilla was gone. He had returned with me to her home to give her a proper burial.

He was surprised by what he found when we entered. He had known Cirilla a long time and had entrusted her with my care. He never imagined she had lost her soul to

dark magic.

It had been years since he had seen her in person, and he had never seen the evidence of dark magic in her eyes.

The proof strewn about the house as opened spell books dotted every surface.

Beakers filled with pink and green liquids.

Stones of every color. Candles burning in clusters on the dining table, the counters, the coffee table.

There was evidence of dark magic everywhere you looked.

But Zion never knew about the Noctani. That secret was for Cirilla and me.

And Persephone, of course.

“Donika, why didn’t you tell me what was going on here?” he had asked, trying his best to clean the house up before anyone else could see. He didn’t want the evidence to linger, tainting her reputation. Cirilla was a well-known Nightshade among the community.

“I didn’t know,” I replied simply. The lie spilled from my tongue effortlessly.

He turned to me, his brows drawn together. “You didn’t know?” He swept his arm about to indicate the filthy house. “How could you not have known?”

I was old enough now to know better. That might not have been the case when I had first begun studying with Cirilla.

But it was now.

I had been young, weak, and naïve. I was none of those things now.

I shrugged absently. “She told me not to worry about these things and to mind my own business.” I nodded toward the table tucked into the dining nook. “We studied there—I wasn’t allowed to look through any of her other spell books.”

That was a lie, too.

Zion had too much on his mind. He simply waved away any concern and continued to clean up, and I helped him. I pocketed the bloodstones and gemstones I found scattered about. They could be of use to me later.

“This is my fault,” he muttered. He was kneeling by the coffee table, his head in his hands.

“What is, father?” I continued to flit from room to room, filling the trash bags with things I no longer needed.

“I sent you here. I should have pushed back at the school harder. You need to be around your peers. You need to be with children your own age.”

Under Cirilla’s tutelage I didn’t feel like a child at all anymore.

I was as grown as the rest of them. But I did want to go back to school, if for no other reason than to rub my power in their faces.

There was no way the other students were as powerful and intelligent as I was.

I had a personal tutor in dark magic. I was far past the spells my peers would be

studying at this age.

I nodded. “Perhaps you are right, father. Perhaps I should be around children my own age.”

His gaze lingered on me for a long moment before he nodded, his mind made up.

The next day he went back to the school and insisted they take me back. That I had learned to control my power, and I was no longer a threat to the other students.

One of those things was true.

Each day on my way to school I would turn into my wolf form and run there, the wind ruffling my thick white coat.

I knew the wolf and I were becoming one, I could sense a change deep within me.

What other reason could there be for my callousness?

My lack of emotion and my thirst for power at any cost?

With my use of dark magic, I was becoming more animal than human.

I relished in the thought of becoming one with my wolf form, I simply needed to hide it from those around me. They wouldn’t understand.

At school, the other children no longer terrorized me.

They feared me.

I was more powerful than any of them. I knew spells they could only dream of.

They were busy unlocking locks and opening doors with their minds while I was mastering shadow wielding.

Creating debilitating potions that would turn my worst enemy into a creature of their own vilest nightmares.

I laughed at what they were teaching in school.

But I sat, and I learned. I didn't draw attention to myself.

I was falling into a rhythm with my studies.

I spent good portions of my time in my wolf form, studying with my peers, then engrossing myself in the Grishina grimoire each night.

Zion had realized he hadn't kept as watchful of an eye on me as he perhaps he should have, and he became somewhat of a smothering parent from that point onward.

But he still had no clue I had the Grishina grimoire in my possession. He simply thought I was reading books I enjoyed on those nights he couldn't peel me away from the pages long enough to eat dinner with him.

I was comfortable. And I was happy.

As happy as I could be, anyway.

Until it all came to a screeching halt.

One night Zion and I were sitting around the fire reading. I had the Grishina grimoire stuffed into a fantasy book about unicorns to hide the cover, my legs propped up on the arm of the settee. The front door to the cottage burst open and Zion was on his

feet in a heartbeat.

In the open doorway stood Annelise.

My mother.

And she wasn't alone.

A baby was held within her grasp.

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TWELVE YEARS OLD

“Y ou thought to bring her here?” Zion asked, incredulous.

He and Annelise were arguing.

I’m not sure what she had been expecting. For me to run to her and pull her into my arms, happy to finally see her again?

No. I hadn’t seen her in seven years. I barely remembered her. As far as I was concerned, I only had one parent.

“I had nowhere else to go, Zion.” Annelise’s voice was pained.

I remained on the couch, feet propped up by the fire. I flipped the page to feign reading, but I was eavesdropping on their argument in the kitchen.

Annelise held the baby to her chest. I had never seen an infant so small...she had to be only a few days old if not hours. She brought the child to the fire, cocooning blankets around her to warm her. They continued to argue as if I weren’t even there.

“You’re sure?” Zion asked, running a hand through his inky black hair.

“Look at her, Zion,” Annelise replied, exasperated.

“She is your spitting image, Bird.” He smiled. The baby did look remarkably like Annelise for being so small. “Cursed with your magic, too.” He ran a hand down his

face.

I perked up at this.

The child was a Stormshade?

How was it that I wasn't born a Stormshade, but this measly little infant was? I was born with the wrong magic, different from everyone else in my bloodline, but my mother's love child wasn't? How was that fair?

I glanced from the book propped up before me to the infant by the fire. Despite being so young, she had a head full of auburn hair. I sneered, returning my gaze to the book.

Annelise had left us and come back with a child. It certainly wasn't Zion's child, so who was the father? As if plucking the thought from my mind, that was the exact question Zion asked next.

"Osiris'?" All he said was the king's name.

Rumors had reached as far as Siraleth that the Dark King Osiris had taken a lover and planned to make her queen. I had never imagined it was my mother. I thought she would be too anxious to get back to us. To her family.

Annelise nodded solemnly. Zion shook his head.

"Annelise, you had to have known the risk..."

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. "I thought the child might be like Donika. A Nightshade."

I peeked at her over the edge of the book. Tears tracked down her cheeks. Her strawberry blonde hair was windswept, still pushed into the back of the hood on her cape. Her fingers were red with cold as she held them out to Zion, pleading.

“Can we please stay?”

Zion reeled back in surprise. “Of course you can stay, Anna. Why would you ask such a thing? This is your home .”

Was it?

It was my home.

And Annelise had never been a part of it as far as I could remember. I had one crystal clear memory of her...and that was it.

Her gaze fell to the floor, stricken. “Because Osiris knows what she is. She isn’t safe.”

Zion grasped her shoulder, pulling her into a warm embrace before the crackling fire. “Any kin of yours will be safe here. Donika will be a big sister.”

Annelise’s gaze flitted toward me for the first time and her eyes met mine. A soft gasp escaped her lips, and she stepped back, out of Zion’s arms.

“Her eyes—”

Zion simply shrugged. “She was a child when you last saw her. Children change as they grow, surely.”

Did Zion truly believe that? Or was he in denial about what had happened at Cirilla’s

house? Had so much time passed, so many other thoughts occupying and consuming his mind, that he could have thought that to be the honest truth?

I smiled, but it never reached my newly cerulean eyes. “Welcome home, mother.”

Her brow knit together at the coldness of my words. I did not embrace her. I did not tell her I missed her terribly and was happy she was home. I simply closed the book and quietly returned to my room. I left the door creaked open so that I could still hear them from the living area.

“The tides are turning in Istmere. You have to know that. Osiris has a deep hatred for Stormshades.”

I snickered to myself at that. Something we had in common, then.

I desperately wanted to train in the king’s army full time.

This once-a-month trip to Akra that my parents had limited me to was no longer satisfying my craving to climb the ranks.

I was smarter than those my age. Stronger.

More powerful. If I asked if I could move there to train, would they let me?

“He does. And it is spreading across the realm like wildfire. Jealousy is at the root of it, if you ask me. We are more powerful. It’s as simple as that. When bound, we can access a new stream of energy through our storms, and there is no comparison to that kind of power.”

