



Wolfsbane (Deadly Duet #2)

Author: *C. Hebert*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Wolfsbane: A beautiful yet poisonous plant; a soft lavender flower that lures unsuspecting wanderers in with its charming allure and mystery. The flower's silky petals bloom only at night, beneath the light of the moon, and release the most pleasant yet toxic aroma that quickly enters the body and kills within minutes. Once the wolfsbane flower entraps you, there is no breaking its grasp.

It is absolutely and unmistakably deadly.

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ONE

MOREL

My eyes searched the stars, my heart aching at the loneliness of my soul. The one thing I never expected to experience was being alone forever. Outside of my kingdom, I was a villain, hated by all who knew of me. Who could possibly love a monster such as myself? My own family did not want me, so why would another?

The deeply rooted pain gripped my heart as my chest ached with the excruciating truth. If I was to be alone in this world, so be it. It was a fate I deserved, for I was nothing but a mistake. Aside from my poor mother everyone knew it, including myself. I didn't deserve a happily ever after. I didn't deserve to know the warmth of a loving touch or the kindness of love. I knew only the cold darkness that pulled my soul deeper into the abyss, filled solely with anger that fueled the flames of my existence until there was nothing but my empty soul seated on the throne of my kingdom.

"Morel." My head turned as I faced the man behind me. It was Orion.

Orion had become one of the few people I could trust. He was the brother I never had, the one I longed for Agaric to be. I wouldn't have survived the harsh wild if not for him. Together, we spent years in these woods, growing not only a community of rejects but a kingdom of lost souls. I owed him my life.

Orion was gripping the pommel of his sword strapped around his waist, the fur of his coat brushing his cheeks as he stared at me with those dark, weary eyes. "Dr. Altair

has arrived.”

“Finally,” I whispered under my breath with a smile. The night air fogged around my face as I followed Orion through the snow-covered forest. The black bark trees reached high into the sky, curving as they twisted together from either side and created a canopy of snow above our heads.

After some time, we finally reached the edge of the woods, stepping out into the open snow and towards the rubble of my castle. It wasn’t fully built, taking years to achieve its current glory, but it was still magnificent. And it was mine, not because of my blood or birth, but because I built it with my own hands alongside the growing number of people who had joined this newfound kingdom. The kingdom of Grisset was a home to any who needed it, for those who felt unwanted and unloved. Here, they were neither. Here, in Grisset, everyone had a place. Everyone belonged.

As we approached the enormous black gothic doors of handcrafted stained glass, I stopped and glanced up at the night sky once again. It was bursting with stars, the moon bright, illuminating the snow in a cool glow as snowflakes gently fell across my face and melted into my skin. One of the reasons I had chosen this very location was this: the way the sky remained dark and true to itself most days, leaving Grisset in a wintry blanket of shadows tucked away from the rest of the world, protected by a wall of mountains; a safe haven for me and my people.

“It’s a full moon tonight,” I stated with a faint smile as Orion stopped and glanced up at the night sky. “The death caps should be glowing bright under the moon goddess’ beam.” My eyes fell to him. “If only my mother could see them.” The mention of her made my black heart ache as I squeezed my fists at my side, my mood melting into something sour. “Dr. Altair better have what I asked for.” I turned my head away from the sky and brushed past Orion into the castle.

Orion scoffed, shaking his head as he followed me. “As do I.”

Dr. Altair was patiently waiting for me in my unfinished room, the only furnishings being my humble bed and the grand fireplace, burning at all times. The fireplace was built from the mountain itself, carved from dark stone and fragments of pure black onyx. The elaborate mantle was covered in tiny blue fluorescent mushrooms and moss, overgrowing from their tiny planters, beaming in the moonlight that peeked through the wall of stained glass windows gazing out to the mountains themselves. The many, tiny little mushrooms drenched the room in a layer of blue with their faint glow.

“My king.” Dr. Altair struggled to bow, his old age finally catching up to him.

“Please.” I gently stopped him. “Do not hurt yourself for such ridiculous customs.”

“Ridiculous?” He scoffed. “King Morel, I?—”

“Morel,” I corrected him with a soft smile. “After everything we’ve been through, you need not call me king.” Dr. Altair huffed as he reached his hand out and motioned for me to sit on my bed.

“Rubbish. You have always been my king and you always shall. From the moment I delivered you from your mother’s womb and watched you breathe your first breath, to the day my soul leaves this earth and joins the heavens above.” The old man followed me while I did as he asked, sitting on the edge of the bed. I couldn’t help but laugh faintly at his stubbornness.

“Now,” he inhaled, “tell me what ails you, my king?”

“The same demons as before.” My head lowered, my long black hair falling in front of my eyes. “The tonic you gave me before did nothing to help my pain.” My eyes rose, meeting his as he listened with tender care—the care I had longed for from my own father yet never received.

“Hmm,” he grunted, pondering in deep thought. “Forgive me, my king, but perhaps your pain reaches deeper than muscle or bone. Maybe the reason none of my treatments are working is simply that what you feel is more of a physical manifestation of your emotions and past. Trauma can?—”

“I’m hurting from building this town from scratch. I spent every day lugging stone and wood, building homes, ensuring every person in Grisset has a place to call their own while defending our little slice of heaven.” I brushed strands of my hair behind my ears, my arm aching as I moved. “My body is too weak, something you know I’ve struggled with since birth. I must become stronger. How can I defeat Agaric if I’m weak?”

“My king is anything but weak.” Dr. Altair stated the words as if they were fact, but he was wrong. I was weak, weaker than Agaric. “My king...” He shuffled through his bag, small glass vials and bottles clinking together as he retrieved a clear crystal. “Perhaps this might help?” He stretched his arm out to me, offering the stone.

“A crystal?” I asked, accepting it with curiosity.

“Clear quartz. Your mother, the late Queen Mellea, was a firm believer in the healing properties of crystals. In fact, that very crystal was hers.” My eyes widened as I stared at the crystal in my palm.

“How did you—” I choked on my voice as the old man wrapped his fingers around my hand.

“The day your mother died, I knew your father would cleanse the palace of her belongings, wiping her existence from history. I did my best to salvage what I could of her, hiding some of her possessions before his men could get to them. Your mother was the embodiment of the moon goddess herself and had the most caring and loving soul. She did not deserve to be forgotten. And neither do you, my king. I see so much

of her in you, hidden behind your sad eyes. I know you are hurting my king, but I beg you, do not close yourself off from the world. Instead, embrace it. I know you seek your revenge, and I understand that desire, but please, my king, for this old man's sake, live . It is all your mother ever wanted."

Dr. Altair's words tugged at my broken heart.

"What other possessions did you salvage?" I asked, fighting back tears.

"Only a few. This crystal, a bundle of surviving death caps like yourself, and her ring."

Her ring? The memory of her wearing the jewelry, laughing as she sang and danced with me as a child, played in my mind, making my heart skip a little. She would always let me play with the ring as I'd been amazed by the moonstone centered in silver, as if a piece of the moon itself rested on her finger.

My eyes raised to his, his hand slowly lifting as we stood. "Bring it to me." I walked past the doctor, squeezing the crystal tightly in my hand. "I shall keep it safe, here, with me."

"At once, my king." The old man grabbed his bag and began to exit the room.

"Dr. Altair?" He stopped. "Thank you. I do not deserve such a loyal friend."

"My king," he cleared his throat. "You deserve the heavens. Your brother may sit on your father's throne, but he is no king. A true king lives not for himself, but his people, sacrificing his own life to protect them. Your brother knows no such thing, unlike you. You are the most noble of men and truest of all kings. It is an honor to serve you. Your mother would be proud, Morel."

I offered him a small smile as he bowed and left my room, closing the door behind him. My eyes fell back to the crystal in my hand. I only wish such a thing were true.

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TWO

MOREL

“Orion,” I called, hearing the familiar sound of his footsteps growing behind me, knowing it was him without needing to look. I had been lugging firewood, helping an elder woman unable to gather the wood herself. “What news do you bring?” I asked as she flashed me a warm smile, thanking me for my help.

“It amazes me how in tune you are with your surroundings,” Orion sighed, both annoyed and impressed.

Wiping my hands and forehead, I chuckled, turning to face him. “When you grow up with an abusive father and a brother who enjoys tormenting you, you learn to adapt rather quickly.”

Orion simply made a face. “I bring news from Hellbore.”

“Hellbore?” My head tilted in surprise. The kingdom of Hellbore was the only one for miles willing to trade and treat with me and my people. King Regalis and Queen Castanea offered my people a kindness no other kingdom would, creating trades with Grisset which allowed the economy and infrastructure of my kingdom to grow and expand with its people. I had only met them once, greeted with nothing but open arms and minds. Recently, all trade and communications with Hellbore had come to a screeching halt, resulting in some of Grisset’s spies slithering into the kingdom.

“It seems the reason the kingdom has cut us off is because it has been overcome by a

rogue prince.” Orion retrieved a shredded flag from his cloak, handing it to me. As I unraveled the material, I recognized the faded yellow symbol sewn into the tattered black tapestry.

Boletus.

“According to our intel, this prince was once an ally to both Hellbore and Dryade until he ambushed them, attacking without reason or cause.”

“He had cause,” I growled. “Follow me.”

Orion shadowed me the best he could as my pace quickened, leading us toward the lively market. People were buzzing about, music playing from a traveling show as animals roamed freely, children playing and zagging through the packed shops. The smell of spices and herbs filled the cold air as voices and laughter mixed with them. He tried to keep up, questioning me as we ducked into a small store.

“My king,” the old shopkeeper greeted me with a welcoming bow. “How may I serve you today?” My eyes scanned the walls lined with tapestries and flags of nearby kingdoms and regions. I lifted the tattered material.

“This symbol.” I tapped the golden scorpion stitched in the black fabric. “Which kingdom does this belong to?”

“Why, the southern kingdom, Scorpius, my king.” My nostrils flared with anger as I stormed from the shop.

“Morel?” Orion chased after me, weaving the lively market. “My king!” I chucked the tapestry into a nearby fire, watching as the flames consumed the material. “Morel,” he huffed, catching his breath. “Care to explain what just happened?”

“It seems fate has a sick and twisted sense of humor.” My eyes glared at ashes floating alongside the swirling smoke of the fire as the cold wind blew them away. “Boletus is Agaric’s childhood friend, the elder son of Scorpius, a vile and vicious kingdom south of here. My brother is but a rat compared to that beast. His mind is sick. He seeks pleasure in tormenting the innocent and yearns to inflict pain. Boletus didn’t attack Hellbore without cause. No, he attacked it for game, simply because he could.”

“What would you have me do, my king?” I gripped the crystal fastened around my neck as I inhaled the night air.

“Hellbore was the only kingdom to aid us in our time of need. It’s time we repaid the favor. Prepare a small party. We leave for Hellbore at first light.” Orion nodded, bowing before rushing to prepare.

It seems fate has altered the path before me, dear brother. Enjoy this time, but know that one day, I will return home. I will come for you, even if it means waiting a lifetime. Our time will come.

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THREE

MOREL

Snow crunched beneath my boots as I approached the ivy curtain, gently brushing the vines aside, revealing a small garden of death caps glowing in the final hour of the moonlight. I had planted merely a handful of my mother's mushrooms here long ago, tending to them all these years. Since then, they had spread and overtook the ground entirely, drenching it in their vibrant blue color, casting their fluorescent light all around. It baffled me how such delicate fungi could survive and thrive in such harsh conditions, but it seemed they flourished, much like myself.

Stepping deeper into the garden, I noticed a set of footprints in the snow. My guard instantly rose as my hand slowly reached for my sword, my body on full alert. I listened closely to all around me, the sounds of the fading nightlife gently dancing in my ears. A small crunch made me turn, my free arm catching something as it aimed in my direction.

My eyes blinked, processing that, in my hand, was a large rock.

What in the ? —

Before I could finish the thought, a second stone smacked my temple. I stumbled back, feeling where it hit my skull, blood from the wound coating my fingers. My anger boiled as my instincts heightened. I listened carefully, dodging another rock as it whizzed past my ear. My eyes followed it, looking to a small divot on the side of the mountain and catching a glimpse of a figure as it ducked into the shadows.

Enough of this.

My temple throbbed, my face burning with annoyance. Someone had not only trespassed into my garden but attacked me in my land. I didn't have time for this ridiculousness, but whoever it was needed to learn that what they did was a grave mistake.

I silently made my way towards the edge of the mountain, discovering a small, snow-covered trail leading straight to the divot. I quietly approached, the silhouette hidden in the shadows of the mountain, peeking over the edge. My hand cautiously reached for my sword as I inched closer.

"If you seek death," I raised my sword, "then you have come to the right place. Death and I are fond of one another. I am his King of Darkness, placed upon this Earth to deliver those who deserve to burn. Now, allow me to deliver you myself." I raised my arm, the sword angled high as the silhouette turned, eyes almost glowing like silver in the night.

"I hate to disappoint a king," a soft voice spoke as the shadow slowly stepped into the light of the surrounding death caps, revealing their face. "But I do not fear death."

My mouth nearly dropped with my sword at the sight of the woman before me. She was unmistakably beautiful, stepping closer with grace, as if the moon herself had fallen from the heavens above and stood before me. Despite her mussed appearance, she was the most fearsome creature I had ever laid eyes on, with hair black as onyx and eyes like sterling silver stars, flickering in the moonlight. Her pale skin was covered in scratches, her hair tangled, and her attire... Well, it wasn't what one would expect someone to wear out in the wilderness. She was wearing a large, elaborate white gown—a wedding dress that looked as though she had run through a forest of thorns and mud, nearly destroying the gown that desperately clung to her body.

I had to gather my thoughts, the woman touching the tip of my sword with her finger, pricking it as a small bead of blood formed atop her ivory skin. Her eyes lifted, spying the wound she left on my temple.

“Now we are even.” She raised her finger, smiling. “Blood for blood.” There was something about her that completely took me back. Without hesitation or any logical reasoning, I lowered my sword.

“I would ask if you were in need of assistance, but it seems you are more than capable of taking care of yourself.” I nearly chuckled at my own words, intoxicated by her boldness and recalling her rather impressive aim.

“Despite what you may think, I’m not some damsel in distress, oh mighty king of darkness. I can handle things just fine on my own and am exactly where I am meant to be.” An interesting response. The woman stood tall, secure in herself. There was something about her that dangerously lured me in, desperately wanting to know more.

“You know who I am, but you are a stranger to me, hiding in my land. You have already struck the king. Some would call you a threat.” The woman smiled at the label, causing my chest to ache in an odd feeling.

She circled me, glancing up and down as she spoke. “I’m only a threat to those who would seek to harm me. So tell me, oh mighty king of darkness,” she mocked, returning to face me, “do you wish to harm me?”

The moon peeked overhead as a light snow began to fall, kissing her blue-black hair. Her eyes stared up into mine, the silver in her irises swirling with such raw beauty, like two stars burning in the night. I struggled to control my breathing, completely awestruck.

“What is your name?” I asked gently.

The woman studied me closely, hesitating before she answered. “Hesper.”

As the name fell from her lips, my black heart did something it hadn’t done in a very long time: it began to beat. For her. For Hesper.

“I hope you can forgive me.” She grinned, as if knowing my thoughts were completely consumed by her.

“For what?” My thoughts were transfixed by the sound of her voice.

“This.” Hesper moved with a swiftness I had never seen before, kicking my legs out from under me as I fell onto my back, landing in the snow with a heavy thud. She snatched my sword, gathering the overflowing skirts of her gown before rushing around me.

My body rolled as my hand reached out, catching her by the ankle, her body falling forward. She whipped her head around, grunting as she tried to escape my grasp, kicking me with her free leg.

“Let go of me!” Not a chance.

I tugged her body closer as I rolled her torso and pinned her back to the ground. My knees straddled her waist as she struggled, unable to escape my strength. My sword remained tightly in her hand, her feet kicking at air.

“You said you meant no harm,” she gritted out through her teeth.

“And I don’t. But this place is no fit for a lady such as yourself,” I groaned, trying to keep her still. “Would you just?—”

She slammed her head into mine, kicking me from her body as I landed on my ass.

Hesper scrambled to her feet, holding my sword, and aimed it at me as I stared up at her, both amused and impressed.

“Despite what you may think, I am no ordinary lady,” she huffed, brushing her hair from her face.

“My king?” Orion’s voice drifted alongside the cold air. “Morel!”

My head snapped back to Hesper, only to find her vanished like a ghost. A playful laugh escaped my mouth as I stood, wiping the snow from my body, brushing my hair back, my forehead aching from the impact.

No, you are most definitely no ordinary lady, Hesper.

My thoughts drifted, haunted by her beauty and temper as I followed the path back to the garden, stopping at the ivy curtain.

“Until we meet again, Hesper.”

HESPER

I watched as the man stepped past the thick ivy curtain. The king of darkness was not at all what I expected. All the stories and tales I had heard of his existence led me to believe he was some menacing evil monster, part demon and part man, not... that . He was nothing like the stories. He was strong and handsome, the embodiment of the night itself.

King of darkness... What a fitting title.

My eyes fell to his sword in my hand, examining the unique black pommel closely. It was covered in a delicately etched constellation, each point of stars represented by a

tiny, single diamond.

“Gemini,” I whispered, brushing the design with my fingertip. “Interesting.”

My feet quietly moved as I gathered the many skirts of my shredded dress and followed the trail down the mountain, clutching his sword. I carefully moved past the glowing fungi, smiling at their beauty. They were the reason I had chosen to dwell out here, braving the climate and dangers of the woods. I had never seen such astonishing things before, and I was enamored by their fluorescent color and allure. It was a shame they were tucked away from the rest of the world. Truthfully, though, they were too perfect for the eyes of others.

The sounds of horses caught my attention as I approached the ivy, peeking past it. Just beyond the snow-covered trees, the king was speaking to a man. I gripped the sword, quickly slithered past the vines, and ducked behind a tree, hoping to hear what they were saying.

“Forgive me, but I am to believe that you, Morel, the king of darkness, simply slipped on a death cap and hit your head on a rock?” The man scoffed, shaking his head. “Am I also to believe that you somehow misplaced your sword during the fall?”

