



Velvet Folds (Velvet)

Author: *Dalia Davies*

Category: Fantasy

Description: The sacrifice on the stone is true and willing, and the creature in the castle craves the velvet of her folds.

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Chapter 1

In which our heroine tempts fate and fang

The moon bleeds, the village is locked up tight, and I dart between trees, hoping no one sees me.

I've watched and waited since the sun set. No one lingers in the streets anymore. The brave have been hauled back inside by the cautious.

Hood cinched tight over my hair, I creep closer to the shuttered back of a house I've visited too many times to count, and hear the prayers muttered with trembling breaths.

Two voices, two different requests lingering on their lips.

She begs for safety and forgiveness. He bargains for things he does not have.

I will help her if I can.

Creeping through the streets, I hope my cloak is dark enough to hide me as I climb the two short steps to their door and drag the bag of crushed blood berries across the wooden planks.

They stain the whitewashed boards with a red X, the juice dripping toward the stoop.

Even if I don't get what I want tonight... others will whisper and wonder.

A shadow passes over the moon and I flinch away from it. Not because the stories scare me, but because my time is running thin.

Bolting, I hope my footsteps are heard too late to draw anyone to their windows.

I can't be caught.

I race just as fast as I can, but it doesn't feel fast enough. Even though the path that leads to the base of the cliffs is clear, and the night is bright with the red light of the moon, I cannot risk turning an ankle.

Felicia needs me.

But I reach the sacrificial stone before he does.

Felicia stares at the ground, her eyes vacant as she trembles.

She prays too, but only some of the words are audible.

I curse under my breath as I look at the too-thin nightgown she's been left out in, and she flinches up at the word.

"Cia!" She says my name too loud and then leans forward, the rest a sharp whisper. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to send you home." But first, I need to warm her up. The edges of her lips have begun to turn blue.

The laces at my throat come apart quickly and my hair flutters in the chill breeze as my hood falls back.

“I can’t go.” She shakes her head as I sweep my cloak off of my own shoulders and over hers and start rubbing at her arms. “It’s my turn to be the sacrifice.”

The sincerity in her voice makes me want to spit. “No, it was your father’s turn. He can’t force you to do this.”

“If I don’t...”

“I know.” Her father made threats. He made demands. “I know what he said and I promise you, he won’t be able to do anything to you or your mother.”

Tonight is their family’s turn to send a sacrifice. Good men leave their wives and children at home, offering their own blood to keep the village safe.

A mixture of cowardice and greed have brought Felicia to the stone tonight. Neither of them are her own.

Those whispered prayers I’d heard through cracks in the shutters asked that Lord Adrik take her away.

The woman he takes for his bride will save the village from this monthly sacrifice. Her family will reap the benefits.

But if he chooses Felicia...

Her father wished a life of terror for her. She is not weak, but she is too gentle for a life as the creature’s servant.

“I asked Clade to come for me,” she says softly, gaze vacant. “I asked him to run away... but he didn’t come.”

I am not surprised.

Clade, the man who claimed he loved her—the boy —was too much of a coward to come rescue her from this fate. I'm glad. He doesn't deserve her.

"Tomorrow, we will make sure that he can't sit with ease for the next month."

A watery smile twitches on her lips. But I don't expect a thank you. "Let's get you up."

"Papa chained me," she says, softly, looking behind her. "I can't get free."

And if she could—if she did—her father would burn her books and destroy her favorite things. He'd make her life a living hell afterward. Her mother's too, and with nothing Felicia loves to give her solace.

She might not be able to remove the chain around her ankle, but I could manage something half as good.

I wrench the stake from the ground, slipping the other end of the chain free and throw it away to clatter on the rocks, ignoring the splinter that digs deep into my palm

"Go now, I will take your place."

"I can't. He'll demand to see the bite marks."

Felicia rubs at the parts of her wrist where the old metal has bitten into her flesh. The ring is red and angry.

I'm angry too.

If I didn't need to stay, I would take her back to town, find the key, and once she was free, I would beat him to death with those chains.

Taking a deep breath, I shake that thought away. The villagers whisper that violence runs in my blood... I've come too close to proving them right, too many times.

"Wait for me in the woods. When it's over, we'll measure mine and I'll make you a pair to match with thorns."

A shadow passes over us and she flinches.

"Go," I tell her. "We will find a way to make the marks before morning. I promise."

The ground trembles as Lord Adrik drops out of the sky behind me and Felicia flees.

Swallowing my trepidation, I turn to face the creature who dwells in the castle above our small village. Our protector and, once a month, our predator.

"The moon bleeds," he says, his voice low and dark and rattling.

"And you need to feed." I know the old rhymes as well as anyone.

I go to the stone hewn into a flat bed that sits between us. It's freezing cold beneath my palm and feels colder when I sit, easing myself to the center of it so that I can lie down.

"Feed from me." I turn my head, giving him my throat and holding my palms face up, hoping the splinter isn't already too red.

Waiting, my breath misting, I try to calm my breath. It still flutters from my sprint to reach Felicia in time.

But Adrik doesn't bite me.

He stalks around me and his wings shake and shudder, his tail flicks. "You are not the promised sacrifice."

"No." I meet his blood red eyes.

In the dark of the night, they and his sharp, glimmering teeth are all that I can make out of his face.

"She was forced to be here." I tell him. "I came of my free will."

"Forced?" his claws scrape along the top of the slab, tracing the shape of my body. "Forced by who?"

This time, when I shiver, it has nothing to do with the cold. "Her father."

He turns his hand over, trailing the back of it down the center of me.

I am also only wearing a nightgown. It's the only thing I own that is white... like the stories say, I need to wear.

Even though mine is far thicker than Felicia's, I feel naked laid out before him like this.

Stretching my palms out so that I don't reach for him too—so that I don't let my curiosity take me somewhere I am not supposed to go...

He is silent. The forest is silent. I watch his face and while it's shadowed by the bleeding moon behind him, I can see his red eyes study me.

“You are a true sacrifice, then?”

I swallow and meet his gaze. I might only be sacrificing myself to save Felicia, but the answer is the same.

“Yes.”

His wings shift, blocking out even the moonlight. “I am your sacrifice, Adrik. Will you take me?”

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Chapter 2

In which our hero offers his favor

It has been more than a decade since a true sacrifice lay upon this stone.

Some have wanted to be in the position for reasons beyond my understanding. Others have reluctantly accepted my teeth as a penance. Others still have come with a blade secreted away and the desire to take my blood before I can take theirs.

I've been met with apathy, anger, curiosity and fear... but this human sacrifice...

She looks up at me with clear, pale eyes, waiting expectantly, and my teeth ache with the need to feed.

Her tongue peeks out to lick her full lips. The motion draws my gaze back to her sun kissed skin and the scar on her left cheek.

The wind flutters her hair around her face, uncovering a thick streak of shocking white beneath the black where it should not be.

“How old are you?”

I do not drink from children, which she certainly is not. And I will not risk the aged, which she does not seem to be.

But that streak...

“Thirty-six... or thereabout.” She shakes her head, flicking her hair back into place. “Don’t tell me you believe in the superstitions of uneducated men.”

Humans would likely think she was cursed.

The challenge in those words... I would not have expected her to question my intelligence as she waits for my teeth to pierce her skin.

She is braver than I thought upon first explanation. But bravery does not change what she will have to endure.

Dipping my head close, I tell her, “I will do what I can to make this quick and as painless as possible.”

She swallows and her heartbeat quickens as she licks her lips one more time. “I can stand a little pain.”

My hands tighten around her at those words. And my tongue trails over the pulse that flutters in her throat.

I don’t offer to let her go.

The warmth beneath her skin pulls at me as strongly as the moon overhead.

Teeth pressed against her vein, I sink into her and...

My eyes widen as I drink her in, savoring the nectar of her blood.

She is who I’ve been quietly hoping for. My mate... My queen.

Her flavor fills my mouth and desire coils through me, winding tight.

I draw away from her before I'm finished to ask, "Who do you belong to, sweet sacrifice?"

Her chest heaves and her eyes flutter as she looks up at me, blood trailing down to soak into the pale fabric that clings to her breasts. "I belong to myself."

That isn't what I want to hear.

I want her to smile up at me and tell me she's mine. I want her to know what fate has already shown me. But how could she know?

"Tonight, you're mine, sweet sacrifice."

"Yes." The word is a whisper.

"Let me help ease that pain." I drag my claws along the stones, blunting them so I won't harm her.

I trail my hand up the inside of her thigh and she eases her legs apart for me.

Such a sweet and warm sacrifice. I shudder as a tremor of sharp need flutters through me, wings trembling when my fingers reach the apex of her thighs, and I trail along the soft mound of her sex.

My fingers delve between her legs, caressing her perfect velvet folds.

I should ask again, but tonight she is mine. I need her to crave being mine tomorrow and every night thereafter.

I bite her again to keep from speaking words she doesn't need to hear—yet—and making promises she won't accept.

Yet .

My tongue aches to replace my claws and explore her velvet folds.

With my teeth sunk deep into her throat, I want nothing more than to capture her up, to steal her away to the castle and slake my lust and need in her.

But she has not agreed to that.

Not yet .

Her velvet folds should be mine. They will be mine.

That possessive desire ripples through me with the certainty of fate.

She came to me. She gave herself to me, not just willingly, but greedily.

Her legs spread wide, she rocks against my fingers and her blood sings against my tongue. We are, in the moonlight, two creatures of need.

Her sweet velvet folds encase my finger as her body rocks on me, squeezes me the way I want her to squeeze my cock.

My cock is heavy within its pocket. Hot and needy, it presses against me, demanding to be released... demanding release.

I can only drink so deeply of her and even still I edge too close to the limit before I draw back, licking her wounds clean.

Free of my fangs, her head tips back, her throat pale in the moonlight, her spine arched as she writhes on my delving fingers.

The muscles hidden behind those velvet folds squeeze tight and her hand goes to her breast, squeezing through the soft fabric of her nightdress.

“Please,” she begs in a whisper. “I need—”

She doesn’t finish her sentence. She doesn’t have to.

“I know, sweet sacrifice. I will give you anything and everything you need.

Thumb working over the tight bundle of nerves at the top of those velvet folds, I keep my other claw from scratching at her skin, and it only takes a moment’s work before her cries echo out over the forest.

She needed this release as much as my body demands it does, as well.

Her body racks with pleasure and I go to my knees as my cock finally bursts free, my cum paints the side of the slab and I grit my teeth, wishing I was sunk deep inside her.

Each inhale makes me dizzy with want for her. The desire to lift her away from this slab, to take her to my lair is so strong, I take a step back instead of taking her up into my arms.

I settle for licking the taste of her from my claws.

Laid out on the sacrificial slab, she looks soft and sweet and demure. But I know the truth of what lies beneath that virginal white. I know who she could be if she wanted to. Perhaps who she already is.

I want to know who this woman is and how to love her.

The word catches in my mind.

That is what I have been looking for... The person fate would deliver to me to love.

“Ask a favor of me and I will make it so,” I tell her, lifting her palm to my lips and sucking an ugly splinter free.

Silence hangs in the air between us and the selfish creature inside of me coils tight. I want her to ask for anything that might keep her close to me.

“The girl,” she says, her breath catching. “The girl who ran away. Her father sent her here against her will. He chained her to a post and threatened her to stay silent.”

Raising her gaze to meet my eyes, she says, “He tried to break your rules. I would like to see him punished.”

It is not the favor I expect.

On the rare occasion I have offered them, those requests are usually for jewels or gold... things to ease their lives, things to help them escape this place.

My sweet sacrifice wants to give her favor to another, even though that is not how she asked for it.

“How should he be punished?”

“The old way,” she says. “He broke the old laws. The old punishments should be meted out. After all... if one father breaks your rules, others will think they may break them, too.”

Her gaze doesn't waver from mine as she makes her request.

Perhaps she is not what I thought she was after all. “I am not the only bloodthirsty creature out tonight, am I?”