Bound? What did she mean by that?

“And you still have the other binding spell in place?” Zion asked. “To mask your Stormshade magic?”

I could see through the crack in the door that Annelise gave a tight nod.

“Good. Then you can stay here, and we will bind the child as well. Nobody will be able to track her. Nobody will be able to tell she is a Stormshade. We already have one Nightshade daughter, perhaps they will assume...”

“That is a good idea,” Annelise spoke with a nod.

Zion pulled her to him once more, and she sighed into his embrace, allowing him to pull her into the cocoon of his arms.

“I’ve missed you, Zion.”

He stroked her hair with a loving hand. “I’ve missed you too, Bird. Welcome home, Anna.”

When Zion spoke those words, they sounded much more sincere than when I had. Perhaps he truly was happy to have her home. I didn’t necessarily feel one way or the other, as long as nothing changed for me.

That is...until the baby began getting all the attention.

Not that I minded it terribly, it allowed me to spend more time studying and practicing my spells.

I had created a trap door beneath my bed that led down to the crawl space beneath my room.

It was there that I practiced the darkest spells I could muster from the Grishina grimoire, safe from prying eyes.

But everything was always about that mother damned Stormshade baby.

It had been just me and Zion for so long, I missed it.

The dynamic had changed entirely. Is the baby hungry?

Is the baby cold? Is the baby tired? When Annelise had first returned home, I had hoped she would dote on me at least a little.

That the time away would perhaps have made our bond stronger, despite my initial reservations upon her return.

That didn't appear to be the case.

Except for the fleeting smile at the dinner table or the brief kiss goodnight, it was as if I were invisible. Perhaps she thought I was old enough now that I no longer wanted to be doted on.

Perhaps that should have been the case.

But on those sleepless nights where I lay awake, the Grishina grimoire tucked beneath my pillow, all I could think about was how it must feel to be that awful little Stormshade baby. To be so doted on and loved.

To be so perfect .

I would throw the covers off and slip beneath the floorboards, losing myself to my spells.

It felt as if they were all I had.

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THIRTEEN YEARS OLD

As it turns out, Zion and Annelise did allow me to increase the amount of time I was training with the king's army.

Instead of once-a-month travel to Akra, they agreed to allow me to travel every other week to train in the academy if I would continue my studies in Siraeth as well.

The trip often left me exhausted, not wanting to spend any extra time studying and simply falling into bed by the time I returned to the cottage.

I was losing at least three days to travel each time I went, if not more.

I slowly increased the amount of time spent at the academy training in Akra versus studying at home in Siraeth. But I wasn't concerned, and neither were my parents. I needed to nurture my superior intelligence, both scholastically and magically.

The only nights I didn't fall into bed exhausted were the nights that I would meet up with Malec. I had met him during our training sessions for the army in the academy at the palace. He was two years older than me, which had all the other girls in my class jealous.

He had luscious black hair that he wore tied at the nape of his neck.

His skin was tanned and honed, evident of all the long hours spent in the training rooms and on the practice fields.

He lived in Prins and traveled to and from the castle, just as I did.

We often made the journey together. When he turned sixteen and graduated from the academy, he would move to Akra full time.

I had no intention of being so far away from him.

I planned to move to Akra full time this next year.

It wasn't as if there was anything for me at the cottage, anyway.

I would sneak out of the window at the back of the cottage, dropping the six feet down to the ground.

I would meet Malec halfway between Siraleth and Prins at one of the bodies of water there, nestled between the trees.

It was a small lake, and the setting was quite romantic beneath the high Siraleth moon.

Zion and Annelise had no idea I had been sneaking out. This had to be the third week in a row I had slipped out and avoided their notice. I followed the moon as my guide to the alcove of trees where we met, and sure enough, he was already there waiting for me.

I rushed into his arms and he scooped me up, spinning me. He pulled back enough to gaze into my eyes.

"Ocean blue," he murmured.

My eyes had darkened more significantly in the last year, but they still weren't black

like Cirilla and Persephone's had been. He placed a chaste kiss against my cheek, but I was craving more. I grasped the back of his head, pulling his mouth down toward mine.

Malec had been my first kiss.

The other girls in class were jealous I had an older boyfriend to begin with, and it didn't help that he was handsome and at the top of our class. He was a Stormshade, and while I initially had my reservations about that, he had proved to be quite powerful.

He made for a great sparring partner.

He responded to my urgency eagerly, pulling me across his lap as he sat atop a fallen tree that spilled over the water's edge.

With only the moonlight shining down on us, I couldn't help but think about the future for us.

If we might get married one day. He slipped his arm around my back, pulling my body against his.

I let him, falling into him as the kiss deepened.

When his other hand slipped under the hem of my tunic, running up my bare stomach, I tensed. His fingers ran over the trim of my bra.

He had never touched me like this before.

We had a couple of heated make out sessions, and though I was more advanced in every other area for my age...

I wasn't sure I was ready for this yet. When his hand slipped beneath the hem of my bra, I tried to pull away.

I shook my head back and forth, but he pulled me back against him, capturing my mouth once more with his.

The butterflies that had been bouncing in my stomach moments ago turned sour, and I pressed my hands against his shoulders, pushing him back harder this time.

"Donika?" He strained back enough to peer down at me, a question in his eyes.

He didn't remove the hand from under my shirt. Quite the opposite in fact. He pushed that hand farther up, grazing my hardened nipple with his thumb.

I reared back, slapping his hand away. I narrowed my eyes at him as he gripped my wrist, pulling me closer once more.

"STOP!" I cried, my shadows snaking out, grasping his hand and wrenching it behind his back.

"Donika, stop! That hurts!"

"I'm supposed to stop when you ask? What about when I ask?" I cried, stepping further away from him into the shadows of the trees.

I could take care of myself, I knew that. But why hadn't he respected when I had pulled away? Shaken my head? Pulled against him, begging him with my body language to stop? Had I somehow... given him the wrong idea?

"Malec, what is wrong with you?" I asked, pulling my shadows back toward myself. They released his arm at once and he wrung it out, rubbing the red and blistered skin

on his wrist where they had grasped him.

“Wrong with me ?” he asked, his voice hiking up a notch. My brow furrowed in confusion. “Why did you stop me?”

“Why did I stop you? When you wouldn’t let me pull away, I had to force you to stop. I’m...I’m not ready for that yet.”

He shook his head, running a hand through his midnight hair. “This is what I get for dating a lovesick thirteen-year-old. I should have listened to them, found a girl my own age.”

I stepped back, confusion swimming in my gaze. I had wanted to be pressed close to him only moments ago. But now, all I wanted was to put distance between us.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“What am I talking about?” he asked, anger rising in his voice. He stalked toward me angrily.

I backed away from him further.

“I’m talking about you being a total tease. I only showed you a lick of attention because of how powerful you are. The army’s little pet. The general’s favorite.” The words were mocking, bordering on cruel.

I took another step backward, and he took another step forward.

“I thought...I thought you liked me.” The words were a croak out of my mouth.

He laughed. Really laughed.

He threw his head back and I could see the dimple in his cheek, the line of perfect white teeth beneath the moon.

“ Like you? No. I don’t like you. I wanted you. There’s a difference.”

Wanted. Past tense.

“I’m dating Evelyn. You thought we were truly dating ? Didn’t you wonder why I never hung out with you back at the academy? Why we always had to sneak out to see each other?”

Dating Evelyn. Not me.

I could sense my magic rising within me without my bidding, pressing against my skin, begging to be released.

I pressed my eyes closed and when I opened them again, my shadows were slinking across the cold ground toward Malec.

I watched as if they weren’t a part of me at all, but rather their own entity. Sentient.

Before they could reach him, I saw his eyes darken. His expression changed into something...different. Something unrecognizable. He moved forward quickly. I barely registered what he was doing before he wound back his hand and I saw more than felt his palm as he slapped me across the cheek.

I reeled back in surprise, my own hand reaching for my now stinging cheek.