Morel shrugged as he glanced in my direction. I quickly shot behind a tree, hoping he did not see me. My heart raced as I closed my eyes and waited, hoping he wouldn’t know I was there or come looking for me.

“My sword is somewhere safe, Orion. Safer than we are about to be.” He was leaving.

The sounds of the horses made me open my eyes. I slowly glanced around the tree and watched as he mounted the beast. Orion tossed a new sword at Morel, the two readying themselves as others joined them. They looked to be preparing for

something, decked in all black, weapons secretly hidden amongst their persons. They were prepared to fight.

“It’s a long way to Hellbore, Orion,” Morel smirked. “Try to keep up!” He kicked his horse, the creature rising as it moved its front legs and sped off through the trees. The rest of the men mirrored his actions, chasing after him as they disappeared from view.

Hellbore.

My heart ached as I leaned back against the tree, closing my eyes as my hands squeezed the sword tightly against my chest, a single tear falling down my cheek. The last words I heard before all hell had broken loose echoed in my mind.

Find the kingdom of shadows and trust only the king of darkness.

Be like the sky and remain true; an unchanging symphony of the stars.

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FOUR

MOREL

It had taken most of the day to reach Hellbore, the well-traveled road along the way barren and desolate. It was an unusual and eerie thing that left me unsettled, cautious, my grip on the reigns of my horse tight with anticipation. Boletus may have control of Hellbore, but he had no clue what, or who, was approaching the gates of Hellbore.

The gates to the usually open and welcoming kingdom were shut, guarded by a small party of soldiers dressed in Scorpius uniforms, every soul well-armed. We slowed our pace as we neared, hoping to be mistaken for merely lost or wandering travelers.

“Halt!” One of the guards raised his arm as he stepped towards us, blocking the path to the gate as he held a burning torch. “Who goes there?”

My eyes shot to Orion, my face partially concealed beneath the hood of my cloak. He nodded, kicking his horse forward.

“Good evening! We seemed to have over exhausted ourselves and our resources. It seems this is the only kingdom for a day's ride. We humbly seek shelter from the cold while we replenish our stomachs and allow our horses a small reprise.” Orion waited as the guard eyed us.

“Bit odd to see such a lively gang of riders out this far. What kingdom do you hail from? I see no sigils or flags amongst your persons.”

“Would you believe me if I told you we were a merry troupe of entertainers?” Orion leaned forward, smiling as he winked at the guard, who scoffed.

“Never seen such a well filled group of entertainers before, especially not without instruments.” The guard moved his torch, stepping towards my horse. My hands gripped the reigns tight. “You seem rather large to be a singer.”

“Why, what a compliment!” Orion chimed, directing the guard’s attention back to him. “You know what they say: a well sung song keeps the belly fed and a warm bed.” I rolled my eyes at his ridiculously made up sentiment.

The guard eyed all of us closely, pondering before he tsked.

“Let them in!” he shouted. The remaining guards rushed to the gate, opening it for us. “Fill your bellies, water your horses, then begone with yourselves.”

“I assure you, we plan to do just that.” Orion nodded his thanks as we slowly led the horses through the gates, remaining silent for a moment, waiting to be out of range of the guard.

“Entertainers?” I grumbled.

“Well, I couldn’t have said we were poets now, could I?” A few men in our party tried to hide their laughter as I smiled beneath my hood. “Besides, if required, I would happily prove our lie to be true with a song of my choice, as I’m the only one here with a voice worth listening to.”

“Are you saying I can’t sing?” I asked with a raised brow and smirk.

Orion straightened his posture. “You have many strengths, my king. But,” he cleared his throat, “I believe the heavens knew with a voice like mine, you’d be an

unstoppable force the world was not ready for.”

The party scoffed and laughed amongst themselves. I turned, glancing over my shoulder at them as they hushed and stared forward. I shook my head, clicking my tongue. “Tell you what, Orion—next time you are in need of my many strengths , why don’t you use that lovely voice you claim to have? Would hate to waste my strength when a man of your talents can sing our way to victory.” I grinned at him as he stared at me with a blank face.

“I should have said we were jesters, as you seem to possess such humor.” The men laughed at his sarcastic sentence. “Very well. As it seems I must be the hero in the end, allow me to warm my vocal cords and prepare for battle.”

“No, Orion, don’t?—”

“Ohhhh,” he began to sing, “they say her hair was red like burning fire?—”

“Orion,” I groaned.

“Her eyes were filled with envy and desire.”

“Heavens save me,” I growled as the other men began to join in.

“To men who fell under her spell, beware?—”

“Beware! Beware!” the party shouted.

“She’ll lure a man down to her lair and dine there.”

“I’m surrounded by imbeciles,” I grumbled under their loud singing.

“Oh, if only you had a voice to accompany us, my king.” Orion ruptured into laughter as we neared the small town surrounding the kingdom, the tone shifting from playful to more serious as we noticed numerous Scorpius flags and tapestries hanging around the city walls in place of Hellbore’s.

“It seems Boletus has made himself quite comfortable here.”

“A bit too much, it seems,” Orion stated as we slowly rode the horses through the streets, noticing the cold, quieted voices, all eyes on us as the people of Hellbore, once lively and optimistic, hushed, filled with a sadness that could be felt in my bones.

Our party approached what appeared to be a small inn as the moon began to rise in the sky and the sun faded behind the thick clouds of night.

“A graveyard possesses more life in it than this,” Orion stated as we dismounted our horses and tied their reins. “Something isn’t right here, Morel.”

“Boletus is here... I assure you, there is nothing right about that. We need to inquire about the king and queen and figure out what happened to them and their kingdom.” The party gathered as we exchanged looks. “Be as silent as the night and do what you must. Trust no one.” The men nodded as they slowly faded through the town, and Orion and I inhaled before stepping into the low-lit tavern.

The tavern was oddly quiet, only a few drunken stragglers seated around the room, minding their own business despite their wandering eyes. I knew I stood out, with my large frame and above average height, but I was hoping that, beneath my hooded cloak, I could blend in. In truth, I think it only drew more attention to myself.

Orion approached the bar as I shadowed him, the older gentleman behind it observing us closely. “Good evening, good sir.” I rolled my eyes at this fake persona he was

once again presenting. “Two pints, please. Say, did Hellbore adapt new banners?” The old man’s eyes widened, obviously frightened by the topic.

My own gaze followed, noticing a trio of uniformed men drinking in the farthest corner of the tavern, watching us with narrowed eyes.

“I’m ‘fraid I’m not sure what you’re asking.” He forced a fake smile, pouring the two pints. “Hellbore is, as it has been, peaceful.”

“Deadly peaceful,” Orion muttered under his breath. He leaned close to the old man. “You need not fear us, good sir. I assure you, the kingdom of shadows is friend to all Hellbore.”

The barkeep's face dropped as he realized who we were, frantically eyeing the group in the corner. His sight moved and landed on me, his face silently telling me he knew who I was.

“Heavens. It is you, the king of darkness,” he whispered. I nodded ever so lightly.

The man fumbled with a cloth rag, presenting our pints. As we reached for them, he grabbed our hands and leaned in close and whispered between us. “Hellbore is prisoner to Scorpius, the prince sitting on our king’s throne.”

“Where is he? Where is the king and queen?” I whispered quietly, trying not to draw any attention to ourselves. The barkeep released our hands as Orion sipped the pint.

“There has been no sight of them since prince Boletus attacked, defeating our forces in a fortnight. His men burned all Hellbore’s flags, replacing them with his own. The kingdom has been on curfew, only allowed to move about as he sees fit, his men roaming freely while we suffer in silence or meet our own death. I could hang for simply repeating any of this to you, King Morel.” A low grunt vibrated in my throat

as I stared into the pint. The man crossed his arms, glancing between Orion and myself as he leaned forward. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?” My eyes met his.

“That you, King Agaric’s twin brother, are cursed by the devil himself?”

I stared at him, my brows furrowing as the side of my lips curled upwards. “I am the devil.” His face drained of all color.

“Aye!” Great. The trio of Boletus’ men finished their pints as they stood, and began to slowly approach us. “What’s going on over here?”

The old man looked at me as I sighed, taking a sip of my drink, ignoring them. Orion finished his, slamming the cup down in a dramatic effort.

“Heavens, that’s some good ale! Really quenches the thirst, doesn’t it, boys?” He twirled around, a smug look plastered across his face as the men stopped.

“Can’t say I recognize you or your shy little friend. What business do you two have here in Hellbore?” I had to force myself to keep my eyes low and not react.

“We’re just two entertainers, stopping by for a drink. Care to hear a song?” My eyes moved to the corners, peeking over my shoulder as I watched Orion try to appease the men.

“You two don’t look like entertainers.” One of the men repositioned his hand, revealing a sword at his waist as the others mimicked his motions. It was obvious they were either too stupid or too drunk, looking for a fight.

One of the men stepped to my side, poking my frame. “Yeah, this one here looks

more like a bear.” The three men snickered and chuckled as my jaw tightened.

“Why don’t you two come with us?” The first man unsheathed his sword.

“Easy, gentlemen. There's no need?—”

“Bite your tongue, peasant!” the man by my side hissed at the old man behind the bar.

“You kiss your mother with that mouth?” The man looked at me in horror as I took another sip, pleased with my muffled response.

“What did you say?” he asked.

“Easy,” Orion warned, his usual demeanor returning.

“You’re right. His own mother wouldn’t even kiss his face.”

“You think that’s funny?” He shoved closer, knocking my arm as I spilled the ale.

“Oh hell,” Orion whispered, lowering his head.

“I was drinking that.” My temper was bubbling beneath my skin, my muscles tensing as he and his friends laughed ignorantly at their fatal mistake.

“Oh? And what’re you going to do about it?” The man ripped my hood down. “You’re just a—” My fist swung fast, slamming into the man’s face. He stumbled backward, the sound of his fumbling footsteps and choked voice mixing as he groaned in immense pain. The smell of his blood and taste of fear he emanated was amusing, pulling a gentle grin from the corner of my lips.

“You’re going to pay for that!” the first man snapped.

“Am I now?” I rose, Orion sighing as we both turned to face the drunken uniformed men. My hand moved from beneath the cloak, seamlessly removing it and rolling my sleeves, Orion mirroring my movements as I stood towering over them.

The men froze, their bodies rigid as their eyes trailed up my torso and met my gaze. I knew my features gave away who I was, but the way their eyes widened and faces drained told me the stories did no justice to the monster I really was. Excellent.

“P-please,” the second man began to beg as I stepped closer, rolling my neck. “We-we didn’t know.”

“That was your mistake.” I grinned as I snatched him by the collar of his uniform, raising him off the floor as his feet dangled a few inches in the air. “Not mine.” Before he could utter another word, my forehead slammed into him, my hair brushing past my face as his nose began to bleed. The sound of his pain filling my ears as I released him, watching his measly body fall to the floor. He wriggled around, groaning and whining like a worm.

“Why you—” The second man drew his sword and rushed me; the third, despite his injury, did the same to Orion, claspings his face as he did so.

My arm swung towards him, jabbing his throat as I instantly caused him to choke. My body turned as I gripped his arm and snapped the bone, forcing him to release the weapon and fall to his knees in agony. My hand gripped the sweaty handle of his weapon, tossing it around in my hand as I slammed the round pommel into his face, knocking him unconscious. His body slumped over across the first man, who was still on the floor and crying out as his nose continued to bleed like a fountain.

I turned to face Orion, brushing a few stray hairs from my eyes as he held the third man in a chokehold, handling him perfectly fine on his own. Grinning, I faced the bar, grabbing his empty pint and slamming it onto the man’s face as his eyes rolled.

He slunk from Orion's arms onto the other men's bodies, forcing the single conscious man to groan under their crushing weight.

"I had everything under control," Orion snipped, wiping his tunic as he mumbled under his breath.

"Yes, well, maybe next time, you can sing to him." He rolled his eyes at my snarky remark as I stood over the pile of bodies, stepping onto the back of the man on top, pressing down with my weight as the first man groaned and stared up at me. "Where's Boletus?"

He cried out in pain, refusing to answer.

"I won't ask again." My foot pressed harder as blood began to pour from between the man's clenched teeth, staining them. "Where is Boletus?"

"He—he's up in the castle, probably sitting on the throne." So Boletus had proclaimed himself king of Hellbore. The sound of horses and scurrying feet began to brew outside, telling me it was time to go. I knew it was only a matter of time before someone noticed our presence. My head raised to meet Orion's with frustration and concern.

"Speak of the devil," the bleeding man cackled, drawing my attention back down to him. "The night guard is here. There's no escaping them." My head tilted as I began to smile, the man's expression fading as I pressed my foot harder, increasing the pressure as I spoke.

"That is where you are mistaken. Boletus is not the devil." I pressed with all my strength as the sounds of his bones snapping and body caving in filled my ears. "I am." His eyes watered as blood poured from his gaping mouth until a final snap of his ribs stole his life from him. I waited a few seconds before removing my foot and

approached the bar to find Orion holding my cloak, waiting for me.

“Now that you’ve had your dramatics, shall we leave?” I shot him a look, reaching for my cloak when the doors of the tavern burst open, quickly followed by a swarm of the night guard.

My arm tensed as I remained still, my hand inches from the cloak. The guards filled the tavern, swarming up.

“Fuck.”

Orion and I were kicked to the floor of the throne room, our arms bound behind our backs. We had been stripped of our weapons and forced to Hellbore’s castle. The night guards had taken their time delivering us, seeking pleasure in landing a few blows to our bodies, something they would all come to regret the moment I was free from my binds.

“Well, well, well.” The sound of his smug, annoying voice made my body tighten with anger and exasperation. “If it isn’t the mighty, self proclaimed king of darkness himself.” My eyes rose, peering through the dark strands of my hair up an elaborate set of marble stairs to see him sprawled across the king of Hellbore’s throne, smiling like a petulant child.

He was dressed in his usual attire: an elegant black uniform with golden accents and leather strapping, that ridiculous scorpion sigil sewn across his chest. His dark, wavy hair was tied atop his head, adorned with an elegant silver crown that contrasted his dark skin and dead brown eyes as they burned into mine.

“Boletus,” I spat, insulted by the sight of him disrespecting Hellbore’s throne.

“Morel,” he hissed, jumping to his feet. “Why I must say, I never expected to find

you way out here.” He placed his hands behind his back, stepping down the stairs before he stopped in front of me. His head tilted as he observed me closely. “My, my, what a man you have become. It seems banishment has been good to you, king of darkness. Tell me, does your twin brother know you’re still alive? Still hiding in the shadows while he rules in the sun?” Our eyes locked as a fire burned inside my chest.

My body jolted forward as a woman suddenly appeared, the sound of a whip cracking as it wrapped around my neck, stinging as it constricted like a snake, holding me in place. Boletus erupted in laughter, my eyes straining as I looked at the woman with ire. Her face was hidden behind a dark hood and face covering, only a glimpse of her dark ebony skin and vibrant white eyes peering through. She was dressed in foreign gear, leather sheaths and straps tightly wrapped around her body.

“Allow me to introduce my personal security, Hystrix. She may not be as strong and mighty as you, Morel, but I assure you, no man is a match for her stealth and speed.” He looked at the woman, nodding his head as she released me from the grasp of her whip, my neck stinging as I gasped for air and eyed her with hatred. She slithered closer to Boletus with a cat-like stride, making no sound. “I found this gem a few years back when I overthrew a small southern kingdom. She is a child of the dawn, a small group of warriors who train their whole lives in the art of stealth and killing. Impressive, really. I saved her life, and thus, she is indebted to me.”

“Boletus—” The woman swung her whip with an elegant stride as it slapped my face, splitting my cheek with a stinging kiss.

“ King Boletus.” I clenched my jaw as blood gently rolled down my cheek. “You may be a disgraced prince of Dryade, but you know the customs of royalty. Please,” he pressed his hand against his chest, covering his heart in a faux sense of formality, “do not offend me.” I squeezed my jaw.

“I am no longer a prince of Dryade. That part of me died the day I escaped that hell.”

I forced myself to my feet, slightly towering over Boletus as my chin rose. “And the only king here is me .”

Hystrix hissed, raising her arm as Boletus stopped her, studying me closely before his expression softened.

“You surprise me, King Morel.” He spat the title with exasperation. “The last time I saw you, you were a weak little boy clinging to his mother, the complete opposite of his twin brother, who excelled at everything. It seems in the darkness, you have found your strength. I’ve heard stories of your wickedness, how you have defeated many kingdoms who have opposed you and aligned with your brother, burning them until nothing remained but ash. Now, I shall ask again: does your brother know what you’ve become?”

“Agaric will know the devil he created when it knocks on his door and drags him to hell.”

Boletus slapped his hands with an entertained excitement. “Oh, what a tale this will be. The king of darkness, brother to the king of sunshine, the two trapped in a circle of hatred. Tell me, do you really think your kingdom of rejects and outcasts can defeat such a glorious and ancient kingdom as Dryade?”

“Says the man who defeated Hellbore.” His smile fell. “Tell me,” I stepped closer, “where is King Regalis and his queen, Castanea? What have you done with them?” His dark eyes glared up into mine as he refused to answer me. “Where are my friends?” I grit through bared teeth. Boletus looked away, turning to step back to the throne.

“They chose their fate. I offered to let them live in a fair exchange.”

“You killed them?” My voice cracked in anger as Hystrix stepped in front of me,

cracking a warning with her whip. Boletus looked over his shoulder at me as he spoke, his voice low and dark.

“We had an agreement. It is no fault of mine that they broke it.”

“How dare you!” I shoved past Hystrix, sprinting towards Boletus as he turned to face me, my vision blurring red with rage as my body snapped back, my breathing restricting as her whip returned to my neck. I fell to my knees, unable to move as Boletus smiled.

“As I said, I offered them an exchange: their lives for Hellbore. There was a small catch that they didn’t seem to like, resulting in their untimely demise. You see, Regalis and Castanea have a daughter, a princess of Hellbore. We grew up together. Our families were once friends long ago.” He stopped. “But that is a story for another time. You see, word of my many successful quests and conquering of kingdoms had finally reached my parents, and it was their wish that if I wanted to continue to conquer kingdoms in their name, I should at least pick a bride. I guess they think marriage will slow me down. Ha, what a thought. Nonetheless, my parent’s demand came as I settled in here, so it was decided: I was to marry the princess of Hellbore.”