“No. You are not.” Her gaze drops to my lips and she turns her head, offering her throat to me once more.

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Chapter 3

In which our heroine sees the cost

I've heard so many of the sacrifices tell tales of pain and fear.

I feel none of that.

The fire coursing through my veins is a hunger I haven't felt in years.

But Adrik doesn't bite when his lips find my throat again. They ghost over me in a kiss that makes my eyes flutter closed.

"I cannot take any more blood from you tonight," he says.

My body sags away from him... disappointment weighting my limbs in a way blood loss didn't.

He's done. He'll leave now.

He owes me nothing, not even that favor he offered.

"Thank you."

His head tilts in confusion. "For what? I am the one indebted to you."

His clawed fingers scoop beneath me, lifting me up into his arms, holding me close to

him. He kisses me and I melt into him, even though I know it's folly.

He is not for me and I am not for him.

I can't even, truthfully, be his for the night. That was a lie borne of desire.

But I don't pull away. I don't ask him to stop... until I remember we are likely not alone. Then I do draw back, fingers clasped in his ruff.

I can just imagine Felicia in the woods, watching in wide-eyed terror.

"It's time to punish the wicked."

I almost ask if he means me as a joke, but then, he shifts and juggles me and I realize...

"You can't take me with you!"

He looks down at me and I know he can hear the panic in my heartbeat. A panic I don't want to fully explain.

"I don't want them to see me. I don't want them to know I asked for it," I tell him. "The door is marked with an X, stained by blood berries. He is the only man who lives there."

He doesn't set me down.

Fingers brushing through my hair, he toys with the white strands. "No one will see you. Only your wrath."

He bundles me close to him and I bury my face in his ruff as he takes flight.

This was not how this night was meant to go.

He wasn't supposed to take me.

I wasn't supposed to want to go.

But now, as the night wind flutters the skirt of my nightgown around my legs, the idea of him releasing me holds less appeal.

We aren't far enough away from the village for that flight to be satisfying.

It is cut all too short when one of his hands leaves me and he catches the bell tower, alighting on it as though it was a tree.

His long tail wraps around the bell tower as his claws dig into stone. And he places me in the belfry, sending pigeons fleeing.

"Ring it for me. I want them all to know what happens when a sacrifice is forced to the stone."

He watches me, waiting for me to do it, and I go grasping the lip of the large bell with my hands, shivering at the loss of his warmth.

Despite regular use, the brass is dusty, and I have to take hold of it with both hands and push with all of my weight to start the swing, but once I do, momentum makes my tasks easier.

It clangs so loudly, and I grasp my ears, wincing at the sharp sounds. And when I turn back, Adrik is gone.

I creep toward the arched openings and peer down.

Windows have started to open, just a few, spilling lines of light out into the streets. Panicked faces peek out.

There's a clatter of feet on the stairs, but when the trap door opens, it's only Felicia who comes to me. My shoes clutched close to her chest.

"I thought he was going to take you away to eat you!" She gasps for air.

"No, he's come to punish your father."

"My—" She swallows, looking down at the square and I take my shoes from her, slipping them on again.

Together we stand at the edge of the belfry and look down as Adrik's shadow coasts over the village roofs.

In a blink, he descends and the door of Felicia's house clatters open.

He doesn't even enter. Reaching inside, he grabs the old man by the front of his shirt and throws him out into the center of the square.

Felicia stares, wide eyed, clutching my arm so tightly, my bones feel like they might break.

Adrik holds her father down against the cobbles. And even though I cannot hear the words, I know they are threats.

I watch, and a new shiver flutters across my skin. I need to leave.

"If anyone asks, tell them he knew your father had made you go." I tell her. "Say that Lord Adrik refused to take you as a sacrifice, because he knew, even though you did

not tell him. Do not tell them I was here.”

She nods, her eyes never leaving her father’s death scene played out below us.

Watching the viscera for a moment longer—glad of it—I take hold of her shoulders, guiding her down the bell tower stairs and once we are at the door, I repeat my words. Sure that she’s understood me, I take back my cloak and dart out into the shadows, racing back into the forest while all eyes are on Adrik.

They cannot know I was there.

They cannot know I was the one who asked for one of their own’s death.

No one will suspect sweet, soft, Felicia. They will believe her.

The forest is dark. Dense branches tangle together overhead, but I have raced through these woods a hundred times.

We live outside the village for so many reasons.

The main one, of course, is that the village doesn’t understand us. They’re happier to have us elsewhere with our cursed hair and odd stories.

But on nights like this, I am especially glad of the freedom that comes from being outsiders.

My home is protected by incantations and herbs and plants that have grown for decades undisturbed.

Snatching my dress from where I left it to hang on the line, I slither into it, buttoning myself up as I grab the rest of the washing and bundle it inside.

When the door closes, my father starts awake in his chair beside the low fire.

“Where have you been?” he asks as I drop the washing into a waiting basket.

“I was helping a friend.” I set my shoes aside quietly and pad across the carpet to him, taking his hands and smiling down at him, even though he can’t see me. “ You were supposed to be in bed hours ago.”

“Was I?” He asks, pretending—as he always does—that he cannot hear the clock ticking the hours away, or the chimes marking the hour. “And where were you supposed to be hours ago?”

Here.

“I told you, I was helping a friend.” It’s true enough. “Now, let’s get you to bed or your bones will ache in the morning.”

“My bones always ache.” But he chuckles as he says it, letting me help him up and into the room on the other side of the hearth.

It’s warm and cozy and I linger beside embers before I slip away, letting him fall into a fitful slumber while I quietly climb the stairs to the loft.

In the dim candlelight, I inspect my neck with a mirror that’s too old to show me a true reflection. But I can see the marks.

When I close my eyes, I can feel the warmth of his touch.

Perhaps I sacrificed more tonight than I intended.

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Chapter 4

In which our hero makes his plans

Tybald waits for me with a robe over one arm and an imperious look in his eyes. “I trust the village is safe for another month?”

“They are, but they have more reason to fear me than they did yesterday.”

“Was there a problem?” he asks as he helps me into what he calls a semblance of civility.

The robe always catches on my wings oddly, even with his help and I have to shake the feeling of back-brushed hair from myself before it feels like it fits.

As the only one within a hundred miles who knows how to kill me, he has no real right to worry over the other threats his kind pose to me.

“I have dealt with it.”

“I’m very glad to hear it.” He falls into step beside me as we walk further into the castle.

The people in the village below call Tybald and the others my servants. And they do serve, but not in the way old stories tell.

I only need human blood when the moon turns red. It is a curse of my kind and theirs

as well. The stories would have their listeners rapt listeners believe that Tybald and the others who have chosen to live here with me are anemic creatures. Whimpering souls I drain at every opportunity.

Those stories are wrong.

The only one I've heard the villagers tell each other that is true is the one that speaks of my future bride and even that embellished in the wrong ways.

Blood and brides and breeding... I do not know who first deviated from the true tales, but they have departed from reality to the point of complete fiction.

Now that I have tasted her, now that I have found my mate... my sweet sacrifice is the only one I'll drink from.

She is the only one I desire.

The only disappointment this night had been the woman who had disappeared.

After I had dispatched the man who forced his daughter to be a sacrifice, I had returned to the bell tower to find her gone.

Her scent lingered, mixed with one other. They parted at its base and though I followed her from the village, I lost the trail of her when faced with a curtain of soap vines.

Either she did not want me to follow and chose the path so that she would pass through those leaves that would hide the scent of her path from me, or she didn't know what they were and my losing her was in fate's design.

It didn't matter. I will find her again... once the sun sets, I will go hunting again. This

time, for her alone.

“Why,” Tybald asks, “are you smiling?”

“I have found my mate.”

Tybald’s steps halt and I manage to dim my smile before I turn back to enjoy the shock on his weathered and lined face. It is a rare sight. But he composes himself quickly.

“If that is the case, where is she?” He glances up and I know he imagines I may have left her in the tower, in the bed where I will eventually breed her.

The memory of her velvet folds beneath my fingers makes me shiver.

Breeding her will be a delight.

With a deep breath, I compose myself and say, “I don’t know.”

His confusion draws deeper creases in his brow. Suspicion sets his frown in a sharp arc.

“She was a true sacrifice,” I tell him, “but she disappeared while I performed a favor for her.”

I detail the night to him and when I’m done, he says, “I will find her for you.”

The sun is on the rise. It’s almost dawn. My flesh was not made for sunlight and I cannot linger outside the vaults, even inside my own home.

“If you do, bring her to me.”

He stops, only letting me get a little ways away from him before he says. “You did not tell me her name.”

I manage to hide my displeasure before I turn back to tell him, “I don’t know it.”

In the moment, her blood had been too intoxicating. And when her rage lingered on my tongue, it was the last thing I needed to know.

Now, divorced from either of them, I long to hear it.

“The girl she saved is called Felicia. Start with her.”

He nods and leaves me to descend into darkness all on my own.

The solitude that once brought me peace feels, for the very first time, like a cell.

My only comfort is knowing that with her blood inside me, I will dream of her... or so the stories say.

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Chapter 5

In which our heroine takes her prize

A chill has set in and I thank my luck. No one will ask questions if there is nothing for them to see.

Scarf bundled tight around my neck, coat buttoned up snugly around me, I gather the herbs I collected before dusk last night and make my way into the village.

The people are somber, the square is deserted, and the cobbles are shattered where Felicia's father was broken hours ago.

What's left of him is gone, but I hear the whispers.

They know why he suffered his fate. They know not to make the same mistake in the future.

I might thank the man who steps in front of me for keeping my smile at bay if he didn't make me frown so deeply.

Robert, the tanner's son, sees me before I can divert my path and I briefly wonder if he was waiting for me.

"Where have you been, little mouse?" He chuckles when I step around him and then follows me when I ignore him.

He is not dangerous... not to me, so I don't bare my teeth at him or snap or growl to tell him to go away. Hurrying to get in my way, he makes a scolding sound.

"I know you have better manners than that, Cia."

"Some of us have work to do."

He shuffles to stay in my path, smiling and smirking... the only one in the village unaffected by what occurred last night.

I'd like to slap the smile off his face, but he'd probably take it as an invitation.

I'm even more certain of that when he says, "Marry me, and the only work you'll need to do is lying on your back."

The idea is so unpalatable, I almost laugh, but even men who are not dangerous can become so with the right impetus.

"Ask my father for my hand." I tell him. "If you're brave enough to do that, I might consider it."

He balks—just as I knew he would—and then mutters something before he wanders away to bother someone else.

There is a reason my father doesn't come in to town anymore. They don't trust a man who cannot see and is still capable. They are suspicious and superstitious and on bad days, I consider leaving carefully placed nettles in pants hung on half the town's washing lines.

I consider letting their favorite tea leaves go to fertilizer instead of drying, or delaying a harvest of mallow.

But those thoughts are better left to angry teenage girls, not women who know better than to retaliate in such obvious ways.

The woman in the shop stall I stop at is among those who make me consider changing my mind.

She crunches on crimson acorns that stain her teeth black and grins at me like we are friends.

We are not.

“What do you have today, girl?”

She only ever calls me girl and I don’t call her anything at all. “Nothing new or special, just your usual order.”

The woman’s hair is tied up higher today. The leather strap is new and decorated with a flower carved from bone.

“Not trying to astonish me with a fresh bunch of hot cockles this far out of season?”

“We both know you wouldn’t buy it, anyway. You’d just call me a witch.”

She snorts an agreement, chuckling as she tosses a bag of coin on the stall counter.

It sounds hollow and when I pick it up, I keep a tight hold on the basket, letting it hover over the counter.

The bag is light and I narrow my gaze. “You know I’ll have to count this. Is it going to be short?”

She squares her shoulders. “That’s all I’m paying you.”

Pulling the basket back and letting it dangle on my elbow, I pour out the bag. Counting each and every coin, I slide them back in the bag and toss it back to her.