As I stood there cradling the pink smarted skin, my emotions turned from hurt, scared, and shocked...to reeling. Who the hell did he think he was, forcing his hand up my shirt, and when I didn’t comply, striking me?

I was ten times more powerful than him.

Twenty.

“Tenebrae consumunt te.” The incantation was leaving my lips before I had even truly given it any thought.

Almost as if on instinct.

This time, he did not step forward, mirroring my movements. He did not close the distance between us.

This time...it was Malec who took a step back.

I took another step forward.

“Tenebrae consumunt te .”

“What are you doing?” he asked, his hands out in front of him as if he could stop me. As if he had the power. As if he could ever stand against me.

I cocked my head to the side, a smile crossing my lips as I spoke the incantation again.

Darkness consumes you.

When the final words had left my lips and I stepped back, I smiled at him.

A laugh bubbled to my lips as I watched him.

The spell wouldn't curse him immediately.

No, it would work its way into his blood over time, and he would regret the day he ever thought he could take advantage of me.

Hurt me . He would pay for using me. For tricking me.

“Your...your eyes.” The words left his lips in a strained exhale, as if they were pulled from the base of his throat.

I cocked my head to the side, narrowing those eyes at him. “What about them?”

But I already knew.

They had changed from glacial to cerulean to the color of the ocean once before. But now...

“They’re black...” His words trailed off, the night swallowing them.

“Is that so?” I replied, amused.

Of course they were.

Darkness hadn’t only consumed Malec this night.

And as if it were a cure to the emotions that had threatened to tear me apart mere moments ago, I now felt nothing .

I had been studying the dark spells for years now, and they had become a part of me in the process.

They had me tight in their grip, and they were never going to let me go.

And I relished in it. The more I practiced my spells, the stronger I became. One day, I would be so strong and numb that nobody could ever hurt me or stand against me ever again.

His hand flew to his chest, his fingers splayed against the material there. As if something physical was changing within his heart.

Good .

Maybe he would think twice before laying hands on another girl when she said no. Maybe he would think twice about striking one. Stormshades were so...egotistical. So fucking selfish. Were they all the same? I hadn't been deterred at first, but now I saw him for what he truly was.

He was just like my mother.

Just like the Stormshade that had murdered Emil in cold blood, simply because they could . They possessed the magic of the sky, and it made them arrogant .

I had grown stronger in these past years, but not strong enough, apparently. Not strong enough that a Stormshade would still dare to stand against me. He was lucky Osiris even let him be a part of the army with his tainted blood.

We hadn't known it at the time, but the presence of Stormshades in the army and at the academy was short-lived. Osiris began hunting Stormshades that same month, before the next full moon waxed and waned.

And I loved a chase.

I was hungry for it. It filled the holes of the injustices done to me.

Filled the holes of a mother who was absent my entire life.

Filled the hole of a boyfriend who thought I was merely a pawn, my mere existence serving the only purpose of pleasing him.

Filled the hole of losing Cirilla, the only person who ever tried to better me.

I trained harder, and harder, and harder.

I was going to become the strongest Nightshade in the entire realm. Stronger than Osiris, even.

I could sit on the throne someday. I would sit on the throne someday.

I would be the most powerful Shade Istmere had ever seen.

A pang shot through me at the thought that my mother's little Stormshade whelp was technically the bloodline heir to the throne. She was Osiris' daughter. His only heir.

That simply wouldn't do at all.

I would need to do something about that.

And soon.

THIRTEEN YEARS OLD

I had vowed that night when I cursed Malec that I would never again be vulnerable. I would become the strongest witch this realm had ever seen, and I would sit on the throne of Istmere.

No matter the cost.

I told Zion and Annelise that I wanted to move to Akra to train in the academy full time, and to my surprise, they had agreed. I knew it was because they wanted me as far away from the baby as possible, but it served my own ends.

That fucking baby.

I heard them arguing one night. Anger simmered deep in my core when they spoke as if I weren't even there. They knew I was one room over, able to hear every word they spoke. But that didn't stop them.

"I think it's a good idea," Annelise said, her arms crossed over her chest.

She was leaning against the kitchen counter in the cottage, the Stormshade infant strapped to her chest with some sort of swaddle. Annelise dug her hands into the counter, her knuckles white.

Zion shook his head, running a worried hand through his hair. He had recently cut it all off, and it was shorn against his head. I thought it made him look younger.

“If you think that’s what’s best.” His voice was strained.

Annelise shot him a look that said she knew he was placating her.

“You think that Diana is safe here, with Donika under the same roof?”

Zion shook his head. “I don’t think she would hurt her own sister.”

“I don’t know what she would do anymore.

What she is capable of. Zion, her eyes are black .

She has been consumed by dark magic. It runs in her veins .

I wouldn’t be surprised if the blood she spilled was black, too.

Her humanity is waning. I’m not sure if there is any left at all.

You know as well as I do that there is no reversal of darkness .

There is no known spell to cure what has already been lost, and no way to reverse the side effects of this magic. ”

Zion released a heavy sigh. “This is my fault.”

“You can’t blame yourself, Zion. I had no idea what Cirilla was. What she had planned to do. I thought our child would be safe with her, too.”

Zion tilted his head back, examining the ceiling. “I should have kept a closer eye on her. Spent more time with her. I was so busy working, trying to make ends meet to afford the roof over our head, the food in our bellies, I let her slip through my

fingers.”

Annelise’s gaze fell to the floor. “If I hadn’t left, it never would have happened.”

Zion scoffed. “It was hardly your choice. If you had been given the luxury of making the decision, you would have stayed here.”

But would she have?

Annelise had always had a wild heart, and never stayed in one place for long.

She and Zion had already been reduced to friends.

It was only a matter of time before she left us, one way or another.

She never would have stayed here to raise me and help Zion with the expenses, even if she wasn’t summoned to The Stone City.

In the end, she was always destined to leave us.

A long moment of silence fell between them as if those words hung unspoken in the air around them.

“I think I need to move Diana to the mortal realm.” Annelise stroked the full head of auburn hair on the baby strapped to her chest.

“You truly think that is what is best? That things have become that dire?”

Annelise’s gaze returned to Zion’s.

All they ever worried about was that baby.

They never worried about me, only about how they had failed me.

But had they? I was more powerful than either of them in my mere thirteen years.

I would be the most powerful Shade in the realm one day.

Maybe they hadn't failed me at all, and their absence had allowed me to become who I was truly meant to be.

"I do." Annelise nodded. "She hates Stormshades, me included. Even when she moves to Akra to train with Osiris and Alastir, I fear her hatred for our kind is festering. Growing into an ugly, unstoppable thing. I'm not sure Diana would be safe here, even with her so far away."

Zion sucked his bottom lip into his mouth, deep in thought.

"You plan to leave me here?"

Annelise's brow drew together with hurt. "Never."

"What, then?"

"I...I plan to leave her there," she replied.

"Leave her there?" Zion asked, incredulous.

Annelise nodded. "It's the only way to keep her truly safe.

As long as she remains in this realm, Diana will be hunted.

Osiris' pursuit of Stormshades has only worsened in recent months.

A war is brewing, and I cannot in good conscience allow a child to be stuck in the middle of it.

She will never be safe here as long as storm blood runs through her veins. ”

“What do you plan to do with her?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Leave her with a mortal friend. One I met in college. We were close, once. I trust her with Diana. She will be raised mortal. Live a mortal life. She might have a chance at happiness that way.”

Zion’s gaze was downcast. Thoughtful.

“And when she summons magic in the mortal realm? When her storms rage and her power ignites everything around her?” he finally asked.

Annelise shook her head. “I will bind her. She will never know.”

“ Bind her? You think that is what’s best?” he replied.

“Yes. She is already bound here in Istmere to prevent the king from tracking her. I will bind her magic to ensure she will never know it, never know she is a Shade. She won’t be traced. The Kotova grimoire has a powerful binding spell. It will last quite some time.”

“And when the binding wears off?” he asked.