Was?

“Of course, the viperous little thing didn’t welcome the idea of marriage or being told what to do. When it came time to wed, her treacherous parents helped her escape, forfeiting their lives in the process. You see, I had no choice.” He grinned, completely satisfied with what he had done. “It’s really a double win for me. I get Hellbore without having to settle down. It is a shame, though. Hesper would have made a stunning bride.”

Hesper? My thoughts returned to the striking beauty I had discovered in the garden of my death caps. The beauty in a ruined wedding dress.

Boletus remained still as he stared at me, wrapped in his assassin's whip on my knees. He snapped his fingers as the whip once again released me, Hystrix returning to his side.

"Considering our past, and that you share blood with my good friend Agaric, I shall let you go." What? "You and your companion will be returned to the gates of Hellbore and sent on your way." Boletus climbed the ivory stairs, sitting on the throne of Hellbore as his night guard approached and removed our binds. I couldn't help but stare, completely perplexed by his unexpected decision.

"Why?" I asked, hesitant to his kindness.

"Consider it a favor," he winked. "Your brother has placed a mighty reward on your head, prince of Dryade. Instead of collecting that prize, I am simply letting you go. In return, you are to leave me and all of Hellbore be. If you return, or try to stop me in any way, I shall have no choice but to write to Dryade and rain hell upon your kingdom of shadows." He retrieved an apple from a bowl of fruit at his side, taking a bite as he tossed it into the air and caught it.

"Be gone, king of darkness. Your duty to Hellbore is fulfilled and your presence is no longer required." He waved his hand for his guard to usher us away. "Oh, Morel." I stopped, growling at the sound of my name from his smug mouth. "If by any chance you learn the whereabouts of my bride, I expect you to relay such information directly to me." He took a second bite as I glanced back at him over my shoulder. "We may not have had the pleasure of exchanging our vows, but she belongs to me. I very much look forward to breaking her spirit on our wedding night." He winked again as I turned away.

Like hell I will.

The guards rushed us to the gate, the rest of our party awaiting our return. The guard

at the gate spat at my feet as Orion and I were shoved outside. I glanced back at the distant glow of Hellbore's castle, my nostrils flared and muscles bulging with an odd and unfamiliar emotion.

Hesper belongs to no one. I turned, Orion and my party silently following me as we began the long and tedious journey home.

I may have failed the kingdom of Hellbore, but I would protect its daughter at all costs.

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:31 am

FIVE

HESPER

My fingers dug into the frozen ground, creating a small hole as I placed one of the tiny, fluorescent blue mushrooms inside it, gently padding the dirt back into place beneath the shadows of an overhanging tree.

“Grow strong, sweet little mushrooms. I shall care for you. As long as I am here, you shall thrive in the darkness.” My lips curled ever so lightly. Ever since I arrived in the kingdom of shadows, I had taken it upon myself to care for these little fungi. They were all alone out here, with no one to tend to them or help them grow. It felt oddly natural and soothing to do such a task. Since I had begun, the garden had almost doubled in size, the little mushrooms growing at such an impressive rate. “Sweet little night caps.”

“Death caps.”

My body swung at the sound of his voice, and I drew the sword I had stolen from him, aiming it in his direction as he remained peacefully still, a gentle smile curling from his mouth. It had been days since I last laid eyes on the king of darkness, oddly eased to see him returned from Hellbore in one piece.

The king’s eyes reluctantly moved from me to the mushrooms, spying the recently planted fungi. I could then feel his gaze as it traveled along my skin, noticing my rough and dirty appearance.

“Your dress,” he stated, pointing to the dirt-stained wedding gown.

“Yes, well, it’s not exactly ideal to garden in. I simply tailored it to my needs.” I raised a brow, ignoring the fact that I had ripped the sleeves, using them to tie my hair from my face and make a sheath for his sword. The skirts had been stripped to a single layer; I’d created a small bed for myself, using what leftover scraps I had to assist me in gardening the little mushrooms.

My eyes rose to his, staring at the warmth of his amber eyes, like two suns setting on a cold winter’s night. They complimented his dark hair, the black almost a deep blue in the peeking sunlight. His pale skin was covered in scars, old and new, giving him an interesting rugged appearance. I noticed a fresh cut along his cheek, my eyes falling to the skin of his bruised neck. Intriguing.

Despite his soft smile, he seemed menacing and powerful. The stories of his appearance may have been farfetched, but they did get one thing correct—the king of darkness was the embodiment of night itself.

I had to shake the wandering thoughts aside, reassuring my grip on the handle of his mighty sword as I kept it aimed at him, ready to strike.

“You seem familiar with a blade.” He stepped closer as I adjusted my stance.

“I assure you, I am quite skilled with a sword. It would be in the king’s best interest to keep his distance.” Despite my parents’ words, I hesitated. I knew it was my duty to seek him out, but something about him made my stomach flutter in a way that scared me.

“Any man would be a fool to cross swords with a daughter of Hellbore.” I gasped, his words nearly knocking me over as he moved swiftly, suddenly raising a sword of his own, our blades meeting as I deflected his swing and adjusted my stance once more.

“But alas, I am no fool.” He grinned, mirroring my feet as he too stood with a skillful stance.

I had to harden my emotions, half surprised and half insulted by the idea of him doing such a thing. King or not, no man raised a sword to me and lived to walk away from it.

“You dare to strike at me?” I whacked his sword with my own, twirling as I swung, barely missing his arm. He moved gracefully, attempting to strike back but also missing me. We stood, moving opposite the other as we planned our next moves.

“I mean you no harm, Hesper.” I lunged at my name as it fell from his lips, his hand gripping my wrist, stopping my blade as it reached inches from the side of his waist. He looked down at me as he smiled, his hair falling in front of his eyes and casting his face in a thick layer of shadows. He leaned close enough that it tickled my ear as he whispered deeply. “You can’t keep hiding here in my garden, daughter of Hellbore. Boletus is looking for you.”

My eyes widened at that traitor’s name, fueling my anger as I lost control of my temper. I raised my head, preparing to slam it into his, when he dodged me once more, my body instead falling forward into the snow. I rotated onto my backside, glaring up at him as he kicked the sword from my hand and towered over me.

“I can offer you protection. My protection.” He threw his sword aside and reached his hand out to me, offering it as I stared at his pale hand. I raised a brow and launched a fistful of snow into his eyes, causing him to stumble back. I returned to my feet and ran straight for him, tackling him back into the snow, my legs straddling his large torso. I lifted what was left of my wedding skirt, exposing my thigh as he watched me retrieve a micro blade, aiming it at his exposed, bruised neck.

“I don’t need your protection. I can handle Boletus and his pet, Hystrix, all on my

own.” His smile only grew as he flipped us, knocking the blade from my hand as he slammed me onto my back.

“I do not doubt your capabilities, princess, but the king and queen of Hellbore—your parents—were my friends. You are safe here, Hesper. I give you my word.”

“Forgive me, but the last king I trusted betrayed my kingdom and murdered my parents. How do I know your word means anything more than the wind that blows through the trees?” A small crystal fastened around his neck fell from his tunic and hung in the air between us.

“Your crystal,” I whispered, resisting him no longer. His eyes fell to it then back to me, confused by the change in my demeanor. “Where did you get it?”

The king released my hands, sitting back as he remained over me, gripping the small crystal close before tucking it back under his tunic. He gave an odd expression as a dark cloud hung over, painting him in a more fitting image of his title. The king of darkness.

“It was my mother’s.”

“Your mother was a daughter of the night?” He seemed to hear my words but not the meaning behind them. I gently rose as he moved away, allowing me to sit up. “May I?” My hand extended towards the crystal, waiting as he eyed me closely before hesitantly removing it from his neck. He placed it in my open palm, his skin meeting mine as a wave of electricity shot through my veins. I nearly gasped at the surprisingly gentle touch; the clear crystal rested in my palm, instantly glowing.

“What did you do?” he asked, his tone surprised.

“Nothing.” I smiled, looking at him as his eyes remained fixated on the now glowing

crystal. “I too am a daughter of the night, blessed at birth by the moon goddess herself. You asked me how I came to be skilled with a sword? Well, this is how. Each daughter is granted a gift by the goddess. I wonder what your mother’s gift was. She must’ve been powerful to possess such a token.”

“If my mother did possess any talents, I’m afraid my father snuffed them out long ago.”

“I’ve heard stories of Queen Mellea. She was quite a beauty, but she had a raw thirst for knowledge and a love for all living things. I wonder if you possess those gifts as well.” My eyes met his as he stared at me, transfixed.

“She did love her death caps.”

“ Her death caps?” My eyes slowly gazed around us, realizing the garden I stood in was not his, but his mother’s.

I had to force my eyes away, extending my arm as I presented the crystal back to him, watching as he concealed it once more beneath his clothing. The king stood, offering his hand to me.

“Forgive me, I did not?—”

He gripped my hand, forcing me up from the snow as my body slammed into his, his arms casually resting around my waist as we stared into each other’s eyes. Time felt like it had slowed, nearly halting as I gazed into the warmth of his irises, the sun glaring back at me. I was lost in the sky of his presence, the heavens and the stars colliding in that moment as I felt something I had never felt before.

“Here.” He lifted his necklace, gently placing the crystal around my neck.

“Why—no, I cannot.” Why would he give me such a treasure? I couldn’t accept it. I tried to remove it, but he stopped me.

“Please.” The whispered word sounded more like a plea than anything else. “I thought I needed it, but it seems I don’t anymore. If my mother truly was a daughter of the night, then it is only fitting you wear it, as you are one yourself.”

“But this is all you have of her.” Why would a king gift someone like me such a valued thing?

“My mother would want you to have it.” My heart nearly skipped at his words, feeling the crystal against the skin of my chest as it glowed. “It seems to feel safe with you.”

“My parents wanted me to find you,” I whispered as he watched me. “I was going to marry him—Boletus—to save them, but they refused. They wouldn’t let it be, saying the only reason to marry is for love, and nothing else. They knew their fate when they sent me away. I tried to convince them to join me, but my father said ‘a king shall never abandon his kingdom’.” Tears began to form in my eyes as I refused to blink. I didn’t want to appear weak, not to him. “The last thing my parents said to me was to find the kingdom of shadows and trust only the king of darkness. Be like the sky and remain true; an unchanging symphony of the stars.”

“What does that mean?” he asked, unchanged by my words.

“Hellbore is a kingdom of the night. We study the heavens and let the moon guide our hearts. It is a phrase taught to us all, to remain true and strong even in the face of death itself. Like stars, burning with a desire to exist. Now that Boletus has taken control of my kingdom, there will be no more kingdom of the night. He will destroy it and leave only fire and poison in his wake. Please.” I slid from his gentle grasp and fell to my knees. “I, Hesper, princess and daughter of Hellbore, pledge my loyalty to

you, same as my father, King Regalis. My only request is that you avenge my parents and help me reclaim my kingdom.” My eyes rose, a single tear falling down my cheek as I stared up at him. “Help me kill Boletus, and I shall forever be in your debt, king of darkness.” The king delicately grabbed my hand and helped me to my feet.

“You are Hellbore. You bow to no one.” His statement confused me. “I may be a king, but you are not just the princess of Hellbore. You, Hesper, are now its queen, and I,” he lowered himself down to his knees, “I bow at your feet.”

I couldn’t speak, too shocked and perplexed.

“A king bows to no one,” I whispered.

“The king of darkness does whatever he pleases, my queen.” His queen. “I will help you avenge your parents, but I must be truthful. Grisset, my kingdom, is still growing. We are no match for Boletus and the forces of Hellbore. Help me build this kingdom and train its forces, and I shall lead you to Boletus myself and place your father’s crown upon your head as you take back your throne.”

I didn’t personally enjoy the idea of having to wait for my revenge, but if helping him ensured an easier victory, it only made sense. Truthfully, I was grateful.

“I shall do as you ask, my king, and help you build your forces and train them in that of Hellbore’s ways.” I softly offered a curtsy as he smiled, rising to his feet.

“Morel.” He picked up the two swords, offering his back to me.

“What?” I stared at the pommel, hesitating before accepting it.

“My name is Morel.” He gently guided me away from the garden of mushrooms. “Now, let me show you my kingdom of shadows.”

My eyes returned to the fluorescent heaven behind us as we approached an ivy curtain. I stopped, a sadness falling over me. Morel noticed, patiently waiting.

“Is everything alright?” My eyes grazed the snowy escape, breathing in the thick, cold air. He watched me closely, realizing my hesitation. “Do you enjoy them that much?” he asked.

“I do,” I whispered.

“Then you are welcome here whenever you like, Hesper.”

“They are like a garden of shadows,” I stated softly, turning to face him, my fingers curled along the crystal that now hung from my neck.

“A garden of shadows. What a fitting name.” Indeed it was. I glanced at the notorious king.

Heavens knows what gifts lay sleeping in his midnight soul.

The kingdom of Grisset was bursting with life, something I hadn't expected. Everyone was helping one another, bustling with joy and happiness. I watched as children ran past us, playing with Morel as he laughed alongside them, the legendary king of darkness nothing more than a humble man who flourished with his people. It was warming to watch as more of his people would venture near, informing him of their triumphs and success in building the kingdom. He asked about their lives and acted as though he was one of his people. It reminded me of my father. It was no wonder he trusted Morel.

As we approached the gates of his castle, I noticed a vibrant purple flower growing along the stone path and gothic gate.

“Wolfsbane,” I whispered with excitement, rushing to it.

Morel stopped, watching me as I approached the wildflowers, brushing their petals with the tips of my fingers.

“You know this flower?” he asked, shadowing me. “Careful.” He tried to hold me back, but I gave him a look. “I’ve seen what they can do to people if you venture too close.”

“Just as your death caps were beloved by your mother, wolfsbane is beloved by me. In Hellbore, we had a whole garden of these poisonous beauties. Much like those little blue mushrooms, I cared for them. The day Boletus arrived, he burned all our gardens, including the wolfsbane. What he didn’t realize is that, by doing so, he released their toxic perfume. It carried with the wind and killed parts of my kingdom. He made us listen as they died, crying out for help.” I turned to look up at him. “There is no cure for wolfsbane poisoning. Once it lures you in with its beauty, it grips your soul with its scent until it drags it to hell, leaving nothing but your flesh and bones. It possesses you as you fall under its spell.” I turned back to the flower.

“How can you be so close to it?” Morel asked, watching me closely.

“Simple.” My fingers reached to the flower’s stem, plucking it free as I pulled it close and inhaled. “I built an immunity long ago. By slowly introducing it to your body, overtime, it does you no harm.”

“Interesting. Your wolfsbane seeds must’ve carried with the wind when Boletus burned them. These flowers,” he reached out, hesitating before stroking a lavender petal, “began to grow overnight one day, consuming all around my castle. My people were unsure of what they were, so they kept their distance. A few were unfortunate.” He removed his hand. “It’s an odd thing, don’t you think?”

“What is?”

“That your kingdom's flowers would grow here. It is as though Hellbore knew its daughter would one day reside in my kingdom, sending these here to comfort you.” He smiled, stepping away as I turned and asked a hasty question.

“Is that how your mother’s death caps came to be here?” He stopped, his back stiffening as he fell silent. “When you were exiled, did you bring them here for comfort?”

“Those death caps are all I have left of her.” Morel slowly turned, his face cast in a shadow of sadness. “The day I escaped Dryade, I took nothing but a handful of those glowing mushrooms. It wasn’t until I reached the woods of this kingdom that I felt safe enough to plant them. I didn’t know how much they loved the cold until then. Their exceptional growth is the reason I chose this place for my home.” He looked around at the snowy landscape. Morel had chosen one of the most beautiful places to lay his roots, the entire kingdom covered in blankets of snow and black bark trees. I felt as though I was existing in a painting.

“They are poisonous too.” I turned back to him, noticing a single death cap now in his palm, glowing in the shadows of his body. “Their glow is poisonous if ingested. My mother studied these little things, alongside all the plants and herbs she could get her hands on. But these...” He held the mushroom out to me. “She was astonished something so beautiful could be so deadly.”

I accepted the tiny fungi, holding it next to the flower in my hand, admiring their blue and lavender hues together.

“It is mesmerizing how the most beautiful things are the deadliest.” I could feel Morel’s eyes on me.

“Indeed it is.”

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Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:31 am

SIX

HESPER

Birds singing and the smell of a fresh fire crackling woke me from such sound and peaceful sleep. I almost didn't want to get up, too content in my bed beneath the warm, silky sheets. I had been living in Morel's castle for quite some time, learning more about him and his people. He was so fond of them, but more so of Orion, a man who may not have shared his blood but was more his brother than his evil twin Agaric.

I had heard tales of the twins of Dryade, one blessed by the sun, the other by what everyone claimed was the devil himself, but they were wrong. Morel and Agaric were simply day and night, born brothers, but their rivalry reached deeper than their blood. As a descendant of a daughter of the moon, it only made sense as to why Morel was so different. He was a son of the night himself and gifted. He only needed to learn how to embrace it.

As I rose from the bed, I noticed I wasn't alone. Crouched in front of the onyx fireplace was Morel. He was poking at the growing flames, remaining quiet as a mouse.

Such a caring man. It was no wonder his people loved him so. I too had grown fond of the king of shadows. Morel slightly turned his head, noticing me as I clutched the bedding close to my chest in a frail attempt to cover my body.

"Forgive me." He stood, backing towards the door. "I didn't mean to wake you.

Winter has landed here in Grisset, covering everything in a thick blanket of cold. I wanted to ensure you had a strong enough fire to keep you warm. I know Hellbore rarely falls to such low temperatures.”

“I have always preferred the cold myself.” Something flashed across his face as he tried to hide a smile, and my stomach fluttered at his expression.

“I shall leave you to get ready.” Morel turned to the door to leave.

“Morel,” I whispered. The way his name fell from my lips sent a chill up my spine as he stopped. “Thank you.” The phrase was all I could manage, though for some reason, I wanted to say more.

“Anything for you, my queen.” Morel exited my room, gently closing the door as I remained in the bed, dropping the bedding, my eyes fixated on where he had stood.