“Have a pleasant day,” I say, plucking up the basket I left behind last week. She goggles at me and when I turn away, she screeches after me. She calls out any number of things, though never my name—I’m beginning to think she doesn’t know it—and I don’t turn back.

I know what she sells my herbs for. I know what she can afford to pay me. If she wants to waste my time...

Her shoes clatter on the cobbles and schluck in the mud as she finally catches up. “That’s no way to negotiate!”

I let her get in front of me and level an uncaring glare at her. “We negotiated already. You pay what we agreed upon, or I go. Those are your only options.”

“But—”

“No. No ‘buts’. No ‘ifs’. No ‘what abouts’.” I would let these herbs go to fertilizer before I let her take them from me for a pittance.

“Fine.” She pulls out a second bag and holds it out to me like she’d rather throw it.

I take it from her, but I don’t thank her as I step to the side, counting it to be certain before I hand over the full basket.

“Be grateful I did not demand more for the irritation.”

She spits into the gutter and says, “You drive a hard bargain.”

“No, I demand what’s fair. If you want to buy less, you can pay less. But after this, don’t expect me to be quick to do you any favors.”

She mutters and grumbles as she walks away, clutching the basket tightly

And I only have a moment to enjoy it before a blur brushes past me, hand grabbing my arm and pulling me out of the street.

“Felicia? What’s going on?”

She gasps for breath, looking every which way but at me. “A strange man came to the house, asking about you.”

“Asking about me?”

She nods, and for a moment, it seems as though her head could tumble clean off her shoulders. “Well, he asked about the woman who took my place when the moon bled.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I said I didn’t know.” She rubs at her arms. “But I don’t think he believed me.”

I should have guessed that he would send one of his servants after me in the daylight hours. I left Adrik with unanswered questions.

Thinking his name makes the bite marks at my throat pulse, the sensation shooting straight through me to my... velvet folds.

I close my eyes at the memory of his touch, tamping my sudden need down.

I left him with unslaked curiosity... I left myself with it, too.

“Have you seen the man since?” I ask.

“No, but I don’t think he’s—” Her words cut short and she inhales a tiny gasp.

“Is he here?”

She steps closer, clasping my hands and whispering, “Yes, but I don’t think he’s seen you yet.”

Squeezing her hands right back, I tell her, “We’ll punish Clade for abandoning you tomorrow.

She nods and I don’t wait for her to say anything more. I slip between the houses, dodging under washing and then sprint for the treeline. I don’t slow until I’m far enough away to feel safe.

Touching my throat, I take a deep breath and tromp through the forest.

Last night had been necessary. I won’t think of it as a mistake, but placing myself in Adrik’s path was not the wisest of choices.

Felicia needed me.

Straying into Adrik’s path again would be folly.

And yet...

My boots scruff on the stones when I reach the path that zig zags up the cliff face to the castle.

Even though it's the last place I should go right now, I have commitments to keep, and in the hundreds of visits I've made to his home, I haven't encountered Lord Adrik once.

He doesn't wander the castle in daylight. Today will be no different.

No one sees me enter through the stony arch hidden by shrubs. No one notices me slip through the halls.

I've been inside the castle for nearly an hour before a gruff old woman—wrinkles tugging her face into a permanent scowl—pauses to peer out at me. Mrs. Pegg, the housekeeper, lingers only for a moment.

I hope she doesn't notice the scarf still tied around my neck. Or, if she does, I hope she thinks it's simply another of my distasteful quirks.

This courtyard, set in the middle of the castle seems too small for the grandeur of the rest of the enormous building with its wings and towers, but it is bursting with roses. And that makes it my favorite part of the ancient edifice.

Bushing the dirt from my hands, I pause to smell one of the larger, darker blooms and wish that they would let me plant roses that grow through the whole year, instead of these ones that spend too many seasons as thorny sticks, cut back for their own survival.

But I do not get to decide which kind of flowers they grow, I only get to make sure they do grow, and that they keep on growing, despite better choices that could have been made.

I slip the gardening apron from around my neck, and clean my hands as thoroughly as I can. Mrs. Pegg will come to scold me if I linger too long. She doesn't want to have to keep track of me.

Normally, I would come to do my job and slip away before anyone but Mrs. Pegg knew I was here.

Today shouldn't be any different.

But it is.

A heat in my blood pulls me deeper into the castle.

I feel him.

I wonder if he feels me as well.

No one guards the entrance to the dark halls that go deep under the castle.

No one needs to.

Only a fool would trespass on his slumber.

A fool... or a woman whose need has begun to override her good sense.

Slipping out of my boots, I stash them and my bag in a little alcove, just beyond the halo of light from the intersecting hall.

The hallway could extend for miles or could end in mere feet. The darkness is all consuming.

I pause only long enough to light a candle and give thanks that no one has stopped me, then, I hurry along, moving quickly enough that no one will have the chance to.

The stones are smooth beneath my feet, the walls ornately carved. These are places I am not allowed. Places even the people who live here with him consider forbidden.

But I can't turn around. The marks on my neck pulse with the need to have his teeth again.

The memory of the way my body opened to his touch...

It makes me shiver.

There is a need and a hunger inside of me that I know cannot be quenched without him.

The dark hallway is long, sloping downward, but when I reach the bottom and it opens, it's to an enormous room. Like a cavernous bubble beneath the castle, this place feels as though it doesn't belong in the same realm as the world outside.

In the depths of that cavernous space, I hear him breathing.

Being close to him eases that thrum in my blood, but he still tugs at me.

I don't have to search for him, my body knows and my feet follow the invisible path to him.

The old stories say he sleeps upside down, hanging from the ceiling. But he doesn't.

He is laid out on a bed wide enough that his wings can expand in either direction.

By moonlight, he was terrifying, but candlelight...

There is a softness to his features that makes him seem almost human. But he's not human, and—I realize suddenly—I wouldn't want him to be.

I set the candle down as far away as I'm willing, and as close as I dare, and go to him.

Taking only the moment required to release the clasps and buttons holding my clothing together, I let my skirt slide to the floor and send my blouse to join it.

The bed is soft and dips beneath me as I climb up and Adrik makes a sound, but he does not wake.

It's foolish, I know, to come to him in his sleep. But he's mine .

Something tells me I'm safe with him.

I don't know what compulsion tells me that's true. I only know that it is.

The faint candlelight shows me his smile as I straddle him and his hands go to my waist, sliding up, even though his eyes do not open.

“What a perfect dream,” he says, claws brushing through my hair. “My little sacrifice, come to give me her velvet folds.”

And then, his eyes open wide, a bright glow in the soft dark.

“Are you here?” he asks me, fingers trailing over my cheek. “Are you real?”

I hardly know.

“I need you,” I tell him instead of answering that question.

The truth of it sings in my veins, as he pulls me down to him, kissing me so deeply the desire overtakes me and rock my hips against his stomach.

“Greedy needy little sacrifice,” he murmurs against my lips. “Did you touch yourself after you ran away from me? Did you think of me in your bed while your velvet folds ached to feel my touch again?”

“Yes,” the confession is so quiet I barely hear it, but his fingers tighten around my waist, and I know he has.

My need soaks through my chemise bunched underneath me and makes sliding across him easier, it makes my aching harder. I want him to touch my velvet folds again

I need to slake this need.

“Let me taste you,” he says, voice gravelly.

I sweep my hair out of the way, but he shakes his head. “No more blood from you this time. Let me taste your velvet folds.

He sits, his wings pushing him upright, and I slide down him into his lap.

“I want you to come apart on my tongue the way you came apart on my fingers last night.” His touch is whisper soft as his fingers coast over my skin. “Can I have that, sweet sacrifice?”

“Yes,” I say, and then, I whisper, “Please.”

His teeth glint in the candlelight when he smiles and his hands find the bottom of my

chemise, sliding it up my body. His gaze doesn't leave my face until I raise my arms for him, giving him silent permission.

When that slip of soft fabric is free of the tangle of my arms, he tosses it away and his gaze drops to devour the sight of me.

His hands trace over my breasts, my stomach, and when he reaches my thighs, he groans and says something in a language that feels heavy on the air.

He lifts me and I am on my back in an instant. He is on his knees and the candlelight glints off his wings, casting shadows across his body. My eyes go wide as my own gaze drops to the stiff cock between his legs, emerged from the pocket that had held it.

He catches my hand when I reach for it. "Not yet," he coos. "Soon, you may do whatever you like to me. But first, I feast.

Hands spreading me wide, he moves us both until he can settle in between my thighs, placing my legs over his shoulders as he lowers his mouth to me.

His tongue parts my velvet folds, and I melt into the mattress.

When he groans in ecstasy, his lips finding my clit, I close my eyes on a whimper.

He's attentive and greedy at the same time. His claws are going to leave marks, but I don't care.

I want more.

My hands grasp at the sheets and my back arches as his tongue reaches deeper inside my velvet folds, teasing me in ways I didn't know were possible.

“Adrik,” I whisper his name, the sound hoarse from my strained throat.

I don’t say anything else. I don’t know what else I could say.

I slide my fingers through his hair, holding him down as he turns his entire focus to my clit.

Whimpering and wailing, my orgasm hits me like a shattering ember and I go rigid with pleasure.

Every part of me feels frozen in place, the strain and the tension coiled tight and then releasing in a burst...

Adrik doesn’t stop his worship until my body gives up its fight.

Only then does he raise up, his heavy cock dragging along my belly as he crawls over me and presses a wet kiss to my lips.

“Let me sink into your velvet folds,” he says. “Let me ease our need.”

Dipping his head, he kisses my breast, tongue exploring

“Yes,” I arch against the sharp pull of his lips on my nipple. “Please, Adrik.”

“Anything you want, sweet sacrifice, I will give it to you.”

“I want you.” I need him.

What had been a low flame before is now a roaring blaze in my blood.

His thighs spread mine wider and he places the tip of his cock against me... against

my velvet folds.

“Fate placed you on that stone. It brought you to my bed.” He exhales heavily and his smile frightens me a little. “Fate knows you are mine.”

His cock spreads my velvet folds wide and I squirm as he enters me. I need this. I need him. My body aches with the desire to claim him and be claimed.

Fingers holding tight in the ruff of his neck, I rock my hips, trying to take what he wants to give.

“Your body was not made for mine, sweet sacrifice.” He eases back, working into me again. “We will have to make me fit.”

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Chapter 6

In which our hero enjoys his mate

She was made for me. She was not made to be taken roughly with the barest amount of preparation.

Her body wants mine, though.

Legs easing wider, velvet folds glistening in the candlelight as her hips move with need...

She moves on what little of myself I've given so far, making tiny sounds of frustration that threaten to fracture my resolve.

Clasping her wrists in one hand, I hold them to the bed over her head, restricting her movement even more.

She is at my mercy and I am going to enjoy earning every sweet moan that slips from her lips.

The warm delight of her velvet folds makes me long for the night. I would wrap her in my arms, take her to the tower and breed her until the threat of sunrise prickled at my back.

I would have taken her there last night.

“You disappeared,” I say, but she knows it’s a question.

“I had somewhere to be.”

“Yes. Here,” I tell her, resisting the urge to press further than she is ready for. “Your place is here and I would keep you, always.”

Her smile is soft and wry at once.

“I have too much to do to spend my days on my back, even for you, my lord.” She gasps as I press forward. “But it is tempting.”

Her velvet folds make room for me within her.

“Is it your man who’s looking for me in the village?” She asks, brows creased, lips open just far enough that I can see her bite her tongue, and I still.

The question is unexpected. Why would she ask now? How did she come to be here if Tybald didn’t bring her to me?

“Yes.”

“Tell him to stop.” She swallows and her gaze fixes on my mouth. “Tell him to stop and I will let you find me every night, without fail.”

Half of what I want will be better than nothing.

For now.

But, “Is that a promise you can keep?”

“Yes. I will give you my nights, but my days are mine alone.”

I don't want to agree. I want to replace my hand around her wrist with chains and keep her here until she forgets the outside world exists.