“I will travel to the mortal realm to bind her again. Wipe her memories of it. She will never know what she is. Who I am. She will be spared of this heartache.”

“You’re forgetting one crucial piece of information,” Zion’s voice was low when he

spoke.

A warning.

“And what’s that?” Annelise asked, stroking the baby’s hair back from her face, her voice feigning innocence.

“The prophecy.”

Annelise’s gaze turned cold as it bore into Zion’s. “Fuck the prophecy.”

A humorless laugh escaped Zion. “Has Alastir ever been wrong?”

Annelise’s face curled up with an expression I couldn’t quite read.

“Has he?” Zion pressed, pushing off the opposite countertop and moving toward her.

He grasped her arms in his, squeezing them.

“You cannot hope to interfere in a prophecy from the mother herself. This child is destined for things far greater than anything you or I could have planned for her. She will bring peace to Istmere after a decade of strife and war. That is what Alastir saw. That is what the mother showed him.”

Her voice was barely above a whisper when she spoke. “Maybe he was wrong. There is still time for the visions to change. She is only but a babe now, and that will not come to fruition for over a decade. A lot can happen between now and then.”

“I know,” Zion replied, running a hand down his face. “But you and I cannot hope to stop fate. The mother has bigger plans for this child.”

“But a war is brewing,” Annelise protested.

“I know,” Zion replied again.

He was exasperated with her. Once Annelise made up her mind, it was made up. There was no changing it. Come hell or high water, she would bring that child to the mortal realm and bind her magic.

I closed the bedroom door with a snap, knowing they would hear the sound of the door against the wooden frame. Serves them right for speaking as if I weren't even there. I fucking hated how they did that.

They were right about one thing, though...

War was brewing.

The Stormshades would be brought to justice, and finally have to answer for their crimes.

Osiris was right about that.

War was brewing...and I planned to be at the heart of it.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:54 am

THIRTEEN YEARS OLD

I had packed my bags to go to Akra, and never wanted to look back.

I was ready to train full time in the king's army, and knew I would climb the ranks quickly.

I was skilled with the dagger and sword, and even the bow and arrow.

But most importantly I was a skilled shifter, and my shadow magic was becoming stronger and stronger every day.

The final item I packed away for my trip was the Grishina grimoire. It was a part of me now, and under no circumstances would I leave it behind. I had never gotten to see the Kotova grimoire when Annelise had returned, but I knew it lingered somewhere in the cottage.

Despite it not choosing me, I could scent the hum of its energy. Kotova blood ran through my veins, after all.

Zion and Annelise had allowed me to go on my own. After years of traveling there each month to train, I knew the way. And I wasn't afraid of passing through The Shadow.

No.

The Shadow should be afraid of me.

I dared anyone to stand against my magic at this point.

I was so powerful, drunk on the feeling, dark magic pulsing through my blood.

I needed more and more black magic to fill the high, which wasn't a concern of mine.

Annelise might have been right...my humanity was slipping away little by little, but I delighted in it.

Soon I wouldn't be hurt any longer.

I would be hardened to it.

Emotions were too fickle, anyway. If I wanted to rule the kingdom, they would only get in the way. I needed to stay focused on the bigger picture. Stay focused on my magic.

As I traveled past the docks of Prins and toward The Shadow I sensed I was being followed.

I could feel eyes on me...it was a sensation I couldn't quite explain.

The sun was setting and I would have to make camp on the other side of The Shadow.

Or find an Inn to stay at for the night to rest. I needed to lose this tail, whoever was stupid enough to be following me.

As I descended the steps into The Shadow and passed through the empty streets, whoever it was gained on me. Closing the distance between us. They were drawing closer and closer, not wanting to lose sight of me in the narrow alleys and twisting streets here, but not close enough to be seen.

I increased my pace.

I wasn't necessarily worried about who it was that was following me, only that I wasn't in the mood for a confrontation at the moment.

I was tired. Tired from the journey. Tired of my parents. Tired of everything .

By the time I had reached the top of The Shadow steps I was beyond annoyed. I picked up my pace through Prins, vowing to stop for the night once I had made it into Akra.

I picked up a brisk walk toward the plains that led to The Stone City when I sensed whoever it was following me draw even closer.

Close enough that I could scent their magic.

Feel their darkness. I stopped short, turning.

I hadn't realized exactly how close they were, and the figure reached out quickly and grasped my pack.

I flew back with it. To avoid being dragged to the dirt, I let the pack slip from my shoulders.

“What the hell?”

When my gaze settled on the figure clutching the pack to their chest, a spark of recognition shocked my core.

“Persephone?”

I hadn't seen the woman before me in years . Since Cirilla and I had traveled to her worn down house in Prins with the Grishina grimoire...and resurrected Emil with necromancy. Turning him into a Noctani, a blood drinking monster.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

I cocked my head to the side as I watched her. She didn't move. Her black, endless eyes were trained on me. The pack was pressed tightly to her chest. Her hair was unkempt, falling out of the messy braid that fell down her back.

She didn't answer.

“Persephone?” I took a step closer, and as if she were a frightened animal she took a step back.

“Stay away from me,” she hissed.

My brows drew together in confusion. She had been the one following me . I took a step back in surprise. Was she...afraid of me?

A long silence fell between us as we held each other's gazes.

“Persephone, give me the pack—” I moved to step toward her again, but she stepped back once more with a hiss.

“I can't let you have it.”

“Have what?” I asked, the words slow and measured as they left my mouth.

“The book,” she answered through clenched teeth.

The Grishina grimoire.

Of course...she had come for the grimoire. She was the only other person who knew I had it besides Cirilla, who was dead. What did she want with the book?

“What do you need it for?” I asked, inclining my head toward her, curious.

“I don’t need it,” she replied. As if the answer were obvious.

My brows drew together in confusion once more. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t need it for myself,” she ground out, pressing the pack even tighter against her chest. “But I can’t let you have it, either.”

“Why not?” I took a step forward, and she stepped back.

It became a slow dance between us.

Persephone wasn’t nearly as strong as me.

If she were, they never would have needed to bring me that day in order to perform the necromancy spell.

Though, I did suspect they needed someone with an untainted heart to perform that particular spell.

Back then, I hadn’t yet known the thrill of the dark magic pulsing through my veins.

She stood no chance against me now—she had to have known that.

I suspected if her eyes weren’t black and depthless I might see fear in them.

“I need you to give me the pack, Persephone.” I spoke the words slowly. Measured. As if not to scare her further.

I allowed my magic to simmer to the surface, snaking out toward her in the form of dark shadows beneath the moon. We were in the middle of nowhere. There wasn't another house or building for at least a mile, we were protected by the silence of the empty plains here.

The trees would be my only witness.

I couldn't let her steal the book from me. I wouldn't . I needed it. What would happen to me if I didn't have it anymore? Couldn't feed the angry animal that had been awoken inside of me with dark magic?

She slipped her hand into the pack and I took another step forward, my hand outstretched.

“You don't want to do that,” I warned.

Her hands found the leather binding of the grimoire and she tugged it free, allowing the pack to fall to the dirt beneath us.

“ Can't let you have it, can't let you have it ,” she murmured quickly under her breath as she clutched the grimoire tightly against her chest.

She had dark magic, too. Didn't she understand why it was important that I kept it? Had the dark magic driven her mad?

“Give it to me, Persephone. I won't ask again.”

She looked much older than I expected her to be. It had only been what, three years

since I had last seen her? It appeared she had aged at least another decade in that short time.

Again I pondered if that was the cost of the darkness. If so...I couldn't allow that to happen to me. I wouldn't. I would find a spell to keep me young. Forever.

Maybe immortal, even.

Her magic sparked at her fingertips against the book, and the edges singed from the flame.

“Persephone—” I warned, stepping closer ever so slowly.

“Perdere . Perdere . Perdere.”

She whispered the word over and over again as the magic sparked at her fingertips.

I couldn't allow her to take the book. I lunged for her, grasping one of the arms that was secured around its leather binding. She wrenched free of my grasp with a cry, turning her back toward me.