His queen.

My eyes moved to the onyx fireplace, stepping from the bed as I approached it, basking in the golden warm that consumed my body. My fingers trailed along the mantle, overgrown with the tiny death caps. When Morel presented this room to me upon my arrival, it was barren, aside from these beauties. He had Orion furnish the room in grand things, things ‘fitting a queen of the night’ as he had stated. As glamorous and stunning as the room had become, it was too much. I didn’t feel deserving of such things. Moonstones and crystal adorned every surface of the room, silver accents popping from all the blue and purple fabrics and tapestries. It felt as though the goddess had designed the room herself, reflecting the night skies within it. Such magnificence. My eyes fell back to the mantle, tracing a lavender petal of the wolfsbane flower that had grown from the single stem I plucked my first night here. The flower had grown alongside the mushroom, reaching high above to the ceiling and down the walls. I felt as though I was living in my own personal garden.

I inhaled the alluring scent, closing my eyes as my brain tingled at the dulled toxin perfume. Despite my eagerness to defeat Boletus and return to my kingdom, I had slowly begun to grow more patient, enjoying my time here in Grisset. I had felt more in place amongst its people, hidden in the cold mountain shadows, than I ever did in my own kingdom.

The wind whistled outside, drawing my attention to the large, stained glass window. I walked to it, opening the panes as I gasped at the sight before me. Snow stretched as far as the eye could see, the sky drenched in a lavender glow as small flakes drizzled from the heavens. I had never seen such wintry powder as this. My bare feet moved, unphased by the cold as I stepped out onto the stone terrace in only my thin, silver silk nightdress. The material brushed along my feet like liquid metal as my hair fell down my back and reached my waist. My fingers played with the crystal around my neck as I inhaled the scents around me, feeling the snowflakes as they kissed my skin and melted into my flesh. I felt at peace.

My eyes fell to the landscape below, the sounds of the kingdom filling my ears. I leaned against the stone terrace as I glanced below and admired everything. There were children running, throwing snowballs and giggling. Animals pranced in the powder, the normal hustle and buzz of the people lifted as they seemed to all admire the snow and cold. I couldn't help but smile and laugh at it all, gleaming with how truly happy his kingdom was.

This may be the kingdom of shadows, but it is filled with nothing but love and light.

As my gaze wandered, I noticed Morel off in the distance, chopping wood just on the outskirts of the frozen forest. He was shirtless, his blue-black hair tied high as his skin glistened in the light. I watched him closely, admiring the way his muscles bulged and his body moved as he swung the axe, gracefully splitting a log in half with one motion.

An older woman approached him with an empty wheelbarrow as he stopped, sinking the axe into the stump he used to chop the wood, and began to carry numerous logs to her. His strength was astonishing, but his kindness even more so. I leaned further, my hair falling along my bare arms as I watched him closely, dazed by him completely. The old woman thanked him and left as he lifted the axe without hesitation.

“Queen Hesper!” The loud shout not only startled me but caught his attention as his eyes scanned the land to see a group of children shouting at me from below, waving their arms and smiling. His gaze lifted to me, locking with mine as I stood there frozen—not from the cold, but from embarrassment.

Morel grinned, crossing his arms as my cheeks burned and blushed. I quickly forced my eyes away, smiling and waving at the children before rushing back inside and closing the window. My heart was pounding. I turned to look back in his direction, watching as he returned to chopping the logs, my thoughts blurring as I watched him, my kingdom’s words playing in my head.

Be like the sky and remain true; an unchanging symphony of the stars.

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SEVEN

MOREL

“Come to watch me work?” I swung the axe as it split the log in half. Hesper approached me, dressed in winter attire, her hair free and blowing in the winter wind as she crossed her arms. My mother’s crystal was hanging around her neck, glowing faintly. I tried not to smile at the sight of her before me, wearing the trinket, knowing she had been watching me.

“I came to see if you needed any help.” She eyed me as I tossed the split wood aside, loading a second log.

“Does my queen know how to chop firewood?” I teased, swinging my axe again. Hesper grinned, her silver eyes glistening like stars as she made a cocky face.

“There are many things about me you do not know, king of darkness.” She slowly walked around me, eyeing me up and down as I stood there, shirtless and sweating. I enjoyed the feel of her gaze on my body, my breathing slowly increasing as she walked in front of me. “Just as I am sure there are many things about you that no one knows.” Her sights fell to the many scars along my flesh as she raised her hands and gently ran her fingers along the raised skin.

I tried to remain still and hide my racing heart, but something told me she knew exactly what she was doing and enjoyed it as much as I did.

“Everyone has secrets buried in their souls. Some of us,” I grabbed her wrist as she

released a gentle gasp, “hide them better than others, waiting for the day another soul comes along, curious to know more. I may not know much about you, my queen, but deep down, do you not wish to unload those dark shadows of your own heart? To share them with another and be truly at peace?”

Hesper gazed into my eyes, her cheeks blushing softly as she pushed her hand within my grasp, touching the healed scar along my cheek. “How would one even know if such a soul even exists?” I closed my eyes and rested my head in her palm, my hand sliding to her forearm as she did so. Her touch was so gentle, the opposite of how she normally portrayed herself. She was beautiful and strong, like the flower she loved so dearly. My own wolfsbane.

I opened my eyes and placed my hand over hers.

“What does your soul feel?” My own heart nearly leaped from my chest as her metallic eyes gazed deeply into my own. I could sense her guard dropping, longing to know she was experiencing what I was. I wanted to pull her close and ask her, to pour all my feelings out at her feet, but something told me she was still apprehensive. Besides, she was a true queen. I was merely an outcast clinging to a title that held no real merit.

How could someone as absolutely perfect and regal as she ever choose someone like me?

A look flashed across Hesper’s face as she broke from our held gaze, gently recoiling her hand. I wanted to stop her, to keep her there in that moment with me, but it was not my place. I would never force her to do anything.

“I’m afraid my soul is as lost as I am in this world.” She stepped away, taking the axe from my hand. “But I do know one thing.” Her hands twirled the handle as her smile returned.

“And what is that?” I asked. She turned, placing a log on the stump as she gracefully swung the axe and split it into two with little effort. Truthfully, I was both aroused and impressed by it. She turned to look at me, grinning.

“I can chop wood a lot faster than you.” My lips curled as I turned to grab a second axe.

“Bring it on, Hellbore.”

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EIGHT

HESPER

“Good! Now, arch your back a little more and keep your head high.” My hand repositioned the soldier’s posture as he let me mold him. “When you strike, you move with confidence.” I stepped back, nodding as the two chosen men sparred, demonstrating the techniques I had recently taught them. Morel’s forces were strong, growing in number almost every day as his kingdom flourished and welcomed the many newcomers. It had nearly tripled in size since my arrival, his armies filled with neglected men and women from other kingdoms, dedicated to him. It was an honor to teach them the ways of Hellbore.

“You have done well, Queen Hesper,” Orion stated, smiling at Morel’s men as he watched them train.

“I wouldn’t have succeeded had you not prepared them yourself.” His smile branched higher as he chuckled.

“Your flattery is sweet but untrue. I am skilled myself, but I am no teacher.” He patted my arm, excusing himself as he headed towards the castle.

“Again!” I shouted as the two returned to their starting positions and sparred once more, this time executing the fighting techniques with near perfection. I couldn’t help but smile, proud of how quickly they all seemed to learn. I watched the two men, signaling to another soldier, a young woman. She moved with grace, slithering between the two, knocking them both on their backsides, pointing a sword in each

hand at their throats. I clapped, the rest of the soldiers surrounding them cheering her victory.

“Wonderful!” The three bowed, returning to their lines as I stood in front of the army of the night, Morel’s sword in my hand. “You have honored me,” I shouted at them, walking up and down their lines. “Each and every one of you has proven your worth time and time again over these last few months, training endlessly to ensure perfection. I can say with much confidence that you are, without a doubt, the most skilled army I have ever laid eyes on!”

The men and women cheered, banging their swords to their shields as they rejoiced at how far they’d come.

“You may not have been born in my kingdom, but you all have a piece of Hellbore in your hearts! You are not only the army of the night, but you are my army! The army of Hellbore!” The sea of darkness cheered, the ground rumbling as they stomped their feet. “Until the heavens fall onto the Earth!”

“A symphony of stars!” the soldiers hollered back at me.

I could feel my skin glowing with such excitement and pride. My smile nearly reached my ears as I looked to see him standing among his people, clapping alongside them, grinning, those golden, amber eyes burning through my soul.

Morel.

“You have done well, my queen!” The soldiers around him quieted as the rest followed, dropping to their knees in unison at his presence. The respect they had for him was unmatched.

“King Morel,” I whispered as I began to bow myself.

“I told you,” he stepped through the crowd and approached me, lifting my chin with such ease, “you do not bow to me.” My cheeks burned despite the cold, snowy field. I could feel everyone’s eyes on us.

“Have you come to watch your army train?” I asked, standing as his hand slowly fell to his side. “Or perhaps you’ve come to offer guidance on their training?”

“Something tells me they are in capable hands.” His smile remained. “I will admit, you have done the impossible, creating the largest and most skilled army I have ever seen. But?—”

“But?” I made a face and raised a brow as he glanced out at his troops.

“If you have trained them in the ways of Hellbore, and we attack Hellbore, how will they have the upper hand? Would they not be equal to those of Boletus’ forces?”

I scoffed at his words. “I assure you, King Morel, I know more than just the fighting style of Hellbore. You forget, I am a daughter of the night, and my gift is combat. I have taught your army everything I know. There is no force between the heavens or hell that can match them.”

“Care to test that theory?” Theory? I snapped my head in his direction, insulted at his question.

“You doubt me?” Morel shrugged, retrieving a sword from his side, twirling it as he stepped near me.

“You may be skilled in Hellbore combat and blessed by the goddess,” he cracked his neck, “but I am skilled in my own way.” Morel took a fighting stance, smiling as he awaited my rebuttal.

“I see.” I released a high-pitched whistle as his forces stood in perfect unison. Morel looked around, impressed with their uniform. “Army of the night, it seems your king has challenged me. Should I accept?” The men and women began to pound their shields into the ground, creating a deep, rhythmic beat, telling me their answer. “Your men have spoken.” My fingers curled tightly around the hilt of his sword in my hand. “Shall we?”

Morel stepped to the center of the field, swinging the sword as I shadowed him. We slowly paced in a circle, the sound of his army beating with my own heart.

“Ladies first,” he teased.

“And yet, you remain still.” Morel made a face, trying not to laugh as I smiled, baring my teeth.

Within the blink of an eye, he began to charge me, moving swiftly as he lunged the tip of his sword in my direction. I curved my body, spinning away as he stumbled, quickly regaining his footing and chasing after me. He might have been substantially larger than me, but I had the upper hand with my speed, using it to my advantage.

My feet quickened as I jumped from a nearby boulder, flipping backwards as he watched me in awe, the ends of my hair brushing along his face as I landed behind him, twirling and meeting his sword.

“You never cease to amaze me, Hellbore.” Gritting my teeth, I tried to rotate my blade away from him, the metal of the swords sliding along the other as his back slammed into the boulder, our weapons crossed between us. We both groaned as we pushed against the other, oddly matched in the moment.

“You’ve seen nothing yet, my king.”

Morel raised a brow at my words as they also took me back. My guard fell as he took advantage and knocked my blade down and pointed the tip of his towards my neck. The surrounding army halted, the world falling into a wintry silence as my heart raced in my ears with my heavy breathing.

“I rather like hearing you call me your king.” He stepped closer, smug. “Admit your defeat.” My face darkened as I began to grin, Morel’s own expression falling as he looked at me with confusion.

“I wouldn’t get used to it.” My feet stepped closer, his blade piercing my neck as he tried to pull back. My hand gripped his, holding him in place as I stared up at him, the army resuming their rhythmic beat, a single drop of blood trailing down my chest. “And I have not lost.”

As the words left my lips, my arm swung, knocking his sword away from my neck, my other hand swinging as it landed roughly against his cheek. Morel slammed back into the bolder again, watching me with wide eyes as I flipped backward once more, gripping my sword and landing in a perfect fighting stance. He stood there as he felt his reddened face, completely shocked by what I had done.

“Do you yield?” I asked.

Morel dropped his hand and spat onto the snow, blood staining it as he tied his hair up high and removed his tunic. My lips pressed together at the sight of him, knowing I had hit a nerve while enjoying the sight of him shirtless. Again.

“I would suggest you put your clothing back on. Wouldn’t want to add to your collection of scars.” Morel scoffed at my teasing threat, tossing his sword back and forth between his hands as he began to walk in my direction.

“You can scar my skin whenever you like, my queen.” He suddenly sprinted towards

me, completely throwing me off as I tried to outrun him. I smiled, breathing through my teeth. Fighting Morel, having him chase me, was exhilarating.

My feet kicked off another rock as my body rotated. I dropped, facing him as I pushed and used the snow to slide beneath his legs, knocking him to the ground. He rolled, catching his footing as we both turned to face one another, half crouched and panting from our used energy. Before he could make a move, I lunged to my feet, running towards him, aiming the sword. He blocked my strike, spinning as we spared, meeting each other's blows. It felt like a warrior's dance, the two of us moving to the army's beating shields as we swayed and matched in both skill and speed. I could see sweat forming around his forehead and body, causing his pale skin to glisten in the light. Despite the strength he used, he was anything but tired.

"Tell me," I huffed, crossing blades with him. "Now that your army is ready, will you strike Hellbore?" Morel's face remained firm, his thoughts concealed from me as I watched him closely, waiting for a response. He pushed me back, continuing our dance as we moved together, shadowing the other.

"I gave you my word." His voice was flat. I could sense another emotion hidden within it, I just wasn't sure which.

"What if—" I kicked his torso as he stumbled back, quickly regaining his footing, holding his stance strong. My eyes fell to his sword in my hand, eyeing the Gemini etching closely. "What if I asked you to break your word?"

Morel's stance slacked as he eyed me.

"Do you think they are not ready?" He spun towards me, hitting my blade as we stood face to face, our swords crossed as our eyes locked.

"Your army is more than ready. But I fear?—"

“What do you fear?” He stepped closer, his amber irises filled with such concern. My voice struggled to form words, overtaken by the sight of him. “Hesper,” he whispered. “I promised to protect you, but I cannot do so if there is something ailing you. Please,” his soft begging nearly melted me, “what do you fear?”

“What if we attack Boletus and take back my kingdom?”

“Then you will be crowned Queen of Hellbore and rule as your father intended.”

“What if that’s a future I no longer wish for?” His face pressed with confusion.

“What are you saying?”

“What if—” My eyes studied him closely, anxious and scared to admit the truth. “What if I choose to remain here, ensuring your forces were unstoppable? Would such a future be possible?” His eyes burned into mine, our swords close to our faces.

“You are owned by no one, my queen. If you wish to stay in my kingdom, you need not ask my permission.” My heart sped faster and faster, increasing in speed with each second. The air thickened between us, our breaths fogging around our faces as we froze in that moment.

The army suddenly stopped pounding their shields, breaking the spell between us as I blinked, the sound of footsteps trotting through the snow.

“Am I interrupting?” Orion asked, approaching us in the field. Morel’s face softened as he slowly lifted his sword and stepped away from me, smiling.

“Not at all. Queen Hesper was simply pointing out how rusty I’ve become.” Morel’s eyes finally broke away as I exhaled, relieved at their absence.

“And such a task requires the king to be shirtless?” Orion asked, looking between the two of us. Morel gripped his clothing, grimacing.

“Either tell me the news you bare or grab a sword.” He had such a temper.

“As much as I’d love to join you, I’m afraid your presence is required in the throne room.”

“Very well,” Morel grumbled.

“Forgive me, my king, but both your presences.” Their eyes moved to me as my stomach dropped.

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NINE

HESPER

“Care to explain what is going on, Orion?” Morel plopped down into his throne. It was large and elegant, made from black onyx, like many of the furnishings in his now-completed castle. Orion stood at the foot of the dais that led to Morel’s single throne, his arms clasped behind his back as he sighed, preparing to speak as I watched from the side of the grand throne room.

“I believe I can answer, my king.” An older man stepped from the shadows, startling me as Morel’s face lit up in his presence.

“Dr. Altair!” He stood from his throne and rushed to the man, embracing him in such a familiar way. “I have sent many messengers to find you! You’ve been gone far too long! How are you? How was your journey?” Morel helped the old man to a nearby chair, hanging onto his every word.

I stepped from the wall and approached Orion, eyeing the man closely as I watched him and Morel exchange pleasantries.

“If I didn’t know any better, I would presume that man to be Morel’s father.” Orion lightly chuckled at my words, glancing back at me.

“They may not share blood, but Dr. Altair is the only true father Morel has ever had. He has only ever loved and supported him, even when he served King Jove in Dryade.”

“He served Morel’s father?” I asked, surprised by the fact. Orion nodded.

“Indeed, though his true allegiance was to Morel’s mother, Queen Mellea, and Morel. He always looked out for them, protecting them from King Jove’s hatred.” I watched as the two men continued to speak.

“Why did King Jove hate them so?” Orion’s eyes met mine as he sighed.

“King Jove was a jealous, hateful man. He ruled not with love, but fear, the opposite of Morel’s mother. You see, their marriage was not for love, but power. It was the only thing the king cared for until Agaric was born. He’s the spitting image of their father, unlike Morel. You could stand them side by side and see the similarities, but Morel is the complete opposite of his twin in every way. While Jove took a liking to Agaric, Mellea did so with Morel. She nurtured him with kindness and love, protecting him from his father’s abuse as much as possible. When she died, Morel had no choice but to leave.”

“Why?” Orion looked back to Morel, beaming at the old man.

“Because he claimed he was the devil’s son.”

“But he is not.” I stated. “The only difference is the hue of his existence.”

“Indeed, but King Jove is not a logical man.” A sadness fell over me. “Truthfully, I think he knew Morel would blossom into the man he is, and I think it terrified him. He favored Agaric, and any threat to Agaric’s reign was a threat to the king himself, even if it was his own son.”

“Why is Morel Agaric’s opposite in every way? His mother did not have the same features, did she?” I felt curious to know his story, the truth of how he came to be the man he was.