With one more press of my hips, I ease into her completely

Her eyes flutter closed and her back arches as she draws in a delighted gasp.

“My nights are yours, Adrik.” Her body pulses around me, trying to pull me deeper.
“For as long as you want them.”

A fractured breath steals away whatever else she might have said, and she writhes, her arms pushing against my hold.

Easing out of her and back in, I relish the way she tries to keep me. I would gladly bury myself within her velvet folds and forsake all else.

“My sweet sacrifice, do you know what you do to me?”

A smile graces her lips. “I have an inkling.”

My next thrust is harder and she moans in delight.

“Please, Adrik. My body was made for you. Take me the way I was meant to be taken.”

She tips her head back, exposing her throat. The marks of my teeth from the night make my cock ache and I do as she asks. I take her the way I intend to when I have convinced her to leave the daylight world behind.

Her whimpers and moans turn to cries and pleas.

When I release her hands, they claw at me and she drags me down to kiss her as she loves me with her whole body.

My teeth ache and I wrap one hand around her throat to keep from biting again.

But when she tightens on me, I squeeze unintentionally, and she moans in response.

Her eyes fly wide and then fix on me with lust-heavy lids.

The desire and challenge in that gaze...

“You are mine. It doesn’t matter where you spend your days, or your nights. You are mine. ”

Holding her down, I slake my lust in her body. I take my frustration and need from her and let her needy, greedy moans wash over me.

I don’t stop until she screams my name and her velvet folds clench so tightly on my cock that I cannot hold back any longer and I pour myself into her.

The encounter leaves me spent, body and soul, and I pull her close as I fall back and let exhaustion and peace drag me into the darkness of slumber.

And when I wake... she’s gone.

She slipped away while I slept.

Tybald would call me a fool for leaving myself so vulnerable to her.

Even if I know she is the mate that fate divined for me, she doesn't understand yet. If she did, she would not have left me.

There is no trace of her left in my rooms.

If I had not tasted the sweetness of her velvet folds, I might think she was a ghost—a torment.

But she promised me her nights and I will find her soon enough.

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Chapter 7

In which our heroine returns home

I could have stayed with him.

A little sliver of remorse has lodged itself in my chest. Sneaking out of the castle like a thief had felt wrong, but if he has someone looking for me, they might have forced me to stay and I can't.

Not today.

Tonight I can be his. Today, there is too much to do.

I check the ring of soap vines that surround my home. Adrik could cross it if he wished, but he cannot scent me once I've passed it. It keeps monsters at bay. Even if he isn't as monstrous as the ones that stories say used to roam freely in this place.

The other creatures have been hunted to the point that they've left these lands... Both by human hunters, and Lord Adrik himself.

"By his vigilance and the blood of our people are these lands kept safe." The litany is usually whispered as a prayer and reminder the day of the bleeding moon.

The village needs him.

There aren't any human hunters left here...

There's only one monster left to hunt and those who have tried have died.

I shiver at the thought of the only one in the village who might try if given the chance.

Waiting for me in the chair on the porch, my father weaves a cord from hemp we prepared last season and listens to the birdsong with his face turned up toward the porch rafters.

"The birds told me you were coming."

"Did they?" I ask as I sit on the floorboards beside him, unraveling a knot that hasn't fully tightened yet.

"They always chirp louder when you're safe."

I don't believe him, but I don't tell him that.

He used to tell me the birds told him when I was "up to something" or when I'd switched out my carrots for turnips. But the birds don't tell him anything.

"I have to harvest lake turnips tonight, or it'll start to choke the outlet. I won't be home until late." Very late.

"Always so busy, my girl," he says with a soft smile. "Too busy for your old man."

"Never."

"The birds say you work too hard."

"I'm sure they do." Standing, I pat the dust away from my skirt and glance out toward

the treeline. “I’ll get supper going. We can eat before I go.”

And he can put himself to bed before I’m back.

I just hope that he does.

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Chapter 8

In Which our Hero Calls Off the Search

I pace my chambers, waiting for the safety of darkness to venture out after her.

She said I can have her nights. Until she proves that promise incorrect, I can refrain from demanding her days as well.

When the sun sets, Tybald waits for me at the entrance to my rooms. His lips are twisted in a scowl, and I know that he has been disappointed today. She was in the last place he would think to look.

“I can bring you no joy this evening,” he says, dipping his head, “I am sorry.”

“Don’t be. You may stop looking for her.”

Tybald’s eyes narrow. “Why? What changed while you slept.”

“She came to me.”

“Impossible.” Tybald doesn’t call me a liar often.

“I fear that sending you to look for her left me vulnerable to her visit.”

“Even when I am not here, the others would not let a stranger get this far into the castle.”

But she is not a stranger here... her scent lingers in the hall. A frequent visitor, but not one who lives here.

Yet.

The thought makes me smile. “You don’t need to worry about her. If she wanted me dead, she had plenty of opportunity to act upon that desire, and she did not.”

He doesn’t like it, but I know Tybald. He’ll accept it. And he does, with a dip of his head, even if he doesn’t agree to it in words.

“If anyone in this castle was going to try to, and then manage to kill me, it would you, old friend.” His smile is pained... he tried to kill me before. He failed.

“Young men do stupid things.” He leaves me in favor of some other task and I—instead of taking my usual route to the tower to start my nightly flight—follow the trail of her most recent visit to my home.

It is purposeful and direct. She doesn’t wander. She knew where to find me and she went directly to my bed, but where she started...

The rose garden caged inside a courtyard of stone looks like a square ruby from above at this time of year.

I imagine I have her to thank for that.

I inhale her fading scent and know I must learn her name tonight.

I need to know what to call the woman who haunts me. I need to know every detail she will allow me to learn.

With a great flap of my wings, I lift into the night to start the task I must perform before I can go to her.

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Chapter 9

In which our heroine gives our hero her nights

Adrik's shadow passes over me while I am shoulder deep in a clump of lake turnips. The wooden walk I crafted years ago holds me out of the muck but when I pull the bulbous fruiting bodies of the lake turnips from their soupy resting place, those boards creak with wear. I will have to replace them sooner rather than later.

But that is a daylight task.

The ground shakes as Adrik falls from the sky, landing in the meadow behind me as I rinse off the last of tonight's harvest... and my arm too.

Carefully walking back along the planks—the lake is too cold to risk falling in—I smile up at him before placing the lake turnips in the basket with the rest of my harvest.

“What are they for?”

“Some eat the leaves, others make tea from the stalks... the fruit has a meaty taste, and one of the women in the village likes to dry them. It turns the bulb at the bottom into a rattle toy for the children.”

He takes my hand, pressing a kiss to my palm. “Did you cultivate them, or do they grow wild?”

“They were here before I was, but I’ve managed to keep them both healthy and from taking over the lake.”

“Do you need to take them somewhere?”

“No, they’ll keep til morning.” They only require a night harvest because the bulbs sink below the water, shying away from the sunlight.

“Good.” He sweeps me up into his arms and kisses me. When he draws back, it’s with a growl. Then, as if to distract himself, he says, “There used to be a vodyanoy in this lake.”

“I know. If it was still here, I wouldn’t need to thin the weeds.” The creature would have eaten enough of them the outlet would never be blocked.

I look out at the water and remember the story my mother told me a hundred times while growing up... about the man who killed the creature... the man she’d found floating, half drowned... the creature had taken his sight and she had made him promise to never hunt another monster again... if she helped him heal.

My father’s eyesight never recovered, but he had kept his word... it was the only promise he ever kept for my mother.

By itself it wasn’t enough to make her stay.

“What brought this melancholy to your face?”

“My mother used to tell me stories. Thinking of the past is never a happy endeavor.”

“Is she gone?”

“No, she lives about twenty miles east of here... it was as close to my father as she could stand to be.”

I don't tell Adrik she comes to visit every year or so... I think it's so that they can throw things at each other and then get drunk while they tell each other how much they hate each other. I leave before I have to hear or witness what comes afterward.

Adrik laughs. “ My mother called the vodyanoy a beast... as though I and my brothers were any less monstrous.”

“You don't drown children, or eat people.”

He brushes his fingers over my throat. “I feel like I could devour you.”

Humming, I lace my fingers in his. “But I'd like that.”

“Tell me your name.”

He's promised to stop his man from coming to look for me and I believe him. There's no reason to keep that from him. “Lucia.”

“A shining name,” he says, inhaling as though knowing my name is a relief. “It's no wonder your blood burns through me.”

“Do you need to go for a swim to douse those flames,” I ask, teasing.

“Nothing could put those out, sweet sacrifice.”

Adrik turns me around, holding me against him, back to chest and then he leaps into the air, wings carrying us both out over that dark water.

The black water glitters with starlight, broken only by our shadow.

Wind fluttering in my hair, Adrik's arms wrapped around me, I let the joy of flight push the small tremor of fear away, even as his wings beat, pushing us higher into the sky.

The world is so small below us, I can understand how he might think it would be easy to leave it behind.

He takes me back to his castle and we descend in a spiral to a courtyard I have never seen before.

It's closer to his vaults and I am glad that no one sees us disappear back beneath the castle.

Tonight, the space is filled with candles. Light and warmth suffuse me and I look at the space that is even larger than I had thought.

Clasping my face in his hands, Adrik turns me away from all of that, kissing me like I'm a lover, long lost.

He lingers on my lips as though he has been deprived for decades, not hours.

I know what he wants and I am happy to give it to him. But first, I want to give him something he hasn't asked for.

Unlacing my ties and wiggling my dress from my body, I step out of my clothes and shiver as his hands brush down my sides.

When I sink to my knees, he doesn't stop me. He only mutters my name so softly, it could be mistaken for a prayer.

The tip of his cock peeks out of the opening at his groin, and I trail my fingers along it, looking up for... permission? I'm not sure.

Adrik's eyes are hooded, his expression soft. But when I stroke him inside of that pocket, his cock is hard.

Toying with him, I don't tug or yank. I let his cock spring free all on its own and lick my lips when it does.

I've felt it and seen it in the dim light of that single candle before, but the full sight of it now...

There is a bulge at the base and a bulb at the tip, almost as if he was made to stay inside of me, no matter how far he's able to get.

If I had seen it first, I might have cause for concern, but the memory of how he filled me pushes any worries away.

And when I tease my tongue over him, his moan is enough to give me the courage to take anything.

"Take me, Lucia." He says with a low growl. "I want to see you take me. I want to feel the sweetness of your mouth."

I plan to give him what he wants, but getting my lips around the bulbous tip is more difficult than I expect.

I've never backed away from a challenge, especially not one with a reward I truly desire.

And once I've done that, I have to brace my hands on his legs.

The shape of him means I'm only able to take so much of him, but even going as far as I can doesn't make me gag.

I'm free to take him with abandon, and when his fingers thread through my hair, moving me at his will, I'm able to drop one hand and slick my fingers in my velvet folds. I moan on him when I first touch my needy clit.

His breath shudders, and his grip tightens. "Yes, touch yourself, Lucia. Ready yourself for me." He presses deep and I hum with desire. "You are mine until sunrise and I plan to take my fill of you."

I suck harder, pressing his cock into my pallae with my tongue and he curses as his cum floods my mouth. My eyes widen at the sweetness, but I can't ask until I've swallowed him all down and he has eased himself from my lips. And then, I have no chance as he lifts me and takes me to his bed.

"Tell me, sweet sacrifice, why can't I keep you here?" He presses a kiss to my sternum. "It is where you are meant to be. I knew that the moment I tasted your blood. Fate weaves tight webs and we have been bound together since before the world was made... we just had to find each other."

They are very pretty words, but, "Fate's web has woven me to more souls than just yours, my lord. I have daylight commitments I can't abandon, even if I would like to lay here with you buried inside of me, cock and claw and fang and all..."

He turns me over on top of him, legs spreading mine wide and when he kisses me, it's not his cock that strokes me. My eyes go wide and he watches my face as his tail—it's the only possible explanation—presses into my velvet folds.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asks.

