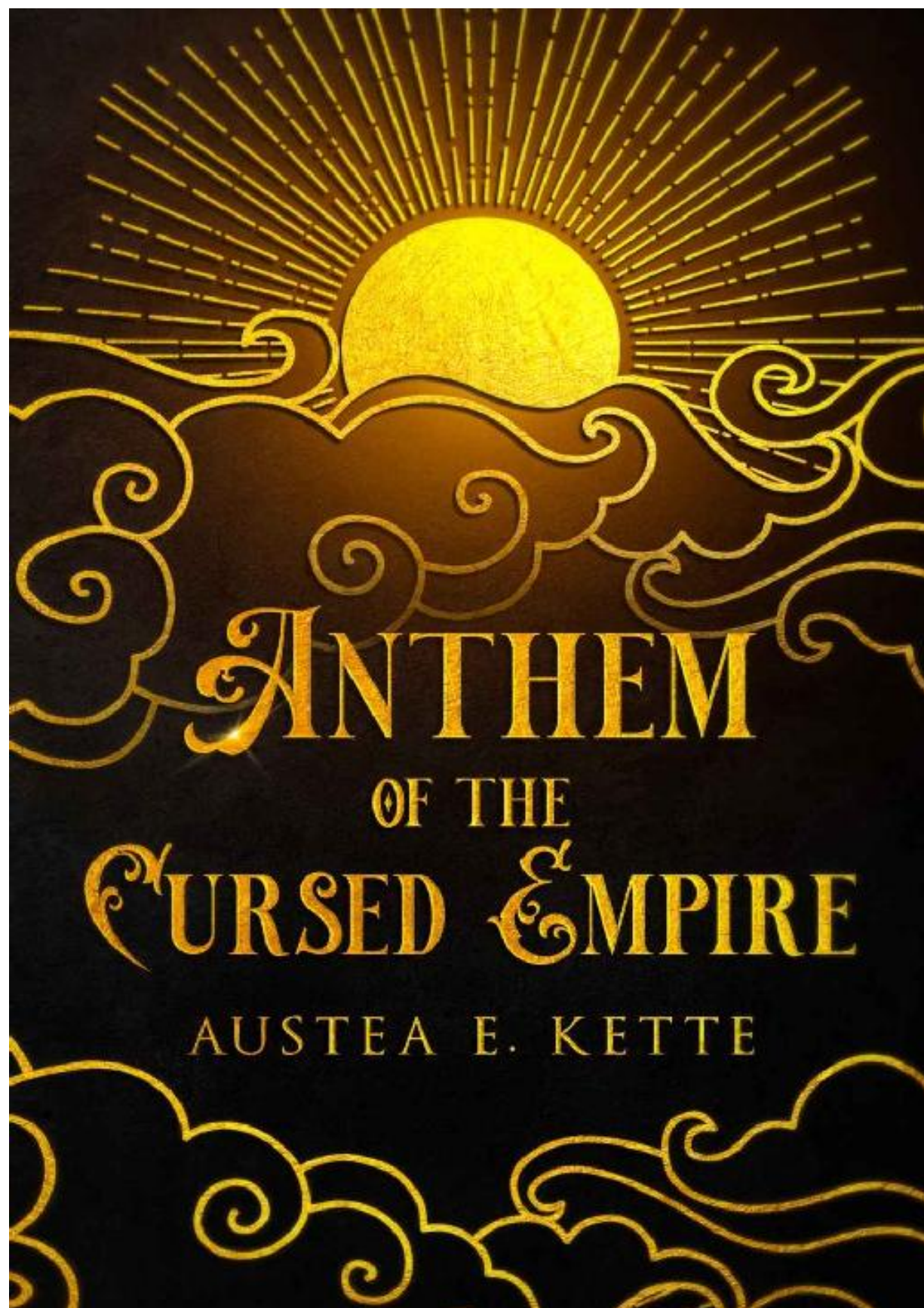


ANTHEM
OF THE
CURSED EMPIRE

AUSTEA E. KETTE



ANTHEM OF THE CURSED EMPIRE

Gold & Fire & Blood Novel
by Austea E. Kette

OceanofPDF.com

Publishing Information

Copyright © 2021 Austea E. Kette

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or establishments is solely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the author.