“The book must be destroyed, the siphoning spell cannot be allowed to exist,” she said through clenched teeth. “You have not seen what I have seen. Heard what I have heard. Alastir said—” Her words were choked off by a sob.

Destroyed ? I thought she had simply meant to steal it from me.

I lunged forward, grasping her braid and wrenching her back by her hair. I clasped her shoulder in my other hand, allowing my shadows to wrap around her neck. But before I could grasp the book, she threw it into the air away from us.

It unraveled in slow motion, the book flying away from us in the darkness, her arm outstretching toward it.

“Perdere,” she whispered once more.

The book ignited.

“No!” I cried, pushing her down and leaving her in the dirt, lunging toward the Grishina grimoire. “No, no, no!” I screamed.

The book was a ball of flame, but I grasped it anyway, badly burning the palms of my hands. I ground my teeth against the pain as I brought it to me, trying my hardest to tamp down the fire.

But it was too late.

Whatever spell Persephone had invoked had taken hold, and the grimoire was reduced to ash within my grip. The tattered pages and burned leather fell to the earth beneath me, and I fell to my knees before it.

A tear tracked down my cheek and I moved to wipe it away quickly. I hadn’t even cried when Cirilla had died, why was I crying over a book?

My hands ran over the once delicate material that had been reduced to nothing and I turned slowly, still crouched on the ground. Persephone was propping herself up on one arm, watching the book burn, a smile across her lips.

“You.” My voice was cold. Unrecognizable.

As I moved to stand Persephone laughed. A fully belly laugh that had tears tracing down her dirty cheeks, leaving clean marks trailing in their path.

“How dare you.”

Anger simmered deep within my core, overtaking me. I could sense my shadows snaking out around me, the inky darkness overtaking the entire field. I inclined my head as I watched Persephone laugh, right before my shadows wove themselves around her neck.

“I had to do it,” she said.

There was no pleading tone in her voice, no desperation. She knew what would come next. She knew what needed to happen.

“I couldn’t let that spell live. It was evil .”

“Unlike everything else we have done?” I asked, incredulous. How could she draw a line there? We had surely done just as bad if not worse. She didn’t earn her obsidian eyes by idly sitting by. No...she was as guilty as I was.

“It doesn’t matter, none of it does. The Grishina grimoire is gone, and you’ll never get it back.”

I didn’t have a grimoire any longer.

The thought left an emptiness deep within my gut. In that moment, I vowed that someday I would have the Kotova grimoire. I would reap all of its spells. I knew there was dark magic in that grimoire, too. Even if it hadn’t chosen me, I could sense the energy humming within it.

Spells Annelise had hidden from me.

I would make sure the Kotova grimoire chose me as its next ward. Even if I needed to

kill Annelise and every other Kotova to do it.

I scooped my pack up off the ground and turned toward The Stone Palace, pulling the bag back onto my shoulders. I tightened my shadows around Persephone's neck as I walked away from her, into the darkness.

I didn't turn back, even when I heard the sickening snap.

I took my third life that night.

FOURTEEN YEARS OLD

Without my grimoire, I needed to find new ways to become powerful. I was living in the castle full time, right under Osiris' wing, and could hear every traitorous word Alastir spoke into his ear.

That maybe Stormshades weren't the problem. That maybe we shouldn't be hunting them so ruthlessly. If you asked me, we needed to do away with him, too. He might not be a Stormshade, but he was a sympathizer, and in my opinion that was just as bad.

Luckily, Osiris agreed with me.

Stormshades were a plague to this realm, and they needed to be dealt with. I relished the days we were sent out in groups to hunt them, bringing their limp, lifeless bodies back to the castle. Those were the best days.

I was climbing the ranks quickly—the general saw the potential in me and reported back to the king.

After that, Osiris took a special interest in me.

He took me under his wing personally. He could see my thirst for power, for a better realm for the Nightshade witches.

If it were up to me, I would eliminate the Shades, too.

The realm would finally be clean with Nightshade blood.

But I needed to focus on one war at a time.

The Stone Palace had been purged of all Stormshades and for that I was grateful.

The day they had strung up Malec and hung him...

that was one of the best days of my life.

He had watched me, fear in his eyes as they tied the noose around his neck.

My only regret is that the dark curse I placed upon him only had a few years to enact itself, seeping into his every thought.

If it were up to me, I would have wished him to suffer a little longer.

Zion had come to visit me, but it had been brief.

Annelise wasn't with him. I had asked after her, and after my sister , but he hadn't given me any information.

There were murmurings and whispers of a revolution, a resistance force who backed the Stormshades in Istmere.

I had a suspicion that Annelise and Zion were involved, but I had no proof.

Zion was still enamored with Annelise...he would do anything for her.

He couldn't see how she was simply taking advantage of him. She didn't care about him. Or us. She only cared for herself and that filthy little Stormshade baby.

After Persephone had destroyed the Grishina grimoire, I was left craving blood magic and dark magic like never before. I remembered a good portion of the spells I had studied, but I was always seeking more.

It was never enough.

I found a like-minded Shade on the outskirts of Akra, and though I wouldn't call her a friend, we became acquaintances. She had a grimoire of her own from her family's bloodline. I would spend my weekends at her hut, studying the book, looking for new ways to turn the spells dark.

Make them better.

Stronger.

I could see my humanity slipping away even further, little by little, as the days went on. My soul was turning as black as my eyes.

But I didn't care.

This wasn't something that was done to me. I was the one in control.

My only regret were the scars on my arms left from the blood magic. They were stark red, then purple, but over time they faded to white.

I would need to find a powerful spell to eliminate them entirely.

I strived for perfection, and that meant my physical appearance, too.

The queen of Istmere would need to be held in the highest regard, after all.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:54 am

FIFTEEN YEARS OLD

The tides of the war had turned, and I had been right.

There was a Stormshade resistance, and Zion and Annelise were at the heart of it.

I had been appointed the captain of the king's guard and, for all intents and purposes, I ruled his army.

After Osiris took me under his wing and took a personal interest in me, I had climbed the ranks effortlessly.

And they backed me.

Supported me.

They knew, despite still being young, I was the most powerful Shade this realm had ever seen. They wanted to see me on the throne as much as I thirsted for it. I quickly grew a contingent of soldiers loyal only to me, and for what I had planned next...this was important.

I had even slept with one of them.

There was no better way to get closer to someone than to engage in pillow talk.

I had flirted with Annikin for weeks before I made my move on him. He was one of Osiris' favorites, but I knew he secretly hated him. Just as I did.

I had brought him back to my quarters in the castle, stripping bare before him and laying on the bed. He was no fool—he didn't turn down the invitation. I felt nothing for him. He was simply a pawn to be used in the greater scheme. A soldier I needed to win over to my side. Someone I could trust.

I used my body to lure other soldiers, too. I felt nothing for any of them.

When they stripped me bare and thrust inside of me, all I could think about was how I was growing closer and closer to the all-consuming power I craved.

I even tried to bed Alastir, but that had failed.

He was one of the few soldiers who could see through my facade, and he was Osiris' best friend.

If I couldn't bring him to my side, manipulate him, he would need to be dealt with.

Annikin and I had killed hundreds of Stormshades. Maybe even thousands. He was always with me when we battled them, charging out from the castle to hunt and slaughter them.

My shadows were unstoppable now.

Annikin craved me the same way he craved power, and I felt much the same.

Once, I had been power hungry, so enthralled from the battle that I had stripped bare right there on the battlefield.

I had pushed him to the ground in a pool of blood, straddling him.

Savoring the feeling of him inside of me, my naked body covered in Stormshade

blood.

Annikin was a powerful ally. I would never take a king once the throne was mine.

That would undermine my power. My seat. But I wouldn't mind if he followed along for the journey.

His company wasn't completely...intolerable.

I had never been in love, never felt what that was like.

To be entirely consumed and enamored by someone.

But I imagined that with Annikin, that was the closest I would get.

I didn't experience the same butterflies I had when I had first kissed Malec. The thought of him didn't send my daydreams whirling. But he was...useful.