“I cannot say, but I know she was gifted. No one was as smart as Queen Mellea.”

“Hesper! Orion!” Morel called us over, his happy, joyful expression replaced with something more serious. “You might want to hear this.”

The two of us exchanged a look, stepping to join him and the old man.

“I was informing the king of the reasoning behind my prolonged journey back home. Boletus has not only overthrown Hellbore, but he has now expanded his reach to the small outer towns. There is nothing left.” My arms fell at his grim words.

“Are you sure? All the outer cities?” Dr. Altair nodded.

“I’m afraid so, Queen Hesper.”

“You know who I am?” I asked.

“Of course, word has spread of your residence here in Grisset. On my trip back to this kingdom, I gathered what remained of your people and guided them here.”

“My people?” I knelt, gripping his hand sweetly. “Sir, do you mean they were able to escape?” He nodded.

“More than you may realize. Apparently, when Boletus overthrew your parents, your people witnessed a great fire that poisoned many. Those unaffected ran in fear, retreating to the small outer cities in hopes of escaping Boletus and his men. Yes, there were casualties when he burned them to the ground, but many survived, thank the goddess. They have been starving, struggling to withstand the cold. Forgive me, my king,” he turned to face Morel, “but I hope you can welcome them here.” Morel smiled, patting the old man’s shoulder.

“Anything for you. Grisset is a kingdom for the people—all people.” His eyes raised to me. “Your people are most welcome here, Hesper.”

“I should tend to them.” I stood as the old man gripped my hand.

“Queen Hesper?” I stopped, looking down at him. “If word of your survival reached the outer cities, then it is only a matter of time before Boletus learns the truth. Once he has discovered you are here, he will come for not just you, but all of Grisset.”

My eyes raised to Morel’s as the color drained from my face. I had never thought of the consequences of hiding in his kingdom, the danger I held over his people. It made me sick to think such a looming threat was my fault.

“Then I must leave before he can harm this kingdom.” Morel’s face hardened at my words.

“I’m afraid it is too late.” We both snapped our focus back to Dr. Altair.

“What do you mean?” Orion asked. The old man released my hand, sighing as he rubbed his face.

“My return was not only delayed due to Hesper’s people, but because we had to find an alternate route back to Grisset. Boletus and his army are on the move. It seems he has received word of Hellbore’s people seeking refuge here in Grisset. Our aide to them insults him, and now, he plans to make an example of us to all who dare defy him. If my presumptions are correct, he and his army will arrive in a handful of days.”

The room fell cold and silent as we all stood in absolute dread.

“If Boletus and his army are looming over our doorstep, then let us ride out and face

him head-on. You've seen our army, you know their capabilities. Hesper has trained them well. We can take him." Orion tried to break the tension and come up with a plan. "Let us show him that Grisset is just as powerful as the ancient kingdoms."

"I cannot ask your people to endure Boletus on my behalf!" I snapped, the three men looking at me. "Attacking him in Hellbore was one thing, but here in Grisset? I will not allow such trauma to destroy another kingdom I love." I tried to fight back tears. "No, I cannot allow such a thing."

"Hesper." Morel stepped around the other and approached me. "If this is how we defeat him, then we will endure. My people will follow me anywhere."

"Your people," I snapped. "Do you not see? They are not mine to command, to ask such a thing. No," I shook my head. "You have built a haven here in these mountains. Do not throw it away for my revenge."

"You have built just as much of this kingdom as me."

"That doesn't make it mine." I turned away from him and approached Dr. Altair. "You say he is a few days away? If I leave now, do you think it'll give me enough time to lead him away?" The old man looked past me to Morel as he fumbled his words. "Dr. Altair!" I snapped. "Do not look through me. I may be a woman, but I am a queen, and I demand you answer me truthfully."

"Hesper," Morel growled.

"No!" I hissed back, remaining focused on the old man. "If I leave now, will Grisset be safe?" The old man struggled but confirmed my question.

"Yes, it would."

“Then it is settled.” I turned to run into Morel, staring up into his amber eyes burning with rage. “Step aside.”

“No.”

“Morel, I must do this.” My hands clenched into fists at my side as he refused to move.

“There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t!” I tried to shove him, but he only remained still, refusing to let me leave. “There is no other way!”

“Forgive me,” the old man stood, approaching us. “But there is one way to solve both your fears.” Morel and I exchanged a look. “Morel, you do not wish for Hesper to travel out alone, correct?” Morel nodded. “And Hesper, you do not wish to ask Grisset to fight for you, as you are not one of us?”

“Easy,” Morel growled.

“Forgive me, I am only asking and repeating her words.” Dr. Altair looked back at me with gentle eyes. “Am I correct?” I swallowed, trying to ease my anger.

“Yes.”

“Then the only reasonable and strategic action that will solve all your problems and strengthen your power is simple.” He clasped his hands together as we both looked at him, waiting.

“Dr. Altair,” Orion chimed in, “You do not suggest what I think you are suggesting.”

“It’s the only plausible way to protect Hesper and Grisset as well as Hellbore.” Dr. Altair made no sense.

“Whatever it is, I will do it.” Morel eased. “If it protects both Hesper and Grisset, then I agree.”

“Careful, Morel. You don’t know what he’s saying,” Orion warned.

“What? What is he proposing?” I asked Orion anxiously. His eyes fell as he quickly glanced at the old man, Morel and I waiting for an explanation.

“Well.” Dr. Altair cleared his throat. “The only way to truly ally your two kingdoms and strengthen your armies while protecting your people is to hold a royal marriage.”

TEN

MOREL

A ROYAL MARRIAGE?

The room had fallen into a cold spell, all our bodies rigid and stiff as my eyes slowly moved to Hesper. She was pale, more so than normal, her eyes absent of any emotion as she stood there like a statue. I could only imagine the flood of emotions she was experiencing. Once again, Hesper was in a position where she must marry to stay, one I knew she didn't like.

“Dr. Altair,” Orion stepped past Hesper and me as her silver eyes reluctantly raised to lock with mine, sending a shiver down my spine. “Politically, a royal marriage is the most ideal option; however, the ancient kingdoms do not recognize Morel as a legitimate king. He is the second born and exiled. Even if such a marriage took place, his title would not be respected or honored in the realm. And Hesper's kingdom—” His words blurred as time began to slow, the only sound filling my ears that of my own heart as her metallic irises remained locked with mine, filling me with a warmth I had not felt since the day I first saw her.

A royal marriage. Yes, it would allow my kingdom the right to stand and fight, protecting Hesper from Boletus, aligning Hellbore and Grisset, but it would mean I could protect her, in every way. Boletus wouldn't dare attack if it meant going to war with my kingdom—our kingdom. As much as I personally enjoyed the idea of having Hesper by my side, as my queen, I would never force such a thing on her. If I could lay my power and forces at her feet without marriage, I would. I would give her

everything... if she would just let me.

Time resumed as Dr. Altair's voice broke the spell between us, Hesper's eyes racing to him with my own.

"Queen Hesper is a queen by birth, and regardless of the 'legitimacy' of Morel's position and title, her hand in marriage alone would solidify any doubt. It would be a most beneficial alliance for the two kingdoms and its people. Grisset is already larger and more powerful than most of the ancient kingdoms, but with Hellbore's queen at its side, the kingdom of shadows would become nearly unstoppable. No man would dare attack such a force." The whole proposal was such a beautiful thought, painting a perfect picture, but it was too good to be true. Hesper would not want this. She wouldn't want me.

"You really believe that a marriage between Morel and Hesper, Boletus would just turn his army away and leave Grisset be?" Orion crossed his arms, obviously unsure of Dr. Altair's suggestion. I couldn't speak, my own thoughts speeding behind my eyes too quickly to focus or form words.

"Boletus is no fool. If he were to attack, his parents would have no choice but to interfere, breaking age-old treaties and igniting a war amongst many of the ancient kingdoms." Orion looked to me, waiting for a response, Dr. Altair's eyes shadowing his.

"I—"

Before I could even finish the single syllable, Hesper bolted from the room, a dark cloud hanging over her as she rushed through the doors. My heart began to sink in an odd fear as I watched her disappear from view. This wasn't right.

"I will make no such choice for another. This is Hesper's decision, not mine." I

turned to face the door, hesitating, wondering if I should follow her. Every inch of my being felt pulled to chase after her, to grab her and beg her to stay, to let me fight for her.

“But Morel?—”

“No,” I hissed at Orion. “I will not do to her what Boletus did.” Without dismissing myself, my restraint broke as my overwhelming feelings took control, and I began to run after Hesper, my speed quickening as I frantically searched for her.

Please, don’t leave. My thoughts began to sour, fearful that the suggestion of marriage would trigger her and scare her away. From me. Please, don’t leave me.

ELEVEN

HESPER

My mind raced as the sounds of my heart mixed with the overlapping voices in my head, my breathing increasing as I readied a horse. I had remained hidden from Morel and his men all afternoon, impatiently waiting for nightfall to gather what I needed.

“I belong to no one,” I whispered, tightening the reins of the solid black horse as its breath fogged the cold air, a soft snow drizzling overhead. My hands slipped into a pair of leather gloves as I pulled the dark hood over my face and stepped to mount the horse, sensing something behind me. My instincts took over as I spun, a small blade in hand, the tip pressing ever so lightly into the skin beneath his chin. His amber eyes stared down at me with an impressed grin.

“Always the surprise,” Morel whispered. My grip on the blade tightened as I stared up at him, the shadows of the moons hidden behind the clouds, leaving us in a veil of darkness.

“You cannot make me stay,” I growled. My own words ached as his smile faded.

Morel raised his hand, gently wrapping his fingers around my grip as he pulled the blade from his skin and lowered my hand. We stood there, gazing at one another for a moment in absolute silence, listening to the nightlife, the soft snow falling and wrapping us in its cold embrace.

“I will never force you to do anything, my queen.” I swallowed, my heart nearly

skipping as his hand still held mine. “But please, don’t leave.” Morel stepped closer, a soft gasp breaking past my lips as he lowered my hood with his free hand. “Let me protect you.” I struggled to control my heartbeat while steadying my breathing.

“I can protect myself,” I whispered.

“I have no doubt. But Hesper, if you leave, I cannot help you. Your people are here, and they need you. I—” He stopped, almost choking his last word as it lingered.

“You what?” Morel’s eyes lowered. I wanted him to finish his sentence, to say the words out loud, but he wouldn’t.

“I told you,” I ripped my hand from his grasp, “I will never marry for political reasons. I’m not some pawn in a war of men. I am a queen, and I will do what I have to, but I will never marry to further a man’s claim.” I turned to face the horse, grabbing the reins as he forcefully spun me around, his mouth slamming into mine, completely taking my breath away. It felt as though the stars from the heavens had begun to crash upon the Earth, surrounding us in a galaxy of constellations.

My sanity returned as my hand slapped his face, stinging from the impact. His lips broke from mine as he stood there, his cheek red, smiling at my temper. I had to compose myself, tucking my hair behind my ears as the brief moment was replaced by a sad, hurtful anger.

“No,” I pointed up at him, “you don’t get to do that!” Morel only smiled. “Stop it. Stop it!” I pushed him away, shoving him back as he laughed lightly, angering me further.

“If you want me to never kiss you again, then I will do just that.” I raised a brow at him, annoyed with how calm he was behaving.

“No, you don’t get to toy with me! I know this—this thing you are doing isn’t real. It’s all just a ploy to get me to agree to that ridiculous proposal. You say you want to protect me, that you want me to stay, but I know the truth.”

“And what is that?” he asked, growling the question as if I had offended him. My jaw clenched and tightened as I stared back at him.

“You just want me to be your wife so you can claim your title as king and use it to destroy your brother.” The words burned in my throat as they regurgitated at our feet. Morel’s body stiffened as his fists clenched at his side. I knew I hit a nerve, and I hated that I felt terrible for doing it. “You will not use me like Boletus.” Tears began to form in my eyes as the moon peeked behind the clouds, its blue light casting down on us.

“I am nothing like Boletus,” Morel barked, seething.

“Then why else would you agree so easily to Dr. Altair’s proposal?” I tried to choke back my hurt, the pain I felt building in my chest. Morel seemed to notice, his own anger melting as he watched me. I felt as though something inside me was breaking, as if feelings I had buried so deep were finally breaking through the hard surface I had created and erupting from within me. It was overwhelming, causing my chest to pound and race, my breathing to become erratic as I stood there, trying to pretend I was okay, but I wasn’t.

“Hesper...” He stepped towards me, his demeanor now soft and gentle. I backed away, shaking my head.

“No, you don’t get to do that.”

“Hesper, please,” he continued until I had backed into the horse with nowhere to run. Morel gently lifted my chin to look up at him, the moon positioned perfectly behind

him as he nearly glowed in the moonlight, his hair almost blue as snowflakes landed in the strands, his eyes burning a golden orange as he gazed at me with such tenderness. “I told Dr. Altair no.” My heart skipped.

“W-what?” His response was completely unexpected, tugging at my soul as I stood there.

“I told him no. You are free to do whatever you please, as you’ve always been. But Hesper, please, don’t leave. Stay here...with me.” I felt such an electric pull towards him, such need to embrace him and hold him close and never let go.

“You—you said no?” It was almost unbelievable. The king of darkness, the man so many feared, said no to a proposal that would give him everything.

“I did.”

“But why? A marriage between our kingdoms would give you everything you wanted.” I felt lightheaded and dizzy, struggling to focus, as the sight of him before me was almost too much to handle.

“Not everything. Hesper—” He stepped closer, and our breaths danced in the air, our bodies nearly touching. “I—” He raised his hands, motioning as he tried to speak, obviously struggling to do so. “For the first time in my life, I don’t feel worthless. I have spent so many years consumed with hatred and spite, seeking nothing but revenge on Agaric for the past. But then you came along and turned my whole world upside down.” He rubbed his temples, lightly groaning as he looked at me, gently gripping my face. “The day I laid eyes on you, my heart did something it had never done before. It began to beat. I felt dead inside, but you—” He lightly shook me. “You made me feel alive. You are my very own wolfsbane, Hesper, entrapping me with your beauty and deadliness. I know you will never marry, not unless your heart tells you to do so, but I have fallen under your spell, Hesper. And I, not a king, but

Morel,” he fell to his knees, his hands wrapping around my legs as he stared up at me, “am asking you—no, I am begging you—to marry me. Not for my title or my kingdom, but because my heart longs for you. Please, will you be my wife? My wolfsbane?”

My body became numb, my heart nearly giving out as I stood there, fully in shock. The king of darkness was on his knees, begging me to be his wife—not for political power, but for love. Love ; the very thing I said would be the only reason I would ever consider marriage. And here he was, offering me just that. Love.

As I stared down at the beautiful man before me, my heart fluttered and bloomed. I had been fighting the feelings I had felt towards him for some time, making excuses for them, but I knew what they truly were, and the truth had scared me...until now. I slowly fell to my own knees, still looking up at Morel as a single tear fell down my cheek.

“If I am your wolfsbane,” I removed my glove and gently placed my hand against his cheek, “then you are the very light in which breathes life into my existence, casting me as your shadow.” Morel wiped my tears as he too began to tear up. I could feel our walls crumbling, our pain and past morphing into this powerful force between us as our souls surrendered to one another. “I think I too have loved you since the day I first met you, and I promise to love you until the heavens fall upon the Earth.”

“A symphony of stars,” he whispered. Hearing him recite my kingdom’s words back to me broke me as I leaned up and kissed him, passion overflowing as he held me close, my arms wrapping around his neck as he pulled my body into his lap. “Wolfsbane,” he breathed, surrendering himself to me.

“Let me be your shadow, king of darkness.” My tears fell to our mouths as he kissed me back with such power, the moon beaming down on us.

“Whatever you desire, my queen.” He stood with such ease, holding me close as I continued to kiss him.

“I desire,” I whispered, reluctantly removing my lips from his, “to be your wife.”

Morel stopped, gazing up at me. My cheeks were burning from our immense moment, despite the night and freezing snow falling around us. His lips curled upwards as he smiled, beaming with pride.

“As you wish.”

TWELVE

MOREL

My heart had nearly given out after confessing my love to Hesper, begging her to be my wife. I had always hoped she'd felt the same, but I never imagined she would accept my proposal. My soul had found its match, its shadow, and it was her. Hesper. My queen.

"My king," Orion stopped me as I entered the castle. His eyes told me my flustered appearance was obvious. "Is everything alright, Morel?" He looked me up and down, searching for wounds or reasons for my appearance.

"Everything is perfect," I beamed. Orion raised a brow.

"Dr. Altair and I were discussing further options, and we believe—" The doors of the castle interrupted him as Hesper silently entered. Her cheeks were flushed and burning a rosy red, her hair covered in snowflakes as her metallic eyes swirled with new life. She stopped, noticing us. A smile pulled at my lips as Orion noticed, looking from Hesper to myself, gently wiping the snow from my shoulders. "It seems someone had a nice walk in the cold." Orion made a face as I wheezed a laugh.

Hesper and I had discussed our plans for moving forward. We decided we would have an intimate wedding of just us, Dr. Altair officiating and Orion as our witness. Her only request was to not announce it to either of our people. She was fearful that Grisset would be opposed to a queen of Hellbore on its throne, despite my objections and desperate attempts to assure her that my people loved her as their own queen.

Nonetheless, I promised to honor her request. The kingdom would not know, even if it did leave me sad knowing how much they would rejoice and welcome her as their queen. My queen.

Hesper quickly rushed away in the direction of her room.

“My king.” Dr. Altair joined Orion and me. “Forgive me for my outburst earlier this evening. I did not mean to offend Queen Hesper or yourself—” I raised my hand with a smile.

“I assure you, you did no such thing. As a matter of fact,” I looked at Orion and Dr. Altair, “I have news for you both.” They stood eagerly waiting, Dr. Altair, gentle and patient as Orion, seemed rather anxious. “But first, Dr. Altair. Were you able to acquire my mother’s ring on your journey?” He seemed shocked by my question, fumbling with his robes as he searched his pockets.

“Indeed.” He found the ring, retrieving it from a velvet pouch as he presented it to me.