Cover Designed by MiblArt

OceanofPDF.com

Table of Contents

[Front Cover](#)

[Publishing Information](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Preface](#)

[PART I: Notes of Family & Sacrifice](#)

[Chapter I](#)

[Chapter II](#)

[Chapter III](#)

[Chapter IV](#)

[Chapter V](#)

[Chapter VI](#)

[PART II: Notes of Beasts & Bones](#)

[Chapter VII](#)

[Chapter VIII](#)

[Chapter IX](#)

[Chapter X](#)

[Chapter XI](#)

[Chapter XII](#)

[Chapter XIII](#)
[Chapter XIV](#)
[Chapter XV](#)
[Chapter XVI](#)
[Chapter XVII](#)
[Chapter XVIII](#)
[Chapter XIX](#)
[Chapter XX](#)
[Chapter XXI](#)
[Chapter XXII](#)
[Chapter XXIII](#)
[Chapter XXIV](#)
[Chapter XXV](#)
[Chapter XXVI](#)
[Chapter XXVII](#)
[Chapter XXVIII](#)
[Chapter XXIX](#)
[Chapter XXX](#)

[PART III: Notes of Fire & Friendship](#)

[Chapter XXXI](#)
[Chapter XXXII](#)
[Chapter XXXIII](#)
[Chapter XXXIV](#)
[Chapter XXXV](#)

[Chapter XXXVI](#)
[Chapter XXXVII](#)
[Chapter XXXVIII](#)
[Chapter XXXIX](#)
[Chapter XL](#)
[Chapter XLI](#)
[Chapter XLII](#)
[Chapter XLIII](#)
[Chapter XLIV](#)
[Chapter XLV](#)
[Chapter XLVI](#)

[PART IV: Notes of Curse & Winter](#)

[Chapter XLVII](#)
[Chapter XLVIII](#)
[Chapter XLIX](#)
[Chapter L](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Author's Note](#)
[About The Author](#)
[Thanks & Appreciation](#)

Dedication

To my one and only superhero, my mum, who, despite not being able to read the story, has never discouraged me and never stopped believing in it.
Believing in me.

OceanofPDF.com

PREFACE

I was dying again.

The first time I'd faced death, I eluded it with the help of a man who I hadn't known would become my most hated person back then, but now I didn't think I'd get lucky to survive again.

This was it. This was the end.

He told me to hold on a little longer with that irritatingly concerned tone of his. Even with blood gushing out of my stomach, I wanted to punch him in the face. If it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't be here, bleeding in his arms with yet beating heart he'd played with and shattered. If it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't be fighting for my life.

I did try to hold on, though. I couldn't leave. Not until I took my vengeance on everyone who'd done me wrong in the past six months.

But my eyelids drooped, and the light was fading.

OceanofPDF.com

Part I: Notes of Family & Sacrifice

OceanofPDF.com

I

THE NEW BOOTS WOULD BE great for the autumn if I could afford them, that was. I didn't have a pair of shoes that wouldn't be scuffed for the season, but when I'd delved my hand into the pocket and felt a few coins, the desire to buy them vanished into nothing.

I couldn't spend the remaining coins I'd earned from my last piano performance. What if I needed them for something more important than a pair of new shoes?

The vendor noticed the direction of my stare and lifted the boots off the stand. "Five shillings. It used to cost six. For a beautiful girl I give a discount."

He flashed me a toothless smile, and I repressed my disgust.

"Maybe next time."

I turned and resumed my amble.

"Are you sure?" he called behind me. "There might be no next time!"

Pretending not to hear it, I didn't slow my pace.

Today had kicked off terribly enough. I didn't have time dealing with lousy vendors, nor walking through the market in the first place, which I had done anyway. It would be surprising if I left it without spending at least a coin.

Although the sun was a warm and tender touch on my skin, it didn't content me as it once had. Last year, I would have smiled since the summer was my favourite season and warm days like this were Gods' blessing, but now the increasing heat of the sun constantly reminded me that my younger sister, Gen, would be offered at the offering of the Summer Solstice.

"Elynn!"

I slightly started as two girls looped their arms through mine. I wasn't surprised to find Alise to my left and Irisa to my right, as per usual.

"Shall we go shopping for the dresses?" Alise asked.

"Yes, dresses!" Irisa exclaimed in joy. "It's the perfect afternoon for it. I heard the shopkeeper had received new models this morning."

“Yes, Elynn, let’s go. You should have bought one a long time ago, and the wedding is just around the corner.”

The wedding. The mere thought of it made my stomach churn.

“Not today.” I managed a pleasant voice. “I have other plans.”

Alise brushed off her flaxen hair. “Oh, come on. If you’re always so busy, when are you planning to buy the gown? I’m sure Chase has a suit already and a bride not having an outfit selected before her husband? Shameful.”