And if I could wring pleasure from him, all the better.

I had grown hungry for the throne. I thought about it day and night.

It consumed my every thought.

In that way, maybe I had experienced love. Or was it obsession? Whatever it was...it consumed me. Body and soul.

I wasn't the heir to the throne. That title belonged to my disgusting little sister. Even if Osiris would never hand his throne over to a Stormshade. That left me one little problem I needed to take care of to ensure I was the next in line for succession.

“You’re serious?” Annikin asked, still inside of me. I fell to his side, curling around the bedsheets. I ran a delicate, manicured finger down his bare chest, twirling the hair there. Annikin had to be in his early twenties, a few years older than me.

“Deadly,” I hissed, capturing his mouth with mine.

“How are you going to kill the king ? He is guarded at all times. You’ll never have an opportunity to do it. And he has loyal followers...” His words trailed off.

“As do I.” My voice was dripping with venom. “You don’t think I have enough followers to take the throne?” I raised my eyebrow at him in question.

He shook his head quickly. “That’s not what I meant at all. I know you would be an incredible queen, the queen this realm needs . I don’t see how we are going to dispose of the king. It won’t be that easy.”

“No, not easy,” I replied. “But it must be done.”

“When?” he asked, his gaze on mine. Annikin had never been scared away by the endless black that gazed back at him.

He knew it meant power. Strength.

“In order to grasp the throne entirely, Osiris needs to be dead. What better way than for him to fall in battle?”

Annikin laughed, the vibration sending a delicious shiver down my spine. “He hates Stormshades, too. The others will wonder why you killed him.”

“It won’t matter,” I mused. “He will be dead, and I will take the throne. Anyone would be a fool to stand against me.”

“They would, my love.” His mouth found the crook where the column of my neck met my collarbone and he placed a kiss there, his tongue tasting my skin.

My love.

Did he love me? Is this what love was? I shook my head to clear it, banishing the thought. There was no point in love. All it did was make you weak. The only thing I had eyes for was power .

We stormed Siraleth two days later, and I planned to make my move for the throne at that time.

All Annelise and Zion could talk about was how they had failed me. But I didn’t think they had failed me at all.

Without their negligence, I might never have been queen.

FIFTEEN YEARS OLD

S iraleth had never seen us coming.

I commanded Osiris' army, and they followed me into battle. We had burned Siraleth to the ground . So much for the holy city. There was nothing left except for the rubble and destruction we had laid to waste.

At the climax of battle, I stood atop a hill with Osiris, the power of dark magic pulsing through my veins. I beat my fists against my chest as I roared in victory. The dark blade in my hand was a symbol of all that I had sacrificed for this moment.

I turned to Osiris, a cruel smile across my lips.

Annikin came up from behind him, pinning the king's arms behind his back. He pushed the Dark King to his knees before me. Osiris glanced up at me in confusion. He had trained me, taken me under his wing. Made me the most powerful soldier in all the realm.

And I had come to slay him.

"Any last words?" I ground out through my teeth, holding the black blade high.

"Why?" he asked in confusion. "Why would you do this, Donika?"

I tilted my head, narrowing my eyes. "You truly can't think of one reason?"

His expression was bewildered, fear masking his features.

“You sired one of them, ” I hissed.

He shook his head back and forth furiously. “You know that was not on purpose. I hadn’t known! She had tricked me! She is your own mother!”

I sneered down at him. “That means nothing to me. She is as good as dead to me. Or she will be in a few moments, at least.”

I laughed, throwing my head back. My blue and white ombre hair whirled in the wind, whipping around my face.

I could see the moment his expression changed at the mention of Annelise. It softened...ever so slightly.

“I knew it.”

“Knew what?” he asked, his voice pleading.

“You are still in love with her. Still have a soft spot for her. You banished her and that brood of yours from the castle, but you didn’t do what you should have done. Killed them both . Their blood taints this realm.”

Osiris opened his mouth as if to speak, but no words came out. He was at a loss. He knew the truth...that he didn’t have it in him to kill them. That despite his vendetta against Stormshades and the war we had brought to this realm, he would never have the guts to do what truly needed to be done.

“Don’t worry, Osiris.” My voice was sugary sweet. “You’ll be reunited with your beloved wife and daughter soon enough.”

I raised the blackened blade in my fist and plunged it down through his heart. His mouth opened, blood spilling forth across his lips, running down his plated armor. His eyes fixated on me for one more moment before he slumped in Annikin's grip.

I placed my foot against his shoulder, sliding his body free of my blade as he collapsed to the ground. I raised my sword to the sky, a battle cry ripping free from my lips.

The Shades of Istmere responded in kind, lifting their swords to their new queen.

I wasn't the only one who could see his weakness. How dare he sit on the throne but harbor love for a Stormshade? I harbored no love for their kind...and I never would.

I heard a familiar cry from the crowd, and I scanned the rubble. Dead bodies were strewn about, the rocks stained with blood and dirt. But finally, my eyes settled on her.

There in the crowd among the revelry was Annelise. Her scream had split the air when she had seen my blade cut through Osiris. I moved quickly, Annikin on my heels. The crowd parted for me as I jumped down the hill of rubble, descending upon her.

Annelise was on all fours, crawling away from me.

I reached her and placed my blood soiled boot against her back, pressing her into the dirt.

"Face me," I sneered, allowing only for her to turn over.

She turned toward me—the end of my black onyx sword lowered toward her. I used the point of the sword to turn her chin up, forcing her gaze toward mine. The blade

split her chin, blood running down her neck to escape beneath her armor.

“Annelise Kotova, you are hereby sentenced to death for the crime of being a Stormshade,” I spat.

Once she was gone, the Kotova grimoire had to choose me. It couldn’t choose a baby .

“Do you have any last words?”

Annelise took a deep breath and closed her eyes before me, pressing them shut. A long moment passed, but no words came forth. When Annelise opened her eyes once more, her gaze was tortured. Sad.

“Fine, have it your way,” I hissed.

I raised the black sword above my head with both hands, ready to bring it down.

Right before I swung, right before I plunged it into her empty, selfish heart, a memory flashed before my vision.

It was me...as a young girl. My hair was swinging behind me as I pumped my feet faster and faster on the swing at the old cottage. Underneath the old willow tree. It was the last time I had been happy—the last time we had been a family.

Annelise’s answering smile was sad. Was she thinking of the same memory?

Cirilla had come that same day to tell Annelise that King Osiris would fall into darkness.

That Alastir had seen it. Had there been more to that prophecy?

Had they seen darkness consume me, knowing there was no hope of stopping what the mother had already set into motion?

Was that why she had kept her distance from me?

When I plunged the sword down, it hit the dirt with a reverberating clash.

Annelise looked up at me with surprise. Her lips parted, shock masking her expression.

“Donika?”

It had been so long since I had heard her say my name. It stirred something deep, deep within me. I shook my head, trying to dislodge the foothold the sound grasped within me.

I needed to focus.

“You are hereby banished from this realm by the queen of Istmere. If I ever see you here again, mark my words, I will not be so gracious a second time.”

I spit into the dirt next to her, but her gaze remained fixed on me.

When she didn't move, I spurned her on. “I will not give you a second chance, Annelise. Leave. NOW.”

After a long, drawn moment, she scrambled to her feet, her sword in hand. Her gaze held mine for one more moment, her eyes crinkled at the corner.

What did she see when she looked at me? Did she see the youngest queen Istmere had ever seen? Or did she see a daughter that she had failed, a daughter she had turned her

back on?

A daughter she left behind.

I would never find out what it was she was going to say when her lips had parted. She pressed them back together, her jaw set, turning away from me. Her strawberry blonde hair billowed behind her on the breeze, bringing with it the scent of battle and ash.

The scent of victory.

I watched her walk away, waiting until her lithe form disappeared from sight, before turning back toward the cheering crowd. They raised me up, their swords lifted into the air.

“Long live the queen!”

“Queen Donika!”

“The king died with no heirs. On this day, a new queen is born!”