I shake my head. “I’m yours, so long as the sky is dark, you may use me as you please.”

Brow raising, he wraps his hand around my throat and my eyes flutter closed for a moment before I can drag them open again.

“I will use you as we please,” he tells me. “Do not think for a moment that I could derive my pleasure from something that gives you none.”

Nodding, I press back, onto his tail and sigh. “I cannot think of a way your body could displease me.”

Kissing me senseless, Adrik uses his tail to keep me perpetually teetering on the edge of my orgasm.

Each time I get close, he eases back, until I bite his lip.

He pulls me back by my hair and the tightness and tension sets my nerves on fire, making me squirm.

“Do you want to come, Lucia?”

Each time he says my name it’s like he’s gotten a treat.

I nod, pulling my hair again and clenching down on him from the sensation. “Yes. Let me come on your tail the way I’ve come on your tongue and cock.”

Growling, he jerks me forward, twisting my head to the side, and when his lips go to my throat, it’s not to bite, but to suck. That tug on the skin of my wounds is so sweet and sharp, I cry out in an instant, shattering over him and then, I scream out in pleasure as—between one thrust and the next—his tail is replaced by his cock and the

pressure and the fullness makes me see stars.

Adrik drives up into me as I bear down on him and his teeth brush along my neck.

“I want to keep you forever,” he says as he holds me down tight to him, pressing until a second burst of pressure passes and I am seated tight to him, held by that lower bulge.

He keeps me there, pressed down tightly to him as his abdomen flinches and twitches and he comes deeply inside of me.

“I want to hold you close, and never let you go.”

The desire to let him is dangerous.

Perhaps someday. If my mother returns for good, or my father agrees to move into the village. Perhaps then I could give into the temptation of letting myself be his.

Buried deep within me, Adrik stills, holding me to him, and I know he has no plans to withdraw.

I don't ask him to.

We lay there for hours.

I spend half of them asleep. He spends all of them inside of me.

He only eases from my velvet folds when he reluctantly tells me that dawn is near.

The candles have burned to stubs and he helps me clean the cum that drips down my legs now that there is nothing keeping it trapped inside me.

But when I have my clothes on again, he pulls me back into his arms.

“I have too strong of a desire to keep you. Fate should not be so cruel.”

“Perhaps fate wished to teach you patience.”

He lets me go when I step away.

“I’ll give you everything I can, Adrik.” Kissing him, I slide back so that he cannot catch me again. “But you’ve forgotten something.”

“What have I forgotten?”

I smile at him and make certain I am at the arch that leads away from the vault, where he won’t be able to catch me before I say, “You haven’t asked me what I want or why I can’t stay.”

I leave him, staring silently after me.

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Chapter 10

In which our hero accepts his ignorance

What she wants.

Trapped in my windowless rooms, pacing, unable to sleep, my mind rolls over the words again and again.

What does she want?

It should be the most important thing to me, and all I've considered is what I thought she would want.

I am a fool.

"You are going to wear a hole in the stones," Tybald says from the shadowed arch where Lucia disappeared hours ago.

"Possibly. But they've stood for a thousand years, they will withstand my abuse."

"I do not like to see you agitated like this," he says. "It makes me nervous."

"Should I worry that you'll start carrying a stake with you?"

"No. Should I worry that you'll risk burning your flesh by trying to go to her?"

“No.” I may want her every moment of the night and dream of her when slumber takes me, but I cannot leave the rest of the people under my care vulnerable.

I could pretend that was why I wanted to keep her here with me. I could pretend that it was not for selfish reasons, but I won’t.

I know better.

“How does one court a human woman?”

Tybold’s laugh is a sharp and sudden thing. “I would not have the first idea.”

“You were married.”

“Yes, but that was an arrangement, made by our parents when we were too young to know how to tell them no. One that we were both happier with when I left to hunt monsters and she was allowed to do as she pleased without me.” He takes a deep breath. “Even if I knew, I do not know how a vampire courts a human woman.”

The way that he says it makes me think there is more.

“What is it?”

“I am glad, at least, that she will tell you ‘no’ when you need to hear it.”

Of course he is.

But he’s right. There is no answer to find for my question.

Not here. Not until nightfall. Because there is only one person who knows, and when I find her tonight, I will ask her.

“I need to speak to Mrs. Pegg.”

Tybald winces. The two of them do not get along. But today, they must.

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Chapter 11

In which our heroine's secret is revealed

It is mid afternoon, a soft breeze flutters the curtains, and I have placed a polished stone onto the loose pages I'm not working on, and have tried, again, to get the leaf shape of the stone poppy just right.

My fingers have started to cramp. I'll have to take a break soon... and I am afforded the perfect excuse.

"You have a visitor," my father says quietly while he rocks near the embers still glowing from this morning's fire.

And not a moment later, Felicia taps on the open door and softly says, "Cooee."

"Hello," I glance at her and she waves.

"Give me one second." I scribble out the last of what I know about the poppy in my hand.

She peers over my shoulder and I see her grimace even out of the corner of my eye. "Don't comment on my spelling."

"I wasn't going to." But her smile is strained.

"We both know that the pictures are the most important part." And then the "do or do

not eat” mark beneath the plant’s name.

The compendium is far from complete. Each page takes time, each drawing needs the right details, the correct colors. The size and shapes have to be exact... any variations need to be included.

I’ve spent more time on the nightshade than anything else so far. And with good reason.

As I set the poppy’s page to the side to let it dry, I remind myself that all the poisons should be first. Just in case.

Felicia speaks softly to my father while I wash the errant slashes of ink from my hands. And when I’m done, she has him laughing, a wide and genuine smile on his face.

“You need to write your stories down, Miss Lecia.” He always calls her that. Patting her hand, he turns his face toward me. “The two of you will have plenty to pass on to the children of the village.”

Felicia doesn’t notice the way he worded it, but I do. The way he speaks about children... but never my children, has never bothered me before. Now, I wonder.

“I actually came to give you this.” Felicia holds out a basket full of baked goods and sweets and a few newly woven dish cloths. There are quills and a new inkpot inside it as well.

“What on Earth?” I look from the extravagant gift up to her and she looks a little sheepish.

“I owe you my life, Cia. That is not enough, but I don’t plan for it to be the last thing

I bring you.”

“How do you owe her your life?” My father’s smile hasn’t faded, and I don’t have the chance to tell a lie to keep it there.

“She took my place,” Felicia says, guilelessly.

“Your place?” The way the smile melts away makes Felicia look at me with concern. And I can see him working through the myriad things it could mean. I know when he’s decided on the worst possible outcome when his jaw sets.

The worst possible in his opinion. “When the moon bled?”

“Y-yes.”

My father is so quiet, so still... and then he slams his fist down on the arm of the rocking chair.

Felicia’s eyes go wide and she takes a step away from him.

“Thank you, but these aren’t necessary,” I say quickly and gently nudge her toward the door, before softly telling my father, “I’ll be right back.”

“I’m so sorry,” Felicia whispers. “I didn’t realize he didn’t know.”

Because she thinks I tell him everything.

But I shake my head and squeeze her hand. “Don’t be. He would have found out, eventually.”

“But not until you wanted him to.” She screws her eyes shut, shoulders dropping.

“That’s important, Cia.”

I don’t remind her that my father is not like her father... because he’s different. I don’t fear a beating when I return inside. He may yell. He may throw things, but never at me. He may begin a tirade of all the dangers related to Adrik’s particular kind of monster.

He’ll certainly be disappointed...

“Let me deal with him.” I tell her. “I’ve had plenty of practice.”

She doesn’t look convinced, but she apologizes again and she leaves.

As soon as she’s out of sight, I turn back to my home and I am not surprised to see him standing in the doorway, waiting.

I am not certain how much he heard, but it doesn’t really matter.

“What she said is true?” he asks, the words getting muddled in his low anger, reminding me that he once spoke a completely different language.

I take a deep breath. “Yes.”

Cursing, he goes back to his chair, hand gripping his face. He curses into his palm. And then, he says, “She would not have died... as evidenced by you being here now.”

“We both know I am made of sterner stock than Felicia. And you know that one’s heart does not need to stop beating for their life to end.”

“Every experience changes us. She will learn that eventually, she simply would have learned it sooner if you’d let the traditions play out the way they should.”

“No.”

“No?”

“The story she told you today? Do you think she would have told it to you if she’d endured a feeding that terrorized her? Do you think she would still laugh and smile and look at this world through eyes that see the good in it?”

He’s quiet for a long moment. “She might have. You can’t know.”

But that hesitation tells me he knows I’m right, even if he doesn’t want to admit it.

“And it was my choice not to leave that up to chance.” And even though I know I shouldn’t, I tell him. “I asked Lord Adrik for a favor.”

The stillness takes him over again and he grips the chair’s arm more tightly. “Did he give it to you?”

“Yes. Felicia’s father is dead.”

He curses and shoves himself to standing. “If he granted your favor, he’ll come for you on the next bleeding moon.”

I don’t tell him he’s come for me already, I follow him into his bedroom and watch as he throws open a dusty trunk and begins to dig.

“Vampires don’t do anything without expecting more,” he says with a soft irritation. “There are very few reasons he would kill a man for you. But whatever the reason he’ll want something from you in exchange.”

He lifts out an ugly stake, sharp and jaggedly carved from white ash.

No. "I am not going to kill him."

"Yes, you are. You are my daughter... and that means you must."

The way he says it, I know he doesn't mean that I owe it to him... he means because he has a legacy to uphold... and he needs me to finish it for him.

But I can't. I won't.

And arguing with him will only agitate him.

Though... he is already agitated.

"He might come for you sooner." Stalking to me, he puts the stake in my hand. "Keep this with you always. No matter where you go, I want you to have it."

"Father. "

"Do not argue with me, Lucia."

"Fine. I will put it in my harvesting basket, in case I need it while out in the night."
But I won't.

I place it at the bottom of my basket, buried beneath the cloth and leave it there.

I'll never use it, but I can't take it out. He'll check. I know he will.

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Chapter 12

In which our hero seeks to learn

My feet don't touch the ground this time.

I find her and pluck her from the meadow, lifting her into the air and kissing her as my wings beat, lifting us into the air.

“The days are too long.”

She hums in agreement. “And the nights are too short.”

The request lingers on the tip of my tongue. Take my days . But she has already told me she won't.

I need more, but I can be patient if that's what she and fate demand of me.

Tonight, I did not follow my usual path before I came to her. Tonight, I carry her with me as I follow a familiar route over the lands I have sworn to protect. She watches the ground with me, but her eyes turn up to the stars often.

Her smile shines more brightly than any of those celestial bodies.

And when we have checked that all of the corners of my domain are safe and secure for the night, I bring her home. I hope, one day, that she will think of it as such as well.

There are dozens of places within the castle that are walled off from the rest of the rooms and halls. The one I take her to tonight is one such place. Designed to keep my future family safe when I cannot be with them, removed from the world that might try to harm them in order to harm me.

Tonight, it will serve to keep Tybald away.

I trust the man to never interrupt or interfere.

I do not trust him to refrain from seeking out a glimpse of her.

Mrs. Pegg came to set everything to rights for me. She won't tell Tybald which of the rooms I've chosen.

Alone, I can ask her what I have wanted to know all day.

"What do you want, Lucia, my sweet sacrifice? I will give you anything and everything you desire."

Her smile is soft as she kisses me. "Right now, I want to be with you. I want to remember the way it feels to be taken by my lord."

"I am not your lord, Lucia. Not in the way I am others' I am at your mercy."

"Right now, I would like to be at yours."

Maybe she thinks I have only one desire, maybe she thinks I have only one goal. And while sinking into her velvet folds is one of my highest and most driving desires, it is not the only thing I want or need from her.

There is a large sofa here. It is old, but it was built to take the weight of four of my

kind, and I sit, pulling her into my lap.

“The girl whose place you took,” I ask. “Why did you do it?”

“If you knew her, you’d understand.” Her smile is soft and I don’t need to prompt her to tell me about her friend.