Irisa nodded. “Very shameful.”

Alise and Irisa might have been born with the same souls, but when it came to their looks, they were the opposites. Irisa possessed much darker features than Alise, who looked like she hadn’t seen the sun in years. But it was the start of the summer, and the season was pretty hot in the Mortal Region.

They were pretty girls, as long as it concerned their outside. Gen liked to call them two-faced nuisances, which wasn’t polite, but it emphasised their true colours.

“Well?” Alise prompted.

Yesterday, I’d told my mum that I was going to check the wedding gowns today, perhaps buy one, and that was my plan until Kris had told me more books were going to be delivered from the city’s library tomorrow. More books meant more chances to find a solution that could save Gen from the annual offering to the Empire of Beasts.

Kris and I had been supposed to go to the library together this morning, but as I’d woken up on a couch hugging a sketchbook like a teddy bear, I found no one in the cottage. Gen had gone to summer school while Kristian hadn’t even bothered waiting for me. Now, since I’d awoken in the afternoon, I didn’t have time for any shopping as I had to go to the library before all the new books were taken.

“I’m sorry, but—”

The loud clatter of hoofs interrupted me, and a horse halted before us, drawing the attention of the people nearby. I craned my neck, but the sun shining dazzlingly bright behind the rider made it hard to identify them. It wasn’t until they dismounted the horse, I saw who it was.

A man dressed in brown tossed his head, and his light brown hair slid off the side of his sun-kissed face.

“Good afternoon, Chase,” the girls said in the same cloying tone, almost purring like kittens.

He didn’t acknowledge them with anything more than a curt nod as his emerald eyes landed on me.

I gulped.

“Hello, Ely.”

It was strange to see my fiancé in the town on Friday. Especially in the morning... or afternoon. To me, it still felt like morning, as it hadn’t even been an hour since I was awake.

I forced a smile. “I thought you were going for a hunt?”

After all, he was hunting every day but somehow still found time for me in the evenings. Covertly, I pleaded with the Gods that he would be so busy he would forget about his fiancée and leave me be for at least one day. Alas, he never did.

“You told me you’d be buying a gown today and that you need money for it.” He pulled out something from his pocket. A pouch. “Here. Buy the most pretty one and make sure it undoes easily.”

I paid no attention to the queasy feeling clutching my stomach whilst taking the pouch. “Thank you.”

“Also, I’m departing for a weekend.”

I stifled a cry of joy once a relief surged my chest at the sound of such fantastic news.

“Where are you going?” I pretended to be sincerely interested in the reason for his absence.

“It doesn’t matter where I’m going, Ely.” A few lines appeared between his bushy eyebrows. “All that matters is that I expect to find you dressed up well at my manor on Monday morning.”

Again, my stomach twisted. I swallowed, smiling like an obedient soon-to-be wife I was. “Of course.” I then inhaled surreptitiously, just to add another full of lie sentence not to grant him with suspicion. “I’ll be waiting for you, my darling.”

The appearance of his pleased smile attested I’d said exactly what he wanted to hear. Without uttering farewell, he turned to the horse and mounted him. Chase directed him towards the sun and rode away, accompanied by townies’ admiring stares, until he and his horse were gone out of sight.

I almost heaved a sigh of relief, conscious of how his mere presence had made the muscles of my body strained, but I couldn't when another two pairs of eyes were watching me.

"He's so handsome," Alise claimed. "You're so lucky, Elynn."

Irisa nodded a few times enthusiastically. "So, so lucky."

Lucky.

Perhaps I was lucky. Lucky that some man had proposed to a girl with shortcomings as it was rare for a man to covet a wife with no useful skills that a woman was expected to have if she wanted to marry someday. Cooking, gardening, taking care of the home when her husband wasn't around wasn't something I was born to do, and I'd already tried those things, failing at each one of them.

I'm lucky. I had to repeat to myself that or else I might bail when the wedding day came. I ignored my inner voice, which I kept hushing or pushing to the back of my mind perpetually, for I couldn't bear it to say:

But Chase is not the man you felt in your trance, Elynn.

OceanofPDF.com

II

I PRETENDED I WAS feeling unwell, this way escaping Alise with Irida. They watched me until I disappeared in the direction of my home, but little did they know I took the other, longer route to the library, winding through the buildings.

The lovely librarian lady welcomed me with her usual contagious smile. It was impossible not to smile back.