I stared at the silver-encrusted jewel, the warm memory of my mother wearing it flooding my mind. The center moonstone sparkled in the candlelight, flashing from a cloudy white to vibrant blue, surrounded by antique silver vines that branched around the ring completely. A fitting ring for a queen. For my wolfsbane.

“Perfect.”

THIRTEEN

HESPER

Hours felt like mere minutes as I had spent the entire night and day creating a gown. Dr. Altair had visited me last night after hearing of our news, bringing me all sorts of materials required to sew my own dress, a request I had mentioned to Morel. He presented me stacks of fabrics and materials, lace and silks, needles and threads of every color. I could tell he was rather excited by our engagement, scuttling about to ensure I had everything I needed. Before he left, he stopped, pausing as he glanced around the room. When I asked if he was alright, he simply smiled, stating that Morel's room was even more beautiful with me in it. When I questioned him on the odd statement, he explained that the very room I had been staying in was in fact Morel's prior to my arrival. He had it finished overnight just for me and took to sharing a room with Orion. Before I could respond, the old man bowed his goodbyes, addressing me as his queen. I had tried to stop him, explaining that I was Queen of Hellbore, not Grisset, but he refused to hear me out, beaming as he stated that Morel's mother would be proud to know his son had finally found love, the one thing she had always wanted for him.

As the sun started to set, I began to prepare myself, dressing in the handmade wedding dress and fixing my hair. I had spent hours ensuring perfection, a gentle wave of fear and anxiousness filling my veins as I wondered if Morel would be there, waiting for me under the moon. It felt like a dream, the fairytale I had always wished for. I never wanted to grow up and find a handsome prince and live happily ever after. No, I never wanted a prince. I wanted a warrior. Someone who could match my own strength and ride alongside me in battle. And Morel was just that.

A gentle knock at my door told me it was time.

My eyes gazed at my reflection in the full-length mirror, admiring every detail of the dress I made, the lavender silk and lace straps hanging loosely around my elbows, the material pulled tight around my torso as it flowed freely down to the floor. It was an elegant yet freeing gown, the lavender reminding me of wolfsbane flowers growing around the room. My hair was curled and loosely pinned partially back, encrusted with star accents and diamond pins, the contrasting sparkle resembling the night sky upon my head. I had tucked the crystal necklace Morel had given me in my hands, the leather strap wrapped around my wrist as I clutched it close, the glow beaming through my fingers.

“Please, let this be real.” Another knock on my door told me it was time to leave. “Coming,” I called out as I approached the door, inhaling before opening it. Standing on the other side was Orion, dressed in a formal black tunic lined with silver metallic accents, a long, black velvet cloak in his hands. He cleaned up rather well, smiling as he took in the sight of me.

“Are you ready, my queen?” he asked, handing me the cloak. I gracefully took it, draping it around my dress as I lifted the hood.

“Orion, I have told you, I may be marrying Morel, but I am not your queen.” He tsked, adjusting my hood as to avoid the material catching on my hair accessories.

“Say what you like, but you have been Grisset’s queen since the moment you stepped foot on our lands.” He stopped, ensuring I was fully concealed. “And it is an honor to call you my queen.” Orion bowed, offering his arm as he began to escort me from the castle.

My stomach began to twist and flutter as we walked down the castle steps into the woods.

“Will he be there?” I asked, filled with a rushing wave of nerves and anxiety.

“He would rather die than leave you at the altar, my queen.”

The night sky had churned into a mix of dark purples and blues, the stars shining brighter than ever before as we approached the ivy curtain that led to the garden of death caps. I had been tending to them in my free time since my arrival, helping them grow and overtake the surrounding land. Considering this is where Morel and I first met, it seemed only fitting to be married in such a beautiful place. Orion stopped, taking the cloak from my body. The cold air and light snow kissed my bare skin, heightening my nerves as I breathed heavily, fogging the air around me.

In just a few moments, I would be Morel’s wife. It felt unreal, my heart pounding, as if trying to escape my chest and run to his on the other side of the ivy. It had never longed for someone the way it did for him. There was no doubt in my mind that I loved Morel, and soon, we would be together forever, our souls finally united.

“It’s time,” Orion spoke softly, lifting the ivy for me to pass through.

Inhaling one last time, I stepped through the garden entrance, gasping as I spied Morel just ahead, standing beneath a small wooden arbor covered in wolfsbane, their lavender popping against the cool blue hue of the garden. It was beautiful and perfect, almost reminding me of home.

Morel was speaking to Dr. Altair, dressed in a formal black tunic with black velvet filigree and silver trim and accents. His hair was partially tied atop his head, looking like the son of the moon himself, his hair burning blue as his amber irises caught sight of me. I nearly melted, seeing him there. His eyes widened, his smile dropping as he froze. I began to panic, an internal fear pulling me down as I tried to register his face.

Oh, no. He's regretting this, he doesn't want to marry me. Oh gods, I have ? —

Morel's face softened as he smiled larger than ever before, his eyes glistening as he seemed to fight back tears. His obvious glee was the push I needed, filling my bones with such confidence as my shoulders relaxed and body eased. Orion stepped to my side, clearing his throat as he offered me his arm. Accepting, I inhaled one last time before stepping down the tiny snow-covered walkway surrounded by hundreds of blue fluorescent mushrooms, staring at Morel as he stood there, beaming.

As my foot moved forward, the snow began to thicken, covering us in a magical wintery scene, creating a snowy veil along my midnight hair as the death caps glowed beneath the moonlight, the trail of my dress dragging behind. Orion continued to walk me down the aisle-like trail, my heart beating hard as the world fell silent, my eyes focused only on Morel as he watched me. It felt as though the heavens had opened up, highlighting him with their light as he stood there, waiting to devote his life to me. I had thought true love was a myth, only existing in fairytales, and yet here I was, drowning in its bliss. My parents might not be here with us physically, but I could feel their presence surrounding me as I neared the end of the aisle, guiding me to the very man they told me to seek out. Deep down, I wondered if they knew what future lay before me, as if, somehow, they knew the goddess would bring us together; Hellbore and Grisset, united as one. The king of darkness and his queen, a daughter of the night. How fitting.

My hand squeezed the crystal close as we stopped beneath the arbor, the petals of the wolfsbane dangling in the air above us, their sweet smell filling the night air. Closing my eyes, I inhaled softly, enjoying their smell, feeling truly at home. Orion bowed to us both, stepping back as he smiled, just as happy about what was occurring as we were. I turned back to Morel, consuming the sight of him.

“How did you do all of this?” I asked gently. He smiled, stepping closer.

“I spent all night building the arbor, but I knew how much you loved your wolfsbane. So, I gathered as many as I could and brought them here, just for you. For my wolfsbane.” His hand gently brushed a snowflake from my cheek.

“But their scent?”

Morel looked up, snow falling all around us as he inhaled.

“I did the same as you, slowly introducing my body to their scent little by little until I could withstand its toxic aroma.” His eyes fell back to me. “A fitting wedding present, is it not? To be able to say your vows beneath your kingdom's flowers in the garden of mine?” I couldn't control my emotions, smiling enthusiastically as Dr. Altair cleared his throat.

“Are we ready?” He seemed just as happy as the rest of us, dressed in formal robes. Morel nodded, taking my hands as he felt the crystal within my grasp. I glanced down, opening my palm as it glowed in the moonlight, brighter than ever before.

“Allow me.” Morel took the necklace, carefully placing it around my neck, his fingertips grazing my exposed skin, causing it to prickle at his surprising warmth. “You look beautiful, my queen. A vision in the night, challenging the moon goddess herself.”

“And you are a handsome and mighty warrior of the night, my king of darkness.” I nodded to Dr. Altair, silently confirming that I was, without a doubt, ready to become Morel's wife.

“I thought you said not to get used to hearing you call me your king,” Morel teased. I smirked, forcing my eyes to remain on the old man as he began the traditional wedding ceremony.

As Dr. Altair spoke, my thoughts raced faster than my heart. Morel's hand slowly touched mine, running his finger along my palm as my breathing quickened. The feel of his touch, standing next to him as we prepared to become one, was all overwhelming in the most beautiful way. My fingers moved, curling around his as we held hands, listening, the moon peeking through the clouds as snow continued to swallow us in a winter wonderland, creating the most exquisite and magical sight.

"Morel, I believe you have your own vows you wish to recite?" My eyes shot to Morel as he lifted his head, nodding to Dr. Altair.

"I do."

"Please," the old man motioned as Morel turned to face me, taking my other hand into his as he stared down into my eyes.

"Hesper." My name fell from his lips the same as the first time he ever spoke it. "The goddess herself could not have prepared me for you. You came into my life, a life full of darkness, and pulled my soul from the shadows and into the moonlight. All the time, I imagined a life of revenge, but now, I do not live for it. I live for you. The moment I laid eyes on you, something inside fell into place, and for the first time in a long time, it began to beat again. For you. My wolfsbane." Tears fell from my eyes as I gazed up at him, bursting with a love I had never felt before, a love that could tear the heavens down and survive the end of time itself.

"Hesper," he whispered, stepping even closer. "I devote myself to you, here, in the garden of shadows, beneath your wolfsbane and in the light of the goddess." He gently released my hand and raised a small blade, running it along his left palm, his blood seeping from the wound as he recited his vows. "I tie my heart and my soul with yours for all of eternity. I am yours. Forever and always." I tried to hold back, to not sob like a child as he held the blade out to me, tears swelling in his eyes. My hand lightly shook as I grabbed the blade, exhaling as I decided to say what was in my

heart.

“Morel,” I breathed his name, “I said I would never marry without love, and I stand before you filled with nothing less.” His lips raised higher as I began to guide the blade along the palm of my left hand. “I devote myself to you, Morel. My king. My husband. May our hearts and souls remain intertwined, forged together here in the darkness for all eternity.” Blood dripped from my skin onto the pure white snow. “I swear by the goddess, I will follow you anywhere, including death itself. You are mine, and I am yours. Your little shadow.”

We both exhaled a soft laugh through our tears as we raised our hands.

“A symphony of stars.” Morel stared down at me as we clasped our hands together, squeezing tight as our blood seeped into one another.

“Until the heavens fall onto the Earth, I shall remain your shadow, your wolfsbane. Your queen.” Morel jerked my arm as I crashed into his torso.

“My wife,” he whispered.

“By the powers of the ancient kingdoms and the goddess, I pronounce you husband and wife, the King of Grisset and Queen of Hellbore, and children of the night.” Morel wasted no time, kissing me with all his love beneath the arbor.

Orion and Dr. Altair both clapped as I embraced Morel, wrapping my free arm around his neck, pulling him closer, our bloodied hands still clasped. Once again, time did not exist, winter wrapping us in a blanket of the night as we became one in the darkness.

FOURTEEN

HESPER

The fire in the onyx fireplace burned and popped, the warmth filling the room despite the open stained glass windows that allowed the cold night air to dance into the bedroom. I stood out on the terrace, snow falling around me as I smiled at the quiet kingdom below, the dazzling stars above and shadows dancing along the land. Morel bid his goodbyes to Orion, closing the bedroom door. I could feel his warmth radiating from his body as he approached me from behind, embracing me as he nestled his face against my neck. I melted back into him, breathing in his scent.

“My queen,” he whispered into my ear, running his hands along my arms. I closed my eyes, feeling him surround me.

“My king.” Morel wrapped his arms around me, slightly swaying as we watched the night sky, drunk on emotions.

“Shall we retire, or would you rather stay here a little while longer?” I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and it was neither of those two things. My body swung as I turned to face him, his arms still wrapped tightly around my waist.

“We may have exchanged our vows and made a blood oath, but there is one final step to securing our marriage.”

Morel raised a brow. “Is the daughter of Hellbore suggesting I take her to bed?” My arms wrapped around his waist.

“That is exactly what I am suggesting.” My hand pulled him closer as he grinned. “As your queen, I demand you show me just how much you love me. Bathe me in your darkness, my king, and make me yours.” A low growl vibrated in his chest as he lifted my body and kissed me roughly.

“As my queen commands.” Morel carried me back into the room, stopping in front of the fireplace, gently letting me stand. He stepped close, brushing my hair back, plucking the embellishments from my hair as he placed them on the mantle. His hands glided along the skin of my neck, pushing my hair back as it tumbled down my back. I released a low gasp, feeling his fingertips as they trailed across my collarbone and up my neck, gripping it fiercely. I inhaled sharply, staring up into his eyes, into the reflection of the flames dancing in his irises as something burned inside him, the same feeling I could feel burning between my legs.

Morel lightly pulled my body as I stood on my toes, his lips meeting mine. All restraints disappeared as he kissed me, pressing his mouth roughly against mine as I began to devour him, my hands moving along his body, twisting in his hair. My body craved his, desperately needing more of each other.

His hand reached around my body, slowly untying the back of my dress, the lavender material falling to the floor as I stood there, completely exposed to him. He touched the glowing crystal around my neck, lifting it as he placed it on the mantle. Despite the cold, I stood proud, confident in my body as he growled, unfastening his tunic, his eyes bearing into my skin. Within the blink of an eye, he too stood naked, matching me as we simply gazed at one another, excited. My wandering eyes trailed from his face, admiring his built chest and large frame, stepping closer as I began to run my fingers along his arm, feeling his building muscles. My hand grazed his heart, feeling it pound beneath his chest as my sights fell past his waist, raising an eyebrow at how kingly he really was. I had to swallow, my mouth watering at the sight of him, a fire burning between my legs, my eyes returning to him as he grinned, knowing he was impressive.

“Perhaps I should bow at my king’s feet and show him just how much I love him.” I moved closer, pressing my breasts against his chest, my hand holding his chin. He removed my hand, his action confusing me as he prevented me from kissing him.

“My queen bows to no one.” Morel slowly lowered himself to his knees, his hands sliding down my body as he did so, my breath escaping my lips as he kneeled and gazed up at me. “I may be a king, but I am yours, and I will always bow at your feet, my queen.” He leaned close, kissing the skin of my thigh, gently raising it as he continued to cover me in kisses, placing my leg over his shoulder. “Now, let me worship you, my queen. Let me show you just how much I love you.” Morel neared my center, his hot breath caused me to grow wetter as he kissed my clit. I gasped, raising my head as I closed my eyes, and enjoyed the feel of his mouth, his tongue moving perfectly along me.

He gripped my thighs, pulling me closer as my fingers twisted in his midnight hair. His tongue pressed into my opening, pushing deeper as my breathing hitched, soft moans filling the room as he ate me, moving faster and faster, my body burning as he did. He felt marvelous, moaning into my body, guiding my building climax as it continued to grow. His hand began to move up my body, reaching my breast as he squeezed it tight, feeling my hardened nipple.

“Morel,” I breathed his name into the night, my excitement boiling beneath my skin. He quickened his pace, digging his nails into my thigh as I lightly cried out.

As my climax neared, Morel removed his tongue from my body, rising as he lifted me and carried me to the bed, throwing me onto it with a gentle grunt. My back sank into the bedding, and I smiled as he stood over me, my king. He slowly crawled onto the bed, whipping me around and positioning my backside high, sliding his fully hardened cock over my wet folds. My hands gripped the bedding, my hair sprawled across my face. He leaned over my body, his chest touching my back as he whispered into my ear.

“Welcome to the darkness, my queen.” As the words dripped from his lips, the tip of his cock slid into my aching pussy, electrocuting my body as I cried out louder, my mouth dry and back arched so far, my spine was screaming.

Morel wasted no time, increasing his speed as he began to thrust, his hands gripping my hips as he slammed his pelvis into my backside as my body bounced. I couldn’t breathe, engulfed in how heavenly he felt. My heart was racing, my soul reaching for his, tangling into the darkness as he continued to claim me. I had to fight back my urge to climax, struggling to control myself. It was perfect. He was perfect.

I could hear Morel nearing the edge, his breathing just as erratic as mine, his own moans filling my ears. I wanted him to unleash himself, to lose all control and let our bodies melt into another.

“Don’t stop,” I commanded. “Take me, my king. Let the heavens know I am yours.” My own words sent me over the edge as I cried out, my body tightening around his, constricting my own breathing.

“Oh, Hesper,” he whined, slamming into my body harder. “I am yours.” My orgasm took over as my walls squeezed him, listening to him as he began to push harder, coming inside me.

That’s right. You are mine, and I am yours. Forever.

FIFTEEN

MOREL

Hesper's body was wrapped loosely beneath the thin, silky sheet, her curves highlighted by the moonlight pouring in from the open windows. Her hair cascaded down her back, resembling the night sky as she lay next to me, my fingers tucking the stray strands behind her ear delicately. Her eyes were closed, a smile painted on her beautiful face as she slept peacefully. It felt like a dream, seeing her next to me, knowing she was mine. My wife.

Her body stirred ever so lightly as her lids lifted, those metallic irises staring back at me like liquid metal. She moaned softly, her hand touching my face as I held it, kissing her exposed palm.

"Were you watching me sleep?" she asked, her voice still lingering in her dreams.

"I was." I lowered her hand, playing with her fingers. She moved, resting along my body as she lifted her head to look up at me.

"I'd think after everything, you'd be fast asleep by now. Is my king not tired out?" I laughed at her jesting.

"Before you stumbled into my life, sleep was not my friend. And now, I get more than I could ever need. Thanks to you, my little fallen angel." Hesper smiled, kissing my chest.

“Shall I help you sleep now?” She kissed my body again, her eyes staring up at me as she did so. Her legs straddled my waist as she sat up across my lap, the sheet falling from her naked body as the dying flames in the fireplace glowed behind her. I gazed at her, admiring just how beautiful she really was, my hands tracing her curves as they landed in her grasp. I looked down at her left hand, feeling the wound with my fingertip.

“These will heal one day, turning to old scars.” Her eyes followed mine.

“But they will never leave us. And I will never leave you.” She raised my left hand to her lips, kissing the wound. “I am your shadow in this world, your wolfsbane.” My heart nearly skipped a beat listening to her.

“Hesper,” I whispered. “I have something for you.” Her head tilted as she gave me a confused look.

“What more could you give me?” I laughed at her words, gently laying her body back on the bed as I rolled, stepping from the bed towards my clothing on the floor.

“You are my queen. I will always gift you things.” My hands rummaged through the pockets of my tunic as she laughed.