The young girl who tells stories and finds joy in making other people laugh is someone Lucia loves.

Telling me of Felicia turns into a story of how her mother had a fever two months ago and Lucia discovered someone had accidentally poisoned a flavored tea when they’d added green willow bark to make it go further and their own purse get heavier.

She tells me a dozen more tales and the picture she paints makes it clearer and clearer that she cares about too many people in the village to leave them.

The stories tell me there are an equal number she does not care for.

Eyes narrowing, Lucia turns until she straddles me, moving her skirt around so she can manage it.

“You got me talking.” The accusation in her tone makes me smile.

“I like knowing things about you.”

“I wasn’t talking about me.”

“Yes, you were.” I kiss her, instead of explaining that the way she smiled when she told me about the oldest woman in the village told me she likes making others happy, no matter how grand or small the task.

I lace my claws through her hair instead of telling her that I know how fulfilling she finds working with her hands from the way she described the local children's penchant for ruining flower beds.

I am determined to learn from everything she says and does.

At this moment, I am learning that her normal clothing truly has too many layers keeping me from her velvet folds.

"You only have me for a few more hours, my lord. I wouldn't think you'd want to waste any time."

"No time spent with you is a waste."

She looks like she may argue, so I steal the argument before she can make it. Kissing her to keep the words from leaving her lips.

But I do not stop her when she moves her clothing out of the way and her fingers quest until they find my cock.

I wonder if she is attempting to keep me from learning more, but I don't ask.

There will be plenty of time to learn everything I want.

Lucia guides me into the delight of her velvet folds and I let her give before I take.

Cock cradled in her velvet folds, I pull her head back and bare her throat to me again. A few more days and I can drink from her.

I can wait a few more days.

Her velvet folds are an all-consuming need now. With her, held in place like this, I want nothing more than to breed her, to see her velvet folds covered in and dripping with my cum.

“I can settle for your nights, sweet sacrifice.” I tell her. “But I will take them all.”

I drive into her more deeply and her velvet folds wrap around me in a sweet bliss.

Mine . My queen, my love... my life.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:33 am

Chapter 13

In which our heroine is mistaken for an assassin

Days later, I find myself in Adrik's castle again in the daylight, gently tending the soil of his roses. Tonight, I will ask him if I can plant more and move others from places they have to fight to survive. If I can do what I need to make them flourish instead of simply making sure they don't die.

The sun is warm on my back, leaving the halls on the other side of the windows in complete darkness.

I've begun to crave darkness.

It is a beautiful day... but I find myself longing for the night more and more. I have other things I should do today, but I am already here and I know Adrik won't turn me away. I imagine the way he salivates at the offer of my velvet folds.

No, he won't turn me away.

Taking off my apron and hanging it on its hook, I place my sheers inside my basket. But I don't get the chance to pick it up. Someone clears their throat and I flinch.

"Who are you?" The man standing in the doorway is old enough to be my father. His hair is shorn down to his scalp, showing scars that extend from the ones marring his face.

“Just a gardener,” I tell him. “A gardener who is done and was leaving.”

Mrs. Pegg won’t thank me for lingering.

Gathering up my things, I go to leave, but when I push past him, he catches my arm. I wrench it away out of surprise and my basket tumbles from my hand. The sound of wood bouncing on stone stabs at my ears and I lunge for the stake I had all but forgotten about.

Too late.

It rolls to a stop in clear view of the man.

A man who holds a long silver blade at my throat.

There is a ‘T’ etched into that blade near the handle. Tybald .

From my knees, I look up at him and swallow. “I swear I mean him no harm.”

“And yet, you bring a weapon to kill him with?” He picks up his foot to kick the stake up into the air, snatching it so quickly it makes me flinch. He sneers at the ugly thing. “Tell me, garden girl. What use does this have in your cultivation?”

“None.” I won’t lie to him, but I can’t tell him the truth either.

“I’m afraid that was not the correct answer.” He turns the blade, pushing my chin up with the flat side.

“I didn’t think it was.”

Eyes narrowed, he taps my chin with the cold steel. “Stand.”

“Lord Adrik protects us,” he says as I get to my feet.

“I know.”

He scowls, but the expression is misshapen by his scars. “Then you know why I can’t believe you.

He hauls me through the corridors and I don’t fight him. If he plans to take me to Adrik, I can explain myself.

But he doesn’t take me to Adrik.

The hall he leads me down is dark, but by the time I realize it doesn’t lead to Adrik’s chambers, it’s too late.

The row of cells looks like it’s rarely seen use.

I do try to fight him now, but he’s stronger than he looks and I gave him too much time to get a good grip on me.

“Please, you have to trust me.”

“Trust is the easiest way to die. I can’t give that to you.” He pushes me into the cell, not a hard shove, just enough to get me across the threshold and inside.

The door clatters shut and I take hold of the bars. “Please, just let me talk to him, I promise this is not what it seems. I—” he turns and leaves before I can explain anything.

The cells to either side of me are empty.

And there is no light in here but the dim rays slanting through a grate near the floor.

The sun will set soon enough.

There is a small bench carved from the same stone as the wall at the back of the cell and I go to it... waiting. Wondering.

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Chapter 14

In which our hero finds his mate in a cage

Lucia is here.

Somewhere.

I inhale the scent of her deeply, filling my lungs with her. But she is not in my vault where she should be.

Stalking the hallways, I search for her with the roses first. She is not there.

Her scent mingles with Tybald's and together, they go to a corridor I am unfamiliar with.

It is not long, and at its end, a wall of bars. Beyond those bars...

She has curled herself up into a ball, sleeping on the narrow stone bench at the back of the cell.

"Lucia?"

She flinches awake, but manages to catch herself on the ledge before she tumbles to the ground.

"Adrik," she says my name with relief. "Thank goodness you're awake."

She stretches out what I assume are stiff muscles and as she stands.

I would tear the cell door from its hinges, but I can smell the cursed metal. If I touch it, I will regret it for weeks.

Turning back down the hall, I go to its end and shout Tybald's name.

The sound of it echoes through the halls, answered by the clatter of footsteps.

He comes running—lantern swinging—and I take hold of him, dragging him to her.

“Let her out, now.” I don't remember the last time I gave him an actual command.

“No.” I don't remember the last time he refused me.

“She was going to kill you,” he says.

“I wasn't.” Lucia sighs and rubs at her eyes.

“She is Liarian. Look at her hair.”

“What does that matter?”

But Tybald is Liarian. He would know one of his own kind... And Liarians loathe monsters.

He produces an ugly stake.

White ash, covered in symbols I know neither of them can see.

It is a weapon that could very easily kill me.

“She brought this with her today.” Tybald says.

“I bring it with me every day.”

The admission makes Tybald flinch.

“It was easier to leave it in the basket than argue with the person who asked me to carry it.”

“Someone asked you to kill me?”

“Yes.” She swallows, gaze dropping to the ground. “I told them I wouldn’t.”

“And still you carry the stake?” Tybald bares his teeth at her, but she doesn’t balk.

“If I have it,” she says with the smallest shrug, “they don’t.”

She looks at me, eyes strangely dark in this dim light. “You know me Adrik. I won’t ever hurt you. And I know you. I have no reason to ever consider hurting you.”

Tybald looks back and forth between us. “This woman is your mate?”

Hearing him say it warms me in a way I hadn’t expected. “She is. Let her out.”

Tybald looks back and forth between us and again, he does not do as I ask.

“No.” His gaze is fixed on her. “Not until she tells us who wants your life.”

“I can’t tell you that.” She looks up at me. “Not unless you promise that you won’t retaliate against him.”

Tybald's mouth twists to a tight scowl.

I might be able to make that promise, for her , but Tybald can't. Not even for me.

“Let her out, Tybald. Or I will hurt myself removing the door.”

He hesitates, but he believes me.

Freed of her cage, she lunges for me and Tybald draws his blade, but even a fool could see that she is not about to attack me.

Holding her close, I look at Tybald, still on alert. Still ready to harm her.

“Go home, Lucia.”

She shakes her head. “I don't want to.”

“We will talk tomorrow night. I have something I have to deal with here.”

She releases me and, sparing a concerned glance for Tybald, she pauses, but she doesn't argue.

She doesn't look back until she reaches the end of the corridor.

She looks at me and the sadness in her eyes makes my heart want to break. But I don't call her back. I don't follow her. And I don't let Tybald go after her, either.

“Why didn't you tell me she was here?” I ask Tybald when she's gone.

“We take care of anyone we need to. It is not a burden you have to bear.”

“How many have there been?”

“Enough,” he says.

“From now on, I want to know.”

He inhales deeply before agreeing. “As you wish.”

“And you will not try to find the person who gave her that stake.”

“You cannot ask that of me.”

“She says he’s harmless. I believe her.”

“Her opinion may not be fact. And we both know that loving can easily cloud our judgment.”

“If you kill him,” I say, changing tack. “I will turn you out.”

Tybalde’s jaw shifts, jutting to the side. “Fine. I can agree to that.”

It’s not an agreement that he won’t kill the man, but it’s better than nothing.

He leaves, and I go with him until I am certain he’s not going to go chasing after her. Only then do I start my nightly task.

The night feels a little darker knowing I won’t end it with her.

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Chapter 15

In which our heroine begs for forgiveness

“You cannot be here.” Tybald says, blocking the door when I try to enter as I always have to tend the garden.

I clench my teeth and straighten my shoulders. “If he does not want to see me, I will not go to him, but I applied a root treatment to your roses. No one here knows how to tend the roses, let alone finish the process I started yesterday. If they did, Mrs. Pegg would have sent me away long before now.”

His brows pinch and I see his gaze drop to my throat... where Adrik’s bite marks from the night before last still pulse with need.

And I know... he still isn’t going to let me in.

“Search my basket, stand guard while I work. But do not let those roses die simply because you don’t trust me.”

“Will you tell me who you’re protecting?”

“No.”

He doesn’t ask me again. He merely grimaces and snatches the basket from my hand.

Rifling through it, he speaks to me in Liarian. A language I know by sound, but was

never taught.

“I don’t understand you.

Again, he doesn’t look like he believes me.

When he hands my basket back, he holds the shears in his hand. “You can’t have these.”

“That’s fine.” I shouldn’t need to prune anything today.

Stepping aside, he lets me in, but I know he doesn’t want to.

The whispers start as soon as the door closes behind me. Eyes peer at me from doorways and shadows.

For the first time, they see me and they pay attention, and I hate that they think I want to kill Adrik.

That awareness prickles at my skin like ice, but I have no way to prove them wrong.

He follows me to the garden and takes up his post at the arched entrance, watching me like a criminal.

Mrs. Pegg joins him, standing beside him, but she watches me with a different kind of wariness, one I don’t fully understand. There’s no anger in it, even though I know she’s never liked me.

I turn my back to them any chance I can.

Coming here was a mistake.

Being this close to him and knowing I can't slip away to go to him... my throat throbs and blood simmers.

Twice, I have to pause, to press the back of my hand against the marks.

I should have snuck in through the lower passages.

"He wishes to see you." Tybald's words make me flinch.

He's closer than I realized.

Looking up at him, I brush the dirt from my hands. "And are you willing to let him?"

"I don't have a say in the matter."

Tybald stays close beside me as we walk down the hall.

"What difference does it make that I'm Liarian?" I ask when the silence has stretched too long.

"Killing monsters is a rite of Liarian passage."

"I'm thirty-six. The time for rites of passage has long passed."

"What did you kill?" He looks at me and he already knows I didn't kill anything.

"My mother is not Liarian. She forbade me from taking part."

He does not look satisfied with that answer.

When we reach the vault, Tybald lingers.

“Do you need to inspect me before you go?” I ask the man who has not let me get an inch from him. “Do I need to strip myself naked for you to make it clear he has nothing to fear from me.”

“No,” Adrik says from the darkness. “He does not.”

Still, Tybald Hesitates.

“Go, old friend. She poses no threat. You have gotten too fretful in your old age.