Among the cheering and revelry, I caught Annikin’s gaze.

There was one more problem we needed to take care of before we could truly celebrate.

But try as I might, I couldn’t find him. I searched the palace, searched the whole of Akra, but he had simply... disappeared .

Alastir had vanished into thin air.

SEVENTEEN YEARS OLD

I had used every spell in my arsenal in those following years, but Alastir had completely vanished.

I wasn't one to let go of a grudge, and I had made it my mission to find him and kill him.

He had seen right through me, and he was a threat to my rule.

He had likely known what I had planned, though it hadn't saved Osiris' life in the end.

If I could sway him to my side, he would be an invaluable weapon. He had the sight gifted from the mother. I could know the outcome of every battle. I could see the events of my reign before they happened.

But if I couldn't sway him to my side...I would need to kill him.

There was no other way.

I sat atop the throne in the newly renovated throne room. I had picked out every furnishing down to the black-and-white checkered floor and the blood red drapes that hung from every window. The throne itself was plush, the color of blood once it had dried.

"My Queen, a visitor for you," Corian said, entering the throne room. He bowed deep

at the waist.

I raised a brow at him. “Let them in.”

Corian had climbed the ranks almost as quickly as I had when I had enlisted in Osiris’ service. He proved himself to be far more valuable than someone who could simply lead my army, though. He belonged at my side.

He had the dream walking sight, and a head for potions. He had ambitions almost as great as mine. And the best part? He didn’t thirst for the throne. He was ambitious for knowledge and for enough power to be important...but not rule. He was happy to be by my side, my little lapdog.

When the figure appeared at the entryway of the throne room, I had to stop myself from gasping. I hadn’t ever expected to see him again, let alone here, in the castle.

Zion strode forward exuding confidence, a smirk across his face, his hand on the button of his delicate coat jacket. He appeared...changed since I had last seen him. There was a confidence in his step that I didn’t remember from my childhood. He had always been tender with me.

But that wasn’t the man who stood before me now.

When I had left Siraleth, I had thought him broken.

Soft. Crippled by the guilt and sorrow that he bore in his heart.

But the man before me was one of power and elegance.

A smile played on his lips—his eyes narrowed in an assessing gaze. He had a lot of nerve to show up here.

He had helped Annelise to lead a resistance against me. He was brave to set foot in my throne room, knowing that it would be the last steps he would ever take. That the only outcome would be his death.

I sat on my throne, watching him stride toward me. He fell to his knee on the marbled floor before me, his hand placed over his heart as he bent his head in respect.

“My Queen, it is an honor.”

His greeting...surprised me. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting...but it wasn't this.

“Zion.” At the sound of his name, he rose, facing me. He clasped his hands together behind his back in a sign of deference.

“What brings you here, father?” I hadn't called him that in a long, long time. I dug my nails into the plush armrest, trying my hardest to keep my composure. I had to admit his sudden appearance had...rattled me.

“A father can't simply visit his daughter?” he asked, raising a brow of his own.

I let a long moment of silence pass between us before I inclined my head. “Not when she is queen.”

“Forgive me, My Queen. I only wanted to see how you fared. If you had requirement of my services.”

“Your services?” I asked, a humorless laugh escaping my lips and my tone rising an octave. “Why would I have need of your services? You betrayed me. Led an army against King Osiris. You sided with Annelise,” I reminded him.

He shook his head, his expression betraying nothing of how he felt. “A simple misunderstanding. I did not side with Annelise, but rather chose to remain at her side to understand what she had planned. How I might...infiltrate the resistance. To bring back the information to you, of course.”

Did I believe him? Was he lying simply to earn favor with me? I hadn't been hunting him. If he never came back here, he could safely hide in this realm until his dying days. But he had chosen to come here. Chosen to face me.

“And why should I believe you?” I asked, my eyes narrowing on him.

“Blood runs thicker than water.”

“Meaning?” I asked, examining my nails.

I feigned a cold affect, but what curdled deep in my core was the opposite. I was shaken. The truth was...I wanted him on my side. I wanted him to join me here in the castle, but I wasn't sure if I could trust him.

He was the only true family I had left. The rest of them had tainted blood and needed to be purged from this realm. He was the only one who had never left me when I was younger.

“Meaning, I would never betray my own flesh and blood,” he replied.

I was his kin. His only daughter.

Did he mean it?

“Why come now? Why not when the war ended two years ago? Why wait?” I asked, curious.

“I have hunted her for you, My Queen. I believe I have found her.”

Right away, I knew who he meant, but I needed to hear him say it.

“Who?” I asked, innocence lacing my tone.

“The Stormshade child. Your sister .”

“And where is she?” I asked without preamble. “With mother dearest?” I inched forward on the throne.

Zion shook his head. “No. Annelise has fled, though I do have Shades searching for her.”

Interesting. He must have a contingent of his own, then. Loyal to him. Had he truly infiltrated the resistance? Did he wish to be my spy?

“All my life you chased her as if you were her lap dog. How can I believe that you would turn on her after everything? You always loved her.”

Zion’s gaze fell to the marble floor as he was lost deep in thought for a long moment.

“Perhaps there was a time when that was true, but I have had some time to reflect on my actions. On my past. Annelise may have cared for me once, but that was a long time ago. It wasn’t only you she left when she came to The Stone City that day. She left me, too.”

That was the truth. She had left us both.

Left us all alone and then went and fell in love with another. Had a child by him. She had the audacity to come crawling back, tail between her legs, seeking shelter.

“And you would bring her to me?” I asked.

Zion bowed his head. “It would be my honor, My Queen, to deliver them both to you.”

“And how does this benefit you? What do you stand to gain from this?”

Zion crossed his hand over his heart. “I hope for a place at your side. To advise you. I may not have as much battle skill as you, but I have years of wisdom to impart. I wish to see you succeed, and to do that, you will need a council. It would be my honor to lead them.”

There it was. A thirst for power. Like father, like daughter, I supposed.

He didn’t want to merely come back into my life to spend time with me; he wanted a prominent and powerful position at my side.

But I approved of the idea of a council.

There would be times where I couldn’t make every decision myself.

I would need a council of similar-minded Shades to guide me.

If he betrayed me, I would slit his throat myself. He could prove to be of use to me, being an incredibly powerful Nightshade in his own right. He would get one chance, and after that...all bets were off. Blood or not. That never mattered to me, anyway.

“In that case...welcome back, father.” A smile lifted the corner of my mouth as I stood, descending the steps of the dais.

When I reached the bottom, I placed a hand atop his shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

He pulled me to him, surprising me once more.

He pressed me against him, caressing a hand down my hair in a soothing motion.

I was instantly transported back to when he had put me to sleep every night when Annelise had been gone.

He had held me close. Tucked me into bed each and every night, stroking my hair in a gentle manner, telling me fairytale stories to put me to sleep. For only a moment, I felt small again.

But I didn't forget myself.

I was the queen of Istmere now, a powerful ruler in my own right. The most powerful Shade in the entire realm. I stepped back, out of his embrace, nodding in his direction.

"Where should we get started?" I asked, curious how he might have found the little Stormshade witch. She had to be what...five years old now? Six?

"The mortal realm," Zion replied.

I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth, biting it. "That might be a problem."

"Why is that?" he asked, his brows drawn together in confusion.

"You see, I can't exactly use the portal to the mortal realm," I answered.

He shook his head. "I don't understand."

"I tried. When I was searching for Alastir. I have scoured this entire realm, but there

is no sign of him. No trace. When I tried to breach the portal to the mortal realm, I was...pushed back. I'm not sure why.

I have to assume it is the darkness that lives within me.

"I motioned toward my eyes. "I have been...consumed by the magic in a way. My current state is"—I paused, searching for the words—"currently incompatible with the mortal realm."

"I see," he replied quietly.

"It brings me hope that it means I am, indeed, no longer a mortal."

"No longer a mortal?" he asked, his voice strained. "How is that possible?"

"Well." I smirked. "Easier if I show you."