“You make me sound like a spoiled queen.” I grabbed the small velvet pouch, clutching it in my grasp as I exhaled.

My hands tucked behind my back as I pranced back to her, listening to her giggles as I approached the bed. “The only thing I will spoil you with,” I smiled, “is my love.” Hesper grinned, wiggling to the edge on her knees as she gently grabbed my chin.

“Then I shall spoil you too, and we shall be known as the most spoiled monarchs in this world.” Gods, I loved her.

“Here,” I whispered, revealing the pouch as I held it between us.

Hesper looked down, gently taking the pouch as she began to open it, her smile instantly dropping as her fingertips removed the ring from inside. She fell silent, her response worrying me as I watched her closely.

“Hesper?” Her fingertips touched her lips, her eyes swelling as she remained fixated on the ring.

Did I upset her? Does she hate it? Doubt and fear flooded my mind as I sat there, waiting for her to speak.

“Morel,” she finally whispered, her eyes trailing to mine. “It’s—it’s—” She lifted the ring and placed it over her finger, raising her arm as the moonlight caught the stone, creating a spark upon her hand. “It’s as if a star landed on my finger.” Her smile returned as I exhaled, relieved she didn’t hate it. “Morel, this is too much.” She turned back to me, filled with emotion.

“Nothing is too much for you.” She smiled again, admiring the ring closely.

“Where did you get it?”

“It was my mother’s.” Hesper’s face shot up as she tried to remove the ring. “Stop,” I whispered, placing my hand on hers.

“It’s too much. You have already given me her crystal. I cannot take this too.”

“Yes, you can. You are a daughter of the night like her, but more importantly, you are my wife. My mother would have given you everything, just as I plan to do.” My hands grabbed her face. “My last gift to you, my love, will be my promise to do whatever I can to avenge your parents, to save Hellbore. I will ride into battle myself

if I must and deliver Boletus' head at your feet." Hesper placed her hand over mine, fighting back tears. "If you wanted the moon, I would face the goddess herself, destroying the stars and heavens to give it to you. I would burn this whole world, drown in their blood, and sit at her feet as I watch you rule on my throne. I may be a king, but you, Hesper, you are my queen. My wife. And I will do anything for you. I would lay my life on death's door for you, and smile from the darkness if it meant saving you. Wolfsbane," I choked on my words as she cried, "my heart and my soul do not belong to me. They are yours."

"Morel," she cried, lunging into my arms, hugging me with all her strength. "I would destroy every soul on this Earth and fight death itself before I let you do such a thing!" I held her tight, our hearts racing in our chests, matching in rhythm. "If you think I would let you sacrifice yourself for me, you are a fool! Death and his lost souls should fear the day I step into the darkness to reclaim you. I would battle every demon, the devil himself. You are mine; death cannot have you!" she cried into my skin, the two of us embracing in passionate love.

"I guess neither of us can die, then, can we?" I teased. Hesper pulled back as I cleaned her tears.

"Never." She tucked my hair behind my ears, her beauty and strength on full display. "Let us ride into battle together, side by side, a king and his queen. We fight as one, in every battle, until fate decides we are too much for this world." My head tilted at her words, realizing what she meant.

"Hesper," I wheezed, "are you sure?" She smiled, kissing me softly.

"As sure as I am that I love you more than life itself."

Until the heavens fall upon the Earth.

SIXTEEN

MOREL

The sound of Grisset's army filled the air, their shields pounding into the ground at a perfect rhythm, as if the Earth had a heartbeat, welcoming me as I stepped into the middle of the field, shadowed by Hesper. Orion was waiting for us, standing at the top of a large platform, reaching high enough to see out and be heard far. He was grinning as we walked closer, knowing what I was preparing to do.

I held my hand out, helping Hesper up the stairs as she flashed me a smile, the crystal around her neck and ring safely around her finger. We dashed up the stairs, stepping onto the wooden platform and gazing out as the winter wind blew across our faces. The army of the night filled the field, reaching as far as the eye could see in a sea of darkness. I stepped towards the edge, their shields halting as I raised my hand, the world falling into a natural silence.

"Army of the night, people of Grisset," I addressed them, yelling out for all to hear, "I come to you with unfortunate news. As you know, our neighboring kingdom and friends in Hellbore have been attacked, the kingdom falling under the influence of an imposter named Boletus. Well—" I stopped, looking at Orion as he nodded. "It seems Boletus and his army are on their way to Grisset, searching for Hellbore's queen. Queen Hesper has trained you, teaching you as she lived amongst you." I looked back as she stepped to my side, removing her glove. "And now," I smiled, "she is not only the queen of Hellbore, but she is your queen!" I raised her hand, revealing the ring to all. "Boletus comes for her. I will not let that trader, that murderer, take my queen! Will you?" My army began to pound their shields. "As your king, I ask you: will you

fight by my side and defend Grissett? Will you defend its queen?" My throat burned from yelling out into the air, my heart racing from the adrenaline, listening as my army continued to pound their shields.

"A symphony of stars!" one soldier cried out.

"A symphony of stars!" another repeated, voices rising until the entire army was chanting alongside the beat, shouting loud enough to shake the mountains.

I beamed with pride, turning to face Hesper as she stepped forward, retrieving her sword and raising it to the sky.

"Army of the night! I shall ride alongside you at dawn, not as your teacher, not as Queen of Hellbore, but as Hesper, your queen. The queen of Grisset!" The field erupted as the army cheered. "May the world fear the army of the night and kingdoms of shadows!"

Hesper lowered her sword as our forces continued, stepping back to me, smiling as she bared her teeth. "Let us rain darkness on Boletus and his men."

"As my queen commands."

SEVENTEEN

BOLETUS

I sat on my horse, staring out into the frozen land, the mountains rising high as the sky, snow covering every surface, leaving the world in a thick blanket of freezing isolation. The idea of anyone choosing to live out here in such ridiculous and harsh conditions baffled me, but Morel always was a fool.

Hystrix suddenly appeared, stepping over a hill as she walked to my side, her whip wrapped around her torso as if a part of her. Despite the cold, she remained dressed in her usual attire, her face still hidden aside from her cloudy white eyes that nearly glowed.

“What news do you bring?” She slithered closer, the sound of my army's horses restlessly filling the air as they awaited my command.

“It seems Hesper is not only alive and hiding in the kingdom of shadows but has married the king of darkness. Hesper, daughter of Hellbore, is now their queen,” her sultry, low, hissing voice hit my ears, igniting a fire of anger and rage inside.

“So, Morel has not only broken our deal, but he’s chosen a side.”

It didn’t surprise me that the viperous little runaway found her way to his kingdom, but for Morel to wed my bride, well, that was something I did not foresee. And for such a betrayal, I needed to rethink my current plan of action. As strong as my combined armies were, I knew if Hesper had taught Morel’s army, we would not

stand a chance. His numbers were unknown, but her skills were familiar to me.

“Hystrix.” She stood, listening. “Change of plans. We shall return to Hellbore. I want you to find your way into their kingdom. Locate this king of darkness and bring him to me.” She bowed. “Let’s see just how strong this kingdom of his stands without their king. He stole my bride, so I shall steal Hesper’s groom.”

“Yes, my king.” Hystrix turned, sprinting over the hill as she disappeared from view.

“Let the games begin, Morel.”

EIGHTEEN

MOREL

As I stared into the flames of the fireplace, Hesper clung to my side, her arms around my body as her head fell against my arm.

“What haunts you, my love?” I kissed the top of her head, trying not to let my dark thoughts sink into her goodness.

“At sunrise, we go to war with Boletus. I am simply planning my strategies, considering our best plan of action.” Hesper stepped in front of me, looking up into my eyes.

“Are you afraid?” My hand caressed her cheek as I gave a warm smile.

“The only thing I fear in all my existence is losing you.”

“Then what is it? Tell me.” Hesper’s crystal glowed as she stared up at me.

“We know our army is unstoppable, but when we ride out to meet Boletus, we leave the kingdom exposed. If only there was a way to protect them in our absence.” Hesper studied me, clutching the crystal.

“What if there was?” I shot her a look, perplexed by her words. “I am a daughter of the night, same as your mother. You must possess gifts yourself. Together, we could use our gifts to protect our people.”

“Our people,” I smiled. “Do you think it is possible?” Hesper glanced down at her necklace in thought.

“There's one person who might know.” She clutched the crystal tighter, its glow peeking through her fingers. “Where is Dr. Altair?”

“Dr. Altair?” I called his name, finding him in the library surrounded by stacks of books and burning candles. Hesper shadowed me as we approached him, the look on his face showing he was surprised to see us at such a late hour.

“My king. My queen.” He bowed. “Whatever can I help you with? Is everything alright?”

“You knew my mother well,” I started as he nodded. “You knew she was a daughter of the night, didn't you?”

“M-my king.” He fumbled with his robes, obviously nervous. “Your mother—she swore me to secrecy. Y-your father?—”

“Never mind him.” Hesper pushed past me.

“With Morel's mother being a daughter of the night, would that not make him a son of the night?” The old man glanced between us both. “Sir?”

“Yes.” My stomach dropped, realizing this was the reasoning behind everything. My past, my trauma, my differences. My world fell into place, learning the truth of myself as I slunk back into a nearby chair. “Please forgive me, my king.”

Words failed me.

“Dr. Altair, I too am a daughter of the night. Tomorrow, when Morel and I ride out to

Boletus, the kingdom will be left with no one to defend it. Together, could we not call upon the goddess and find a way to protect Grisset?"

The old man pondered for a moment, searching his books for answers to back his knowledge. He muttered to himself as Hesper joined me, crouching at my side.

"Morel?" I showed her a smile. "Are you alright, my love?"

"It all makes sense. Everything. I am a child of the night, just like you. We are souls birthed in the darkness and taught by the stars." She smiled, gripping my hand.

"Love forged in the shadows, blessed by the goddess herself."

"There may be a way—" We both stood, joining Dr. Altair as he scanned an old and ancient book. "There is an ancient spell, one that would grant abilities and protection to the land and its people, but it would require a sacrifice—not of blood, but life." What does that even mean?

"I will not kill an innocent," I snapped.

"No, I'm afraid..." His eyes moved from me to Hesper's, falling to her stomach, his words suddenly making sense. "No. No!" I pulled her back, moving away from the old man.

"What is it?" Hesper asked.

"We will not do that!" Dr. Altair sighed, nodding.

"Do what? What?" Hesper pushed from me, glancing between us both. "Answer me, Morel!" I couldn't form the painful words.

“You would forfeit your ability to bring life into this world.” Dr. Altair’s words stunned her as she remained still, pale as a ghost.

“We will not do it. Hesper...” I approached her as she stepped away from me. “Wolfsbane,” I whispered, “please.”

“Morel.” She looked at me with an odd expression. “Our people need us. If this is what must be done to protect them, now and forever, would it not be a worthy sacrifice?”

Our people. Hesper was willing to give up any chance of having a child for them.

“And what of Grisset’s heir?” I asked.

“You are a prince banished from his kingdom, a king born from the darkness. I am a queen forced from her kingdom. Would it not only make sense for Grisset’s heir to come from an outcast like ourselves, chosen by us? They would have no less right than a child of our own. We may give up a chance to bring life into this world, but think of how many lives we would save. How many children would be born into the shadows because of our sacrifice. A king is nothing without his kingdom.”

If there was any room left in my heart for my love for her to grow, it filled that space and overflowed. She was right. A king was nothing without his kingdom, and I was nothing without her. She was all I needed, heir or not.

I stepped close, pressing my forehead against her, nodding as I placed my hand across her stomach. She laid her head against my heart, knowing the sacrifice we were making was worth it.

“It is your body, and I will follow you whichever path you choose. You are my wife, and you are all I need in this world and the next.” Hesper kissed me softly, breaking

away as she addressed the old man.

“Do what you must, Dr. Altair,” Hesper whispered.

“Grisset will be forever grateful to you both for your sacrifices.” Dr. Altair came to my side, book in hand. “I will also need the crystal,” he whispered.

Hesper glanced up at me as I nodded. She removed the necklace, placing it between the fold of the old book, listening as Dr. Altair began to recite the ancient words.

“As the goddess watches from above, we come to you, humble servants of the night, laying our sacrifice at your feet, asking for your protection. May the moon bless the people of Grisset for all of eternity and protect them from outer forces. May it give them the strength to fight, the courage to remain strong, and the ability to thrive under your light and in the shadows of the night.” The crystal began to glow, rising from the book as it levitated. Hesper groaned in pain, falling to the ground.

“Hesper? Hesper!” I fell at her side, unsure of what was happening or how to help her. “Dr. Altair!”

“We present this sacrifice, bound by love, and ask for such an exchange,” he continued to chant.

“Morel,” she whispered, groaning as she cradled her stomach, writhing in pain. She grabbed my hand, gripping it tight as sweat formed across her face, tears falling down her cheeks.

“I’m here.” I squeezed her hand, brushing her hair from her face. “I’m here, wolfsbane.” My heart nearly shattered watching her suffer, unable to do anything to help. Anger began to consume me as I listened to the old man’s words while my wife cried out for me.

“You better hurry,” I growled up to Dr. Altair. “I swear to the gods, I will kill you if this doesn’t end soon!” Hesper rolled as I clutched her body, holding her close, trying to comfort her. “I’m here,” I whispered over and over. “I’m here.”

The old man fell silent as the crystal changed from a glowing white light to a pale blue, glistening light resembling stars trailing from it as it hovered. He closed the book as Hesper calmed, huffing and weak in my arms.

“It is done.”

“Hesper,” I whispered, wiping her forehead. “Are you alright?” She nodded weakly.

“You must take the crystal outside and release it beneath the moon to complete the spell.” Dr. Altair stepped back, bowing. “Grisset thanks you for your sacrifice, my king and queen. We are forever in your debt.”

Hesper slowly opened her eyes, clinging to my neck as I stood, holding her in my arms. I carried her to the crystal as her arm reached, carefully grasping it. The light changed color from a pale blue to a lavender. She looked up at me as I nodded, holding her close as we left the room.

Dr. Altair followed as we stepped outside the castle and down its steps. Orion spotted us, rushing to Dr. Altair’s side as he helped him down the stairs and remained close behind Hesper and me.

“What is happening?” he questioned within earshot.

Hesper looked at me once more, the pain in her eyes now absent. I smiled, kissing her softly, a tear falling from my eyes onto her face. She had made the sacrifice without hesitation. This world did not deserve her.

“Do you think it will work?” she asked softly, holding the glowing crystal in her hand.

“There is only one way to find out.”

Hesper inhaled, raising her hand as she aimed the crystal into the sky, the moonlight catching it as it glowed even brighter, slowly rising from her hand and lifting towards the heavens. The crystal burst into a million stars, scattering across the skies, purple magic raining down on all of Grisset as if it were a gentle snow.

“Dr. Altair?” Orion asked in awe.

“Your queen has ensured our people shall never suffer, never fail, and only thrive. She has made the ultimate sacrifice for Grisset.” I looked back at him, watching as the old man fumbled to our side, shadowed by Orion, and fell to his knees. “Queen Hesper, I am your humble servant.” Orion also kneeled, offering his protection and allegiance to Hesper.

As the lavender magic kissed our skin, its effect immediately took hold. My vision sharpened, my skin suddenly feeling no cold despite the freezing temperature of the night. I could feel a new strength building in my muscles. I looked down at Hesper, noticing she was being affected as well.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

She carefully dropped her legs, sliding from my arms and standing, showing no pain or weakness. Her hand touched her stomach, unphased as she glanced at me, beaming.

“I am perfect. The pain is gone, and I feel—” She inhaled, spinning, laughing as the magic continued to fall around us. “I feel stronger than ever!”

My hands snatched her body close, kissing her without thought or hesitation, my heart burning for her. Her arms wrapped around me, kissing me back as we stood there, a force the world had never seen. A force that should be feared.

“I love you, wolfsbane.”

“And I you, my king.”

NINETEEN

HESPER

My hands pulled the straps on Morel's armor, tightening them as he shoved his hands into a pair of leather gloves. He looked deadly and beautiful in his pitch black armor, his hair once again pulled high as a few loose strands hung in front of his face.

"Are you ready?" I asked. He smiled, pulling me close.

"With you by my side, I am perfect."

We kissed for a moment, heavy knocking on our door interrupting the moment as Orion stepped into the room.

"Morel, Dr. Altair wishes to speak with you." Morel nodded, kissing my forehead.

"Ride ahead with our army, Orion will shadow you, and as soon as I finish speaking with Dr. Altair, I shall join you." My heart stung. I didn't want to leave without him, but I knew time was working against us. Boletus and his army were spotted not far from the fields surrounding the kingdom late last night.

"Do not keep me waiting," I warned.

"If I am late, you may punish me however you see fit." Morel winked, leaving the room.

Orion approached my side, dressed in black armor, his horse snorting as he stopped. I was steadied my own horse, dressed the same, my hair braided back, my face smeared in black and white paint resembling a skull. Our army had been patiently waiting in the surrounding field, no sign of Boletus or his forces. Morel was also running late, nowhere to be seen. Something felt off. He should have arrived by now, riding steadily at my side, but he was not.

“Orion.” He trotted in front of me, bowing slightly. “Something is wrong.” My gut twisted and sank as I became uneasy and anxious. “Boletus should have arrived by now, and Morel is not here. No, something is off.” I scanned the horizon, searching for a sign of the opposing army. Nothing. “Boletus is not here. He must have changed his plans. Orion, we must return to Grisset!”

I kicked my horse as it rose and neighed, rushing past him to address the army.

“Your king needs you! Army of the night, follow me!” As I rode past, the soldiers shifted in unison, marching behind as we stormed back toward the castle.

The wind burned my face as I pushed my horse, forcing it to run as fast as possible, fear growing in my core as my breath fogged my face. Please be okay, Morel. I kicked the horse, groaning as I clenched my teeth. Fear and dread swallowed me whole as I spied the castle in the distance.

Do not leave me alone on this Earth, Morel!

“Morel!” I screamed, lunging from my horse as we reached the palace steps.