Finally, he leaves, and I step cautiously into the room.

“Do you need to search me?”

“Maybe?” He doesn’t reach for me like he usually does. “I have questions.”

“Ask them. I will answer them if I can.”

“You told me no one had a claim over you.”

It’s not technically true, or a question, but I do not argue with him. “I have not lied to you.”

“Who wishes me dead?” he asks. “Who gave you the weapon that could have killed me?”

“I told you I had daylight commitments... My father is blind. He cannot hurt you and I won’t. You have no reason to fear him, or to retaliate against his ineffectual desire for your life.”

“How did he come by that stake?”

“Tybald told you I’m Liarian. That comes from my father.”

He tips his head to the side. “And Liarian’s most lauded profession is hunting monsters.”

“My father used to hunt monsters.” I take a deep breath, not wanting to tell the story, knowing I have to tell him at least a little of it. “I told you I knew about the vodyanoy in the lake. He’s the one who killed it. But, it blinded him before he did. If it hadn’t, he might have come after you, my mother would never have found him, and I would never have been born.”

“He would have come for my father. He would not have known about me yet.” Adrik’s claws ghost across my cheek. “I’m not terribly old.”

“No?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

With a deep breath, he inspects me. “You did bring a weapon into my home. One designed to kill my kind.”

“I would never have used it.”

“You might be carrying one now.”

“I promise you I am not.”

“Take off your clothes, sweet sacrifice. Prove to me that you have nothing concealed on your beautiful body.”

I slip the fabric free, watching him the whole time.

He stalks around me, claws tracing the lines of my body.

They travel down to the V between my thighs. “Would you conceal it within yourself?”

His fingers part my velvet folds, dipping inside of me, and he exhales heavily when I shiver with need.

“How long did you carry it?”

“Not long... but also long enough to forget that I had it,” I tell him, truthfully.

He steps close, brushing his lips against mine, but not kissing me as he takes my hands.

The click of a latch and the cold press of metal against my wrists.

He releases me, taking a step back and I look down at the manacles.

“You may ask for forgiveness.” Wrapping the long chain that connects them in his fist, he leads me further underground. Another space, still cavernous, but smaller somehow. The ceiling glows with rocks that cast a deep blue light through the room. Ornatly tiled floor alcoves carved into the walls with statues of men in crowns.

This room... is a throne room. And Adrik sits on the throne.

He watches me with a dark and lustful gaze. The red glow of his eyes has turned purple beneath this light.

“Are you the king?” I ask.

“There were kings here once, but one of my kind killed them, long before I was born.”

“Are you my king?”

“I will only be your king, if you become my queen.” A low growl echoes through the room. “And you have not agreed to that yet.”

“Haven’t I?”

“Not with words.”

He doesn’t let me do it now.

Pointing to the floor in front of him, he says, “Kneel if you wish for absolution.”

The ornate tiles are cold and rough against my knees, but I do not complain. I need him to know I am his. No matter the cost.

“What would you do for forgiveness, sweet sacrifice?”

“Anything.” I look up at him, wanting him to know it’s true. “My body is yours. Use it as you please. My blood is yours. Drain me if you must. But my heart is yours as well. Please don’t break it.

He reaches for me, grabbing hold of my hair and pulling me close to his face. “I will never break you, Lucia. But you do need to be punished.

My legs burn as he holds me like this. His claws grip my hair more tightly. My eyes flutter closed at the bright sensation of my hair pulled tight.

“Suck my cock, sweet sacrifice. Choke on it. Prove to me that you want forgiveness.”

When he lets me go, I drop back to my knees and the burning in my thighs is overshadowed by the sharp strike of bone to stone.

But I manage to barely wince. And then, I do as I’m told.

Working the bulbous tip of him into my mouth, I remind myself to breathe through my nose, but that is the only kindness I give myself.

I take him as deep as I can and as hard as I can. And then, I push deeper.

When his hand slips into my hair again, I push harder.

He pushes too, and together we go too far.

The sound I make is ugly. Tears prick at my eyes and I push down again.

And again.

Fucking him with my lips and throat, I grip his thighs and struggle for even more, but he doesn’t let me take it.

He drags me off him, scowling at me. “Were you trying to make me come?”

“Yes.” My voice is hoarse and broken, my throat burns.

His grip tightens once more. “You may suck my cock clean after I have spilled myself inside your velvet folds. Not before. Do you understand?”

I nod, swallowing against the burn.

He lifts me up, hands beneath my knees and then my thighs when I wrap my legs around him. Settling back onto the throne, his hand goes to my neck. “Do you know the old stories? Do you know how queens were made in this land?”

“No.”

“It’s not a story many would tell to their daughters.” His grip is firm around my throat. “For a thousand years, future queens would be brought here, stripped bare as you are now... if they wanted the crown, they would need to fuck their king on this throne, in front of his entire court.”

I swallow, imagining this room full of people watching us.

“When the time comes, you will do something similar.” He lines himself up with my velvet folds and drives up into me with a single thrust. “When the moon bleeds, I will claim you in the village square, so everyone knows that you are mine. Your screams will ensure that everyone knows you want to be mine.”

“Yes.” I’ve already started to move my hips on his.

“Show me how you would fuck me to gain a crown in front of these dead kings.” He twists the chain between my wrists. “Show them how you would free yourself of these chains.”

I move to my knees again, rising and falling on him. “I would give myself to you before anyone who needed proof. And as long as you are the one with the key. I don’t need to be free.”

“Then let me prove to them.” Growling, Adrik stands. He pulls me off of him just as quickly as he entered me and puts me back on the throne on my knees.

This time, he hooks the chain over the back of the throne, though, and I gasp as he takes my hips, dragging me back onto him as he forces me open wider for him.

“I would spend every hour of every day worshiping your velvet folds,” he says, snarling and I moan, gripping the chains and leaning against the warmth left behind by his back.

It doesn't feel like a punishment.

This feral, need driven joining of our bodies feels like a reward.

It makes me dizzy, and when his tail toys with my clit, it makes me want to sob with pleasure.

But my eyes fly wide when the tip of one of his claws presses into my ass. Everything else is a distraction from the initial pain, though, and I'm too open to him—to the pleasure he's giving me—to deny him any access to my body.

And when I come, screaming his name, he follows right after.

“Do you think they'd approve?” I ask, even more hoarse than before, while cum drips from my velvet folds, onto the tiles.

Adrik holds himself still as I do what he told me I could, tongue tracing over his cock, cleaning myself—and his cum—from him.

“I think we are lucky they did not burst from their tombs and demand they're turn.”

I am not done with him when he picks me up again, holding me in his lap when he returns to the throne.

“The moon will bleed tomorrow,” he says, softly. “I cannot drink from another sacrifice. I won’t.”

“You don’t have to.” I tell him. “I’ll be at the stone, waiting for you.”

“That is a tradition of the village’s making, you can wait for me wherever you like.”

“I know. But I’ll need to send away whoever is there for their turn.” If he doesn’t arrive, they will spend the month living in terror.

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Chapter 16

In which our heroine's father proves to be a problem

I don't go home.

I check on Felicia and her mother, and make sure their door has been scrubbed clean.

I go to the patch of blood blossoms and pick the buds before they can bloom with the moon.

And I watch the sky, waiting for the sun to fully set.

When it does, I walk the path to the sacrificial stone, to tell whoever is waiting that it is not their turn after all.

But when I see the person laying on the block, my steps stutter and my soles scuff on the stones.

"You need to go home." My father says, laying with his eyes still closed.

He looks so peaceful, like he could be asleep... or dead.

"No, you need to go home." I go to him, taking hold of him to drag him away, but he shoves me back.

"Whatever you have planned. Stop it."

“I will not let him feed from my daughter again.” He is too still. Too calm.

“You were fine letting him feed from Felicia? Or any of the other men and women in the village?”

“They are not my daughter.” The words come out in a bellow and then he clamps his mouth shut and the forest goes silent. After a deep breath, he says. “Others may choose how to make their sacrifice. You may not.”

“You swore you wouldn’t hunt him. You made a promise to my mother on your life.”

“And your mother is welcome to fallow through on her threats the next time she is here. I will do what I must.”

“What you must ?” I take hold of his arm again. “I know you were raised to believe anything that appears to be a monster was evil and needed to die. Adrik is not.”

Swallowing, I tell him, “I won’t let you hurt him.”

He wrenches his arm away, tearing his sleeve off and I see the marks.

Needle marks...

“What did you do?”

“What I had to.” He snarls and rubs at the bend of his elbow. “He’ll choke on the silver sail in my blood. And I will hear him die.”

The mixture won’t kill my father. In the morning he will wish he was dead, but for the moment, he’ll feel stronger, he’ll hear better, his mind will work more quickly.

And if Adrik bites him...

But he won't.

I exhale, at peace with the understanding that Adrik won't have to be anywhere near him. Because the stone doesn't matter to him. Gathering up my skirts, I start for the path, but Robert steps out of his hiding place and into my way.

He holds a stake like the one my father asked me to carry.

"Do you want me to let her leave?" He asks my father, eyes fixed on me.

"No, she should stay and watch."

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Chapter 17

In which our hero spills blood beneath the moon

My Sacrifice is not alone.

The man she shoves backward is clearly her father. I can see the resemblance, I can see the marks left behind by the vodyanoy's attempt to kill him.

Another man watches their interaction warily, a stake with its carved incantations in his hand.

Swooping down, I snatch the stake from the man's hand and fling it far away.

He draws a sword with a trembling hand instead, slashing indiscriminately.

Fear makes him careless and I pull Lucia out of the way, but not fast enough. The blade slices through her dress and through her skin and the scent of her blood bursts across the air, but it is not hunger that my sacrifice's blood triggers.

Not this time.

This blood was not freely given. And the one who drew it...

I grab his wrist, breaking the bones, forcing him to drop the sword.

I catch him up by his throat, lifting him off the ground and staring down into his wide

and terrified eyes.

Good. He should be terrified.

“Please, don’t bite me.” His words are weak, shaking with terror.

“I would not taste the filth of your blood if you were the last option available to me.”
I tighten my grip and leap into the air, carrying him by his throat, back to the village.

I don’t fear leaving Lucia with her father. The man wants my life. He won’t take hers.

No one peeks out of their homes. I don’t want them to tonight. I want this man to suffer. I want him to know unending pain.

And when I shove him down, dropping him onto the bell tower’s spindle, his scream paints the air with my vengeance.

It pierced him too far off center.

He might survive it.

I don’t care if he lives or dies, so long as he does it in pain.

I leave him there, blood dripping down the roof tiles. If someone wishes to save him, they can. But he will get no mercy from me tonight.

His screams echo across the town’s roofs, but I gain little satisfaction from them.

I want Lucia. I need to know that she is safe.

She has placed the stone between herself and her father. He wields a wicked looking

syringe. There could be any number of things inside it, but I smelled the silver sail before. I don't need to guess. And I don't need to bother with him tonight.

He is a problem for tomorrow, when Lucia's wounds are tended and the moon no longer bleeds.

I snatch her out of his reach and when he screams after us... I do find a great deal of satisfaction in that.

She whimpers in pain and I try not to touch her back as I carry her. Face buried in my ruff, I don't ask her any questions.

Taking her back to the castle, I go to Mrs. Pegg instead of the secluded place I had planned for tonight's feeding.

The older woman gasps and gets to work, immediately, cleaning the wound and smearing ointments on it.

"I don't think it needs stitches. But it's going to scar." she says. "Lucky think you Liarians collect them like badges of honor."

"Though..." she glances at Lucia's face and her only other scar. "Never met one with as few as you."

Tybald stands in the doorway, arms crossed. "Are you willing to tell me who it was, now that he's hurt you," he asks.

Lucia's eyes are closed, her teeth grit against the latest salve Mrs. Pegg has used.

"A different man hurt her tonight. I left him bleeding on top of the bell tower."

Tybald doesn't look pleased with that, but he leaves us.