One moment I was standing before him, a delicately beaded chiffon dress adorning my body, and in the next I was in my wolf form. I was large, even for a Nightshade, and my height rivaled his despite my animal stature.

When his gaze took in my wolf form, I knew what he would see.

That a bright red sigil graced my forehead. It appeared to be dripping blood, despite it having dried years ago. When the witch in the wood with whom I had visited every week during training had shown me this spell, I knew it was the one I would use for immortality.

The price of such a spell? A piece of my soul.

When I had decided to let Annelise live, to spare her on the battlefield that day, I had

marked her. I had driven the sword into the ground with such force it had distracted her and those around us from my true intention.

I had placed a piece of myself in Annelise.

If I was killed in this form, I would still live on in her .

I could easily be resurrected, even without the necromancy spell from the Grishina grimoire.

I wanted Annelise dead in the end, of course, but I thought it quite poetic that she would be the one to hold the first piece of my soul.

When she died, I would transfer it to another.

The witch in the wood had warned me that I could only give one piece at a time, lest I die in the process. Once I took the piece from Annelise back in order to kill her, I could simply place it in another. The same held true if the one I had entrusted with the piece of my soul was slain.

Zion was shocked, whether it was because of the sigil itself or because he recognized the spell, I wasn't sure. I didn't think he would be privy to such a spell. It was dark, dark, blood magic after all. He had never dabbled in such things.

“What does it mean?” he asked, cocking his head to the side as he examined it.

In the blink of an eye I switched back into my human form, a little breathless from the quick transformation. My hand rest against my stomach, steadying myself.

“It means...I'm immortal,” I replied simply. He didn't need to know the details of the spell. That it was his beloved Annelise that now held a piece of me.

He took a step back, his face a mask of shock. “Immortal?”

I nodded, a smile turning up the corner of my mouth. “I will not age, as those before me did. My skin will not wrinkle, my hair will not grey. But because of my incompatibility with the mortal realm, I can’t go there. My sister will have to be brought to me.”

A slow smile spread across Zion’s face. “We can arrange that.”

I had gotten everything I had ever gone after, and I wouldn’t fail at this either. I picked up the skirts of my dress and ascended the dais steps once more, sitting on the throne I had worked so hard to claim and crossing my legs.

Annikin, Annelise, Malec, Zion, Corian, Osiris, Alastir...they were all pawns in this game. That’s all anyone was, truly. People were simply tools I needed to manipulate and persuade to do the things I needed them to. Wanted them to.

I wasn’t born a villain...I was made into one.

I had been twisted into something dark and evil by the spells in the Grishina grimoire, and once dark magic had grasped a foothold, it did not let go.

After that first spell to resurrect Emil, there had been no hope for me.

The humanity slowly bled out of my soul as the years passed.

The only thing that drove me now was my thirst for power... and revenge.

My attention turned back to the single most important thing. The thing that would consume my every thought over the next decade.

Alastir, the seer, had prophesized that a certain little Stormshade would bring an end to the war and strife that plagued Istmere.

I could only assume this meant my continued battle to hunt and eliminate every last Stormshade that existed in this realm.

Zion may have located her, but my rule had not yet endured for a decade.

That meant, despite Zion thinking he had located her, it was going to take me years to truly find her and have her within my grasp.

Years to bring her to justice.

For if she was already dead, she couldn't fulfill the prophecy. A dead Stormshade couldn't put a stop to anything .

It was time to hunt my sister.

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ZION

I had never thought I was a good actor, but the fact that I was walking away from the throne room with my head still attached to my shoulders meant I must be.

I had waltzed into the room as if I owned the place, exuding confidence.

Donika would never take me in if she thought me the soft, thoughtful man from her childhood.

Annelise was on the run, and with Diana hidden...

someone needed to keep an eye on Donika.

Remain close to her. She had accused me of siding with the resistance, and I had been able to lie easily to explain away my association with them.

But in truth, I wasn't simply acting as a spy for Donika...

Annelise and I had created the resistance ourselves.

There was a deep underground built into the cottage where Donika had grown up, and it was filled to the brim with resistance members. They would continue to plot and plan, and I would feed them information from The Stone Palace.

The immortality spell though...that had taken me by surprise.

The way she made it sound it was as if she weren't going to age, not that she couldn't be killed.

We would find out whether that was the case soon enough.

I would continue to get closer to her, and hopefully she would spill her every last secret to me.

She had taken me back so easily. She thought herself so powerful and indestructible...

but everyone had a weakness. For Donika...

it was family. She always felt slighted by Annelise for leaving.

Slighted by my absence during her childhood and years of training with Cirilla.

She blamed us for the way she turned out, despite relishing in it.

Despite thinking she was better off this way.

It was as if she couldn't make up her mind—or perhaps she was in denial about her true feelings.

The first opportunity I had unmonitored after leaving Donika's throne room I sent word to Isaac that I was still alive.

If anyone knew where Annelise was and could get word to her, it was him.

Donika hadn't killed me, and I had successfully placed myself by her side as her advisor.

I would be able to report everything back to them and the resistance.

I didn't have the faintest idea where Anna might be.

Perhaps searching for Alastir. She was drowning in the guilt of leaving Diana in the mortal realm—to live a mortal life—despite it being her idea in the first place.

I understood why she thought that was best for her, and for the time being, it was.

But I doubted any of us could stand between Diana and what the mother had foreseen for her.

The moment I composed a council on Donika's behalf, Nightshades flocked to the opportunity.

None more so than Corian. He was skeptical of me, and I believed he wanted to keep a watchful eye on me.

He had quickly worked his way into Donika's ear after the battle at Siraleth.

Annikin had been her second in command, but she had cast her lover aside in favor of Corian.

He was a genius of sorts, and she wanted to use him for all he was worth. I would need to be careful around him in my time at the castle. I knew that it was going to be difficult, that I would have to do things while I was here that would go against my every moral and conscience.

But it needed to be done.

There was no one else Donika would trust. No one else who could infiltrate the castle and report back to the resistance.

If Donika ever suspected me, she would kill me.

No hesitation. Family might be her weakness, but she would not tolerate betrayal .

I couldn't understand how Annelise had escaped her wrath during the battle at Siraleth.

Whether it was because she had a moment of weakness—of humanity—or she simply couldn't be bothered to kill her.

I believed it to be the former, but I would be a fool to let my guard down.

But that fifteen-year-old Donika was different from the seventeen-year-old that had stood before me in the throne room. She was colder and more hardened than ever before. Her humanity had begun slipping away that first time she had performed dark magic, and I believed it to be entirely gone now.

She was simply a void.

The daughter I had once known was gone, and the sooner I came to terms with that the better.

It would be a long game to remain by her side and keep my emotions in check, but it needed to be done.

Alastir had seen that she would torment this realm, and that Diana was the only one who could put a stop to it.

I only wished things had gone differently all those years ago.

That I could take those years back and never send her to Cirilla.

Never let her get her hands on dark magic.

The moment she touched that magic, she was lost to us. We could never get back what was already lost. She would never be whole again.

While she searched for Diana, I would need to steer her in the wrong direction.

I hadn't expected her to be unable to travel to the mortal realm herself, but that only worked in my favor.

I could send my own spies to "look" for Diana and they would continue to let her slip through their fingers.

I could help to keep her safe, all while pretending to hunt her for Donika.

This was a tricky game I was going to play, and I needed to keep my wits about me.

I prayed to the mother that playing this role wouldn't cause me to slip further and further into the darkness myself. I never had a want for power, but once it clawed its hooks into you...you could become a different person.

I needed to find a North Star to keep me sensible these next few years.

Donika was my daughter after all, and I was happy to be close with her once more. But she had already done things I couldn't condone, and steering her toward the light would only draw suspicion.

Donika was hunting her sister, but I would need to do some hunting of my own. I would hunt for a cure to her darkness. All magic demanded a balance. Perhaps what Annelise had said back in the cottage wasn't true. Maybe there was a reversal spell out there, somewhere.

I only needed to find it.

What was done could be undone.

Maybe in the end...I would be able to save her.