I neared her desk. "Kristian told me more additions were arriving. Are they here already?"

"Yes," she said. "Do you want to see them all?"

I nodded.

"Come this way."

I followed her to the small table standing before one bookshelf with two unpacked cardboard boxes on it.

"All the new books are here. None have been shelved yet."

"Can I go through them?"

She chuckled. "Of course. I'll leave you to it and hope you find what you're looking for."

As I watched her go towards the desk, I wondered if she knew why I was so eager to go through the new books. She must be suspecting it, at least, as it wouldn't take a fool to figure out why a girl was entering a library once a week and inspecting all the bookshelves, only to leave empty-handed. Especially when everybody in town knew the names of sixteen-year-olds who'd be offered this year, Gen's name included.

I opened the boxes and started the search. There were gardening and cooking books I would never pick in my life, and then there were two novels. One was a romance; the other was a mystery. I picked the mystery one for my mum. However, there weren't any that could have an answer I'd been looking for all along.

Hiding my disappointment, I came back to the desk and put a mystery novel on it.

"Is this what you were looking for?" she asked.

I chuckled aloud without meaning to. If my problems revolved around finding a perfect mystery book, my life would be simple to live.

“It’s for my mum.”

“Oh.” She smiled, but there was something sympathetic about her smile. “Well, I have to register it first, then you can have it. Meanwhile, you can explore. Maybe you’ll find something you missed.”

Doubtful, but I didn’t object and disappeared between the bookshelves.

I wished there was something I’d missed, but there was no book with a loophole that could save Gen from the offering. I’d investigated every nook and cranny of this library many times, and my chances of finding something worthwhile remained practically non-existent.

And yet I stayed here, hopelessly expecting a new book with the answer written in it would fall into my hands, even if that had never happened before.

Sometimes I wondered if the offering wasn’t a deception. Teachers had said we offered minors because it was the sign of peace between the Mortal Region and the Empire of Beasts that they’d reached years and years after the ending of the Hundred Years’ War. But what if it was a lie? I’d done my investigation, and I’d discovered no written proof of it being true.

I halted at my favourite spot and brushed my fingers down the book’s spine of the most horrifying tales ever written. There was a time when Mum used to read them to me. I was just a child then—a careless child living its best irresponsible life. More than anything, I longed to come back to that life and be irresponsible for a few more years to lose this weight upon my shoulders, but it would always remain as nothing more than a desire.

I reached the end of the aisle, but it wasn’t empty. A figure was engulfed by the shadow. Reading a book with the help of a faint light filtering through the shuttered window, being so absorbed in it he didn’t notice me.

I plucked out a book from his hands, and the brunet boy flinched, round glasses sliding down his nose. He had to shift them with the push of his forefinger to get them back in place.

“Lynn,” Kris whispered, respecting the silence in the library even if I’d stolen a book from him, and his tone wasn’t exactly pleased. “Give it back.”

“Why?” I gave a quick look at the pages he was reading and read something I wished I hadn’t. “Is that why you left without me? To read this... unseemly thing?”

He flushed, rosiness crawling from his cheeks up to his ears. "I... I was not."

"Right." I plopped my bottom down beside him and offered him the book, which he snatched from me. "Rude."

"As if you didn't do the same thing."

I rolled my eyes. "I don't think reading a cliché romance novel will help you get a..." I made a thoughtful face. "Never mind. Maybe it would help you get a girl, after all."

"Please, stop."

"Don't worry. You're young. You'll find someone who would be worthy of you. So far—"

"All right, I get it, Lynn."

A reflective smile touched the corner of my lip before I ruffled his neatly brushed hair.

He began fixing it right away, shooting me an annoyed look. "What's the matter with you today?"

I shrugged, resting my head against the wall while Kris adjusted his reading glasses once again. We couldn't afford the ones which would be a perfect fit for him. Luckily, these had been on discount since it had a little crack on a temple.

"Oh, um..." he began. "Don't tell Mum what I'm about to tell you, but Gen didn't go to summer school this morning."

I shut my eyes for a moment and let out a frustrated sigh before reopening them. "Where did she go now?"

"Didn't tell me."

Gen had become more and more distant these days. Uncharacteristically quiet, laughing less than usual, just like making her sarcastic puns. Not one of us talked about the forthcoming event in two weeks, but we were all aware of it. Ignoring it helped avoid the despair it'd bring upon us until we had no choice but to face it.

"We should head home." I rose and extended my hand to help Kris get up. "Mum must be already waiting for us with lunch."