The kingdom seemed unharmed, with no sign of attack, but the doors of the castle were left open. An eerie feeling fell over me as I stepped inside, retrieving my sword. Orion was panting, running after me with his sword in hand. Our eyes met as we moved with stealth, communicating with our hands. We moved from the entryway,

making our way through the castle, searching the rooms. The smell of blood stopped us as we approached the throne room.

Orion pushed past me, guarding me with his body as he slowly opened the door, the smell hitting us in the face as we stepped into the room. Laying in the center of the room, surrounded by a puddle of fresh blood, was Dr. Altair.

“No!” I dropped my sword and rushed to him, falling to his side as I searched his body. “Dr. Altair?” He groaned, barely conscious. “What happened?” I noticed a whip mark across his face, similar to Morel’s, answering my own question. Blood continued to pour from a wound on his shoulder, as if he had been stabbed. I ripped part of my armor, pressing it against the wound to stop the bleeding. “He needs help, Orion!”

Orion rushed to us, replacing my hands with his as he pushed against the hole to stop the bleeding.

“S-she took him-m—” the old man mumbled.

“What?” I looked at him, fearful of what he was saying.

“H-hystrix.” My hands balled into fists at my sides, realizing what he was saying. “F-forgive me—” I leaned down, kissing his forehead gently.

“You have nothing to apologize for.” He slowly faded away as my eyes met Orion’s. “Take care of him.” I stood, snatching my sword.

“My queen! You cannot face them alone!” I shoved the doors open, raging as darkness befell me.

“I’m not.”

I was greeted by my army as I rushed from the castle and mounted my horse. My nostrils flared as I galloped to the frontline, raising my sword as they listened.

“Army of the night, shadow me as we ride to Hellbore!” They slammed their shields in response to my command. “Let us rain darkness upon Boletus and his men! Let us show the world how mighty Grisset is!” They pounded their shields, shifting into position. “A symphony of stars!”

“A symphony of stars!” the army chanted back as we galloped from Grisset toward Hellbore, a strength unlike any other fueling us.

Prepare for darkness, Boletus. You stole my kingdom, killed my parents, and now, you have taken my husband. I am coming for you.

TWENTY

MOREL

My body fell to the cold stone floor as Boletus erupted in laughter. His pet, Hystrix, cracked her whip, hitting my back. I groaned, fighting back the pain.

“Morel, mighty king of darkness,” Boletus snarked, standing in front of me. “Tell me: how does it feel to lose?” He wore an arrogant smirk, smug and confident that, by kidnapping me, he had won this sick game, when, truthfully, he ensured his defeat.

I smiled, laughing up at him as Hystrix struck me again, my mouth bleeding from the sharp impact.

“Do you not understand? I have taken Grisset’s king, left it unprotected as your forces and your queen await mine on the battlefield, completely unaware.” Boletus bent down, retrieving a small knife, using the tip to force my chin upwards. “Are you such a fool to truly think you can escape me?”

“It is not I who needs to escape.”

Boletus’ smile fell as he dropped my chin and backed away, stepping up the dais and plopping down onto the throne—Hesper’s throne.

“When you were last here, I let you go, but we had a deal. Do you remember it?” I groaned, rising as I remained on my knees, my hands chained behind my back. “Well, allow me to remind you.” Boletus waved the small blade around as he spoke. “I let

you go in exchange for any information on my fiancée's whereabouts. I also agreed to leave your little kingdom of darkness be as long as you left Hellbore alone." Boletus looked down at me, pressing his eyebrows together. "You've been a naughty little king, Morel. Not only did I learn you had allowed the people of Hellbore to enter your kingdom, but you were hiding my queen in the shadows. Did you really think I would not find out?" He tossed the knife, catching it as he continued to play with it. "But imagine my surprise when, on the cusp of attacking your kingdom, I learned not only did you try to keep such a thing from me, but you decided to marry my fiancée!" My muscles bulged at his words.

"Hesper is not yours! She never was!" I roared the words, fighting the chains around my wrists. "Not only is she my queen, but she is the queen of Hellbore! The true queen!"

Boletus simply smiled at my temper, adjusting his posture as he leaned forward on the throne, his head resting on his arm as he watched me.

"The only queen Hesper is is mine . You may have married her in some diluted thought that she could be yours, but you are no true king. You are an outcast. You have no title, no ancient kingdom. And once I kill you, I shall march upon your measly kingdom and claim it as my own, with Hesper at my side as my queen."

My legs stood as I bolted towards him, Hystrix's whip catching my leg as I stumbled. Rage and Hesper's sacrifice pumped through my veins as I continued, only slowed by Hystrix's interference. Boletus' smile faded as he stood, unnerved by my new strength.

" You —" I groaned, stepping onto the dais.

"Guards!" Boletus' fear began to seep from him as his men rushed into the room. They tried to hold me back, but it was no use.

“Will never have my kingdom—” I groaned, baring my teeth as I stopped inches from Boletus’ face. “And you will never have Hesper.” An eerie smile formed as I stared down at him, raging with power.

Screams and shouts erupted from outside as a flood of Boletus’ men flooded the room, barring the door in absolute fear. I remained still, his guards struggling to pull me back. His eyes rose back to mine, studying me closely.

“What is happening?” he asked his men as they scattered around in a fluster.

“Hellbore is under attack!” they shouted.

“By whom?”

“An unknown army! They just appeared, flooding the horizon with darkness!” My laughter answered his question as he looked at me.

“You made one fatal mistake, Boletus.” I allowed his men to pull me back as I stepped down the dais, grinning. “She’s coming for me, and I can assure you, no one will survive her wrath.”

“Who?” Boletus demanded, pulling his sword from its sheath as Hystrix joined him.

“My wife.”

TWENTY-ONE

HESPER

Grisset's army tore through the gates of Hellbore, ripping it to shreds as darkness poured through the kingdom. My men easily triumphed over Boletus', slaughtering them as they flooded the kingdom. Rain began to pour as thunder roared through the skies, lightning flashing. My army remained unphased thanks to the spell we performed. I moved through the kingdom, aiming for the castle. As I neared the entrance, one of Boletus' men injured my horse, causing me to fall into the mud.

I held my sword tightly, quickly standing as he ran at me screaming. I swung my sword, slapping his away as my elbow slammed into his face, knocking him to the ground.

"Pathetic," I spat, kicking him in the face. A cluster of my men galloped to my aid as I nodded. "Follow me!" The paint on my face smeared from the rain as I wiped it clean. I charged the castle entrance, followed by my army. "Morel!" I screamed as their horses kicked the doors down with ease, flooding the castle.

I ran inside, only to be instantly met by more of Boletus' men. I swung my sword as I moved, slicing them down with little effort.

"Morel!" I screamed, moving toward the throne room. Another man crossed me, and we locked blades as I groaned, fighting back. "Big mistake." I swirled my arm, freeing my blade as I lunged deep into his gut, gripping his neck as I pulled his body closer, my hand sinking into his bloodied flesh. "No man is a match for me." He

stared at me in absolute fear, and I smiled as I flung his body aside, shaking the blood from my hand. An arrow landed in my shoulder as I stumbled back in shock. Pain radiated as I looked up to see an archer just ahead, docking a second arrow. Without hesitation, I ripped it from my flesh, screaming through my teeth as he launched the next, my sword hitting it away. He moved a third time, missing as I charged him, grabbing his bow and snapping it across my knee. "It's going to take more than that to kill me." The archer tried to run, but he was too slow.

I adjusted my handle of my sword, throwing it like a spear. It landed deep into his spine, and the man fell to the ground as I walked to his side. I stared down at him, grinning as he watched me slam my foot into his skull, listening to the sound of his brain smooshing beneath my sole.

"My queen!" I snapped my head to one of my soldiers. "We believe Boletus has the king in the throne room!" I looked down at the corpse, ripping my sword from his back as I joined my men, aiming for the large doors.

"Do you know his pet's whereabouts, Hystrix?" I asked as I watched my men use a nearby fallen pillar to ram the door.

"We believe she is also inside." They rammed the door again as the wood splintered, weakening at their strength.

"Good. You and the rest are to defeat his guard and clear a path for me. Protect the king at all costs, but remember: Boletus and Hystrix are mine."

"Yes, my queen." The throne room doors crumbled as the army of the night flowed into the room, fighting ensuing as they continued, doing as I commanded, leaving me a path.

I gripped my sword, slowly stalking into the corridor as my soldiers attacked, taking

Boletus' men down one by one. Thunder roared, shaking the castle as I stepped into the throne room. I smiled as I locked eyes with Morel, who matched my own expression as he watched me. My heart nearly leapt from my chest as I saw him, any emotion quickly replaced with anger as I noticed the blood from his mouth. My sights turned to Boletus, standing on the dais in front of Hellbore's throne. My throne. He was pale, drowning in fear as my smile grew. His pet was nowhere to be seen, but I didn't care. All I saw was red, and all I craved was blood.

My head raised as the army cleared a path, making their way to their king, allowing me to move towards him with ease. I walked like the queen I was, time slowing as I neared him.

My king.

I approached Morel's side as one of my men tried to free him from the chains, my hand caressing his cheek as he gazed up at me.

"I told you to never leave me." He leaned into my touch.

"Forgive me, my queen."

"Hesper!" Boletus hissed my name as my body tightened, my smile fading at his voice. I turned to address my men behind Morel.

"Free the king, finish off what's left of Boletus' forces, and then return to Grisset."

"Hesper," Morel protested.

"A kingdom is nothing without its king." I leaned down, kissing him gently as thunder boomed. "Protect our people. Do not let our sacrifice be for nothing." As my whispered words hit his ear, I turned to face Boletus, stepping down from the dais.

“You’ve returned home,” he snarked, his sword in hand.

I rose, stepping from Morel as he tried to break free from the chains, to rush after me, but it was no use. He had to wait and watch.

“Boletus,” I hissed, stopping at the base of the steps. “How does it feel to know you will die a traitor?”

“Traitor?” He smirked. “No, the only traitor here is you .” He raised his sword in my direction as I chuckled, clutching mine at my side. “You fled Hellbore in its time of need, running into the arms of this illegitimate king, living amongst his people and warming his bed as your kingdom burned. And now, you stand before me, slaughtering and killing for a man with no place in this world.” Boletus stepped down further. “Tell me: how does it feel to know your parents' sacrifice was wasted?”

“You know nothing of sacrifice.” I raised my blade, adjusting my footing as he approached, standing less than a foot away. “I have done everything for my people, the very people you let die for a throne and a crown you will never have. Morel is more of a king than you will ever be.”

Boletus glared at me, looking past me to Morel, who was still chained.

“This may have been my home once, but Grisset is my home now. And I, the queen of shadows, fight for the people in both my kingdoms. I fight for Hellbore, I fight for Grisset, but most importantly, I fight for my king.”

My body twirled as I swung my sword toward him, clashing blades with him. He grunted, pushing back as I backed down a few steps, grinning.

“You are insane,” he stated. I ran up the steps as he tried to back away, nearly falling as he blocked my aim.

“No,” I growled, kicking his sword from his hand as he fell back. “I am death . I am here to set things right, to seek my revenge.” My foot pressed down on his chest, pinning him to the floor as I pierced my blade gently into the flesh of his neck. He groaned, blood staining my blade. “It’s time to pay for all you’ve done, Boletus.”

His fearful expression changed as her whip cracked, forcing me back as it wrapped around my neck. I nearly fell down the dais when it released me, dropping my sword as my body rolled down the stairs.

“Wolfsbane!” Morel’s voice filled my ears as I groaned, my vision slightly blurred from my head slamming into the cold stone floor. The whip cracked again as Hystrix stalked towards me. “Hesper!” I could hear the fear and pain in his voice. My eyes raised as I spotted my sword nearby, and I crawled to reach it.

Hystrix’s whip caught my ankle, the stinging strength pulling me back. I groaned, rotating my body as I looked up at her. She was mostly covered, dressed in dark assassin’s gear, a hood covering most of her face, though her cloudy eyes burned into mine. My eyes fell to her chest, a necklace hanging against her clothing—a golden sun pendant. Hystrix was not just a skilled warrior; she was a child of the dawn. My smile returned. Children of the dawn were enemies of children of the night, matched in almost every way—almost.

My leg rotated, yanking the whip and her body forward, her feet stumbling as it broke from her grasp. I quickly removed it from my ankle, running to my sword as she picked her weapon up. We both studied the other as we slowly rotated, easing closer. Boletus stood, groaning as he held his neck, his ridiculous smile back now.

“Kill her, Hystrix.” The hooded woman nodded, raising her whip as she spun and cracked it, hitting my arm. The impact shredded the armor, causing my flesh to bleed as I backed up, refusing to give in to the pain.

“Hesper!” Morel finally broke free of his chains and ran for a nearby sword, watching me closely.

“I can handle her!” He stood nearby, his eyes rising to meet Boletus.

“Let us fight like men, Boletus.” Morel threw his sword aside, removing his gloves as he approached the dais.

I couldn’t watch, my focus returning to Hystrix as she swung, her whip missing me. I took advantage of the moment, rushing her as I swung my blade. She moved quickly, her whip wrapping around the end of the sword, attempting to pull it from my grasp. I remained firm, fighting her. My muscles screamed, my new strength building as her eyes widened in shock. She tried to use both hands, tugging with all her strength, but it was no use.

“This is not possible!” She groaned, her feet sliding across the stone. “You cannot possess such strength! Not unless—” Her hands gave out as I stole the whip from her, my sword in one hand, whip in the other as thunder once again rumbled. Hystrix stared at me in fear, slowly backing away.

“You may be a child of the dawn,” I hissed, stepping closer, twirling my sword, “but I am a daughter of the night.” I cracked her whip, the end catching her neck as I pulled her to her knees. She tried to fight me, one hand gripping the coil around her throat, the other pulling at the whip. I tightened my grip as I approached her, my sword at my side. “And unlike you, I am blessed by the moon goddess herself. You cannot defeat me. Darkness will always consume the light and triumph in the end.” My eyes bore into hers. “Let’s see the dawn save you now.” As I dropped the whip, my body swung, my blade following as it sliced through her flesh and bone, decapitating her. Her blood sprayed across my face as her head fell, her body slumping to the floor. Lightning flashed as my head rose, and I inhaled the smell of her blood stained across my face.

“No!” My head snapped as I watched Morel swing, his fists landing into Boletus’ face.

I gripped my sword, gripping Hystrix’s head as I slowly approached the base of the dais, looking up as Morel yanked Boletus to his knees. His eyes fell to me, grinning as he beamed at my victory.

“Your pet,” I spat, tossing Hystrix’s head down. We all watched it roll, hitting the lower step of the dais. I exhaled, my men surrounding me, as they, too, had been victorious.

Morel adjusted his grip, snatching the back of Boletus’ neck as he casually began to drag the bloodied and beaten man down the steps.

“Allow me to present you with one last wedding present, my queen.” He dropped Boletus at my feet, the man groaning as he looked up at me, defeated and filled with absolute fear. I raised my sword, smiling as I stared at him, the moment of my revenge finally within my grasp.

“Any last words, traitor?” Boletus laughed, spitting blood at my feet.

“You may win today, but someday, you will lose. The ancient kingdoms will never accept your kingdom or its king.” My smile nearly reached my ears.

“The ancient kingdoms will either accept our kingdom of shadows or they will burn. We will cover this world in darkness, starting with Hellbore.” My arm swung as his eyes bulged, his head falling to the ground as it rolled next to Hystrix’s.

Morel looked at me as I dropped my sword and ran into his arms. The storm raged outside as our men cheered, my mouth crushing to Morel’s, our laughter mixing with our breath.

“Hesper,” he breathed as I slowly pulled away from him. “Your throne.” My eyes raised, landing on my father’s throne. My throne. Morel offered his hand, guiding me to the steps of the dais. He walked me up the steps, our men flooding the room, falling silent as I took my seat. Morel grinned, turning to face the room. “All hail Hesper, daughter of the night, the savior of our people, Queen of Hellbore and Grisset. All hail the queen of darkness!” He raised a fist as the room erupted, chanting alongside him. “Until the heavens fall onto the Earth, forever she shall remain your queen!”

“Queen Hesper! Queen Hesper! Queen Hesper!”

Morel turned to me, kneeling as he bowed. He took my hand, kissing the ring upon my finger.

“Queen Hesper.”

I tried to fight back tears, looking out at our army then back at my husband, a king kneeling before me. He had not only made true on his promise, but he delivered both the world and his heart at my feet.

Morel’s eyes raised to mine.

“What shall we do next, my queen?” I glanced around, noticing tapestries with Boletus’ sigil around the throne room.

“Have the army of the night evacuate the kingdom and prepare them for the journey back to Grisset.” He nodded, commanding our men as they began to carry out my wishes. “As for Hellbore...” I glanced around. “Burn it to the ground.”

More of our men scattered, carrying torches as they began to light the tapestries, working their way through the kingdom as I remained on my throne, my fingers

curling over the armrests. A large tapestry burned behind me, thunder roaring once more.

“Hellbore is no more. There is only Grisset.” Morel stood at my side, watching the room ignite as we took it all in. “You have given me my revenge.” I turned to look at him. “Now, let me give you yours, my king.”

Morel offered his hand to me as we gracefully walked down the steps, leaving the throne room as it crumbled beneath the raging fire. We stepped out into the night, the rain soaking us as our army waited, a horse readied just for us. Morel mounted first before helping me as I took my place in front of him.

“Let us worry about that another day, my queen. We have a kingdom to complete and people to care for. Besides, I remember breaking a promise to you, so I am in need of a punishment.” I raised a brow, grinning as he kicked the horse. “Let us return to Grisset. Let us return home.”

Home.

“I love you, Morel.” He gripped my body close as we galloped away from the burning kingdom, my people joining our army as we began the short journey back.

“And I love you, wolfsbane, until the heavens fall upon the Earth. A symphony of stars.”

“A symphony of stars.”

Source Creation Date: August 6, 2025, 5:31 am

And so, King Morel and Queen Hesper returned to Grisset, their kingdom of shadows, where they lived happily ever after seeking vengeance for all those wronged in the world... That is, until the day Morel's revenge came. But you already know that story. If you do not, perhaps you should.

This may be the story of the love of darkness, but what happens next is simply the story of those poisonous mushrooms. Death caps.