After another moment of fretting, Mrs. Pegg does too. And I gently take my sacrifice into my arms.

I inhale her. Letting her skin and the blood beneath it soothe me.

"You can't drink from me. I might be poisonous." She shows me a red scratch on her forearm. "He nicked me."

Lifting her wrist to my mouth, I shake my head, brushing my lips across her skin. "No. That was always a useless method of killing my kind. I could smell it if it was in your blood."

"Do you promise me?"

"I would never do anything to cut our time short."

"Then take me somewhere I can take off this ruined dress and you can feed."

I scoop her up with my arm beneath her legs so that I don't hurt her any more than I have to, and I take her back to the chamber that will eventually keep her safe when I cannot be with her.

I was not with her tonight.

The bed is turned down and I set her on her feet beside it.

"I won't have anything to wear, but... it's already ruined," she says, "just tear it off."

The fabric rips beneath my hands, but I do as she requests gently.

Whatever Mrs. Pegg put on her back, it is odorless and even though I know it has worked its way into her bloodstream, I know that I am still safe to drink from my sacrifice tonight.

But I lay her down on her stomach first.

“What are you doing?” she asks, even as she lets me do as I like with her.

“I’m going to distract you.”

When I spread her legs and kiss her, she doesn’t ask anymore questions.

The taste of her velvet folds make me ache. I want nothing more than to pull her closer to me until my tongue fills her so completely.

I want to know every nuance of her flavor, every sweet and tangy ounce of her.

I want to taste the difference when she comes and when her body simply works to make itself ready for me.

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Chapter 18

In which our heroine is distracted

Face buried in the blanket, I try not to move, even as his tongue makes my hips want to rock against him.

The salve Mrs. Pegg used has numbed the pain, but it has not disappeared and if I pretend that it has, it will only be worse in the morning.

He worships my velvet folds like they are the best and sweetest delight he's ever tasted.

But nothing lasts forever and I come softly, as his tongue coaxes the orgasm from me.

He hadn't wanted to hurt me, and he'd managed to ensure that I didn't hurt myself.

Moments later, he has me in his arms and in his lap as he moves backward on the bed until he is seated against the ornate headboard.

I don't wait for him to take me. I move my hips, adjusting until he's inside of me and sigh with relief.

"I was made for you," I tell him again. "And you were made for me."

"That is something you will never hear me argue."

Tip my head to the side, offering my neck to him and he takes it.

What I had thought was a trick of his first bite is there again. Something hot and dark floods my veins. Something that wasn't present when he drank from me days ago.

I want it. I want everything.

His cock buried in my velvet folds, our hips rocking together as he drinks me down, I let my eyes flutter closed and give in to the sensation. It turns my vision red bright against the back of my eyelids.

"You asked me who I belonged to." I grip him tighter, wanting more and more of him. "I'm yours."

He retracts his fangs from me and blood trickles down to pool in my collar bone. "I know. Fate doesn't make mistakes."

He kisses me and the blood on his lips—my blood—tastes oddly sweet.

"I love you." I whisper the words against his mouth and I feel him smile.

"I love you too." Pressing a kiss to my palm, he says, "Everything that I am is yours, if you'll take it."

He drinks more deeply this time, and my head is swimming by the end. But there's no pain, my body is distracted as he fills my velvet folds.

Every moment his fangs are inside of me feels more perfect than the next.

He pulls me down onto him that last inch, locking me inside of him with that bulging knot as he comes, eyes screwed shut, abdomen twitching...

“A lifetime of worshiping these velvet folds won’t be enough.” He presses a kiss to the flat of my breast. “Ten lifetimes spent worshiping you wouldn’t be enough.”

“I suppose we had better make this lifetime last as long as we can.”

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Chapter 19

In which our heroine goes home

Two days pass before I find the will to leave.

Two days of healing wounds, discovering that Mrs. Pegg does not hate me after all, and letting Adrik prove just how much he wishes to devour my velvet folds.

Adrik doesn't ask me not to go. He doesn't try to keep me when I kiss him and slip from his bed.

And I don't tell Tybald not to follow me when I go, either.

Dressed in clothing that is not my own, I take the path down the cliff side toward my home.

He follows at a distance, even though he knows I know he's there.

This time, he has promised he won't kill my father.

But when I get to the clearing, my father isn't waiting for me as he usually does.

When I try to open the door, it won't budge.

Something heavy rests against the door and I push at it again.

Then, for the first time in my life, I knock on my own door.

My father comes barging out and I quickly backpedal down the stairs, away from his ire.

But it's not my fear that stops him. It's Tybald.

The man steps between us, a blade to my father's throat.

"Don't hurt him, please. You promised."

"I said I wouldn't kill him, and I won't. Unless he makes me." And then, as my father takes a step backward, confusion written on his face, Tybald says, "Hello old friend."

Stumbling back, my father sits on the steps of our porch and laughs mirthlessly. "My daughter has betrayed me for a bloodsucker and my dead friend has risen from the grave. It must truly be the end times."

"How interesting that we both thought the other dead all these years." Tybald sheaths his sword. "I thought the vodyanoy killed you."

"It almost did. I thought the previous lord of the castle killed you."

"We were both wrong." Tybald laughs mirthlessly. "About so many things."

"What were you wrong about?"

"Not all monsters are bad. Some monsters aren't even monsters at all."

My father spits. "Your father would be ashamed of you."

“Probably, but he would be wrong. As he often was.” Tybald glances at me, before he asks. “Are you going to welcome your daughter home? Or will you be the same sort of fool he was?”

“She can’t stay here if she plans to go back to him.” He turns his face toward me. “If you leave, you can’t come back.”

“I can’t stay in this house forever.” I tell him. “Did you think I would?”

“You are my daughter,” he says with a righteous indignation that isn’t deserved. “You are Liarian. No one in this village. Certainly no monster in that castle.”

Tybald looks at me over his shoulder. “Go get your things if you want them. If you would like to stay, I will go.”

I should pretend to hesitate.

The steps creak as I walk up them.

“You’re leaving me.” My father says with a bitterness I’ve never heard from him before.

“You’ve given me no choice.”

Tybald says something to him in Liarian and I slip inside while he’s distracted.

The house smells like sickness—the silver sail’s effects—and I open the windows to air it out before I go to my room.

There is too much to take with me. Too much I’ll have to leave behind. But I pack what I can and I gather the pages of my compendium, binding them together, notes

and all.

And when I step out again, my father turns his face away from me.

I say good bye, but he ignores me.

This time, Tybald walks beside me. He takes my things and I let him—except my compendium, and when we reach the shroud of soap vines, I pause.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ve asked him not to come looking, but... I don’t want him to kill my father, even if he didn’t intend to.” I press the soil at the base of the plants, making sure they are sturdy. “If they don’t cross each other's paths, my father can’t do something that will make him.”

“To be honest, I thought Luca was dead because he didn’t come after Adrik.”

“You did?”

He shakes his head. “I came for his father. And found just that, a father, playing with his youngest son... and a mother, teaching the older children how to be better than I was ever raised to be.

“Farin could have killed me then and there. He could have set his children to do it, heaven knows they were all capable at that point.

“But he didn’t. He asked me questions I didn’t expect. He reminded me why your father and I started hunting in the first place... and after a time, I realized there was something more important than killing for me.”

“What happened to his parents?”

“They left. When Adrik’s older siblings reached maturity, they went off to find their own place in this world, and when Adrik was old enough, Farin said his goodbyes, lifted Raelle into the skies and went to the guardian’s resting place.”

“They died?”

“No, vampires don’t die unless you kill them... but when their service has ended, they can return to the land of their forebears and spend the rest of their days at ease.”

We descend into silence until we reach the path that leads left to the castle and right to the village.

“Will you come back to the castle?” The way he says it, I know that he won’t drag me with him. He does not plan to make me return.

“I will go to my friend for the time being. There are still a few things I need to do before I can leave the village to its own devices.”

When I knock on the door, Felicia opens it, wide eyed and she looks sharply up to the top of the bell tower and then pulls me inside.

She only notices Tybald when she tries to close the door and then she shrieks a little.

He is the one who apologizes, leaving us as soon as he’s set her things aside.

“You have to tell me everything, Lucia.”

And I do.

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Chapter 20

In which our hero prepares to take what he desires

For a month, Lucia has spent her days in the village or tending to the castle gardens. Mrs. Pegg showed her the courtyards that used to be cultivated, and she has turned what was once dead dirt into rows upon rows of sprouted seed starts. Half the castle seems like it will be overtaken by flowers come spring.

For a month, Lucia has spent her nights in my arms.

She has become mine in every way but one.

And soon, that will be taken care of as well.

After a month of nights exploring every delight of her velvet folds, I still want more.

Tonight, the moon has my blood buzzing with need of hers. Tonight, I will claim her as my queen.

Tonight, I will sink into her velvet folds for anyone to see and I will gladly let anyone who had designs on her weep for the loss.

“The tower is ready,” Tybald says, meeting me at the entrance to the vaults.

He was the second to change his mind in her favor. Mrs. Pegg beat him to it by a day.

The two of them have worked tirelessly to make this place feel like it could be her home. The changes are both subtle and garish as well.

“There is a storm coming.” He says as he waits beside me. “Please be careful.”

“Only because you’ve asked.”

He lets free a beleaguered sigh and I ignore the sword on his hip. What he has planned for tonight is his own business.

Leaping into the air, I start my nightly flight around my domain, and when it’s done, I will find my mate and claim her velvet folds.

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Chapter 21

In which our heroine becomes a queen

I step onto the cobbles in bare feet and walk to the grassy patch at the center of the square. In this light, my nightgown glows like a wedding dress.

I see shadows in my periphery.

Others come to their windows, creeping to peer out of their shutters and I need them to see me. I need them to know.

Adrik is mine and tonight I intend to claim him.

Walking steadily to the center of that grass, I go to my knees to wait.

A thunderous crash echoes overhead and I look up at the dark clouds crowding the blood red moon.

The air feels electric, and I do too.

When the first patter of rain shakes, his shadow passes over me and the ground shakes as he drops from the sky in front of me.

“It’s raining,” I tell him with a soft smile as a drop lands on my face, forcing me to blink.

“I know.” His wings raise up to cover over me and the patter of those drops on them is such a strange sound, it makes me laugh.

“Have you come here to give yourself to me, sweet sacrifice?”

“Yes.”

“Body and blood, mind and soul?”

“Everything that I am is yours, if you’ll take it,” I say, repeating the words he said to me a month ago. “Will you take it?”

There is another thunderous crash overhead and Adrik’s claws tear my nightgown to shreds.

This ritual, a melding of the ancient traditions of this land and those of his kind is raw and dirty and I land on my back in the sopping grass.

He pounces, entering me with a thrust that makes me cry out.

More shadows. More cracked windows.

Let them watch. Let them see.

And when his teeth find my throat, there’s no mistaking the ecstasy in that scream.

He drives me into the mud with each thrust, fucking me just as ravenously as he drinks my blood.

I know it looks like he’s devouring me. And maybe he is.

I’d let him. I’d let him drain me and fill me and do it all over again.

But he grunts and groans and together, we find release as the sky opens into a torrential downpour.

Adrik holds me tight to his chest, still fitted inside of me and now there are full faces at the windows, watching with wide eyes as my king takes me for his queen.

He lifts me into the air without removing his cock from my velvet folds.

“This is dangerous,” he says, flying faster than I have ever felt or seen him fly before.

A bolt of lightning crashes, but I am not worried.

Fate would not betray us like that.

He alights in the tower he’s only told me of before. But I knew I would see one day for myself... a tower for bathing and breeding on the bleeding moon.

Soaked to the bone, we don’t need to bathe, but Adrik closes the window behind us and finds a towel.

We are still joined, his cock locked inside my velvet folds and when he kisses me, drying the rain from my skin, I never want to let go.

When he lowers me onto the bed where the windows focus all of that red moonlight, he says three soft words against my throat.

“I love you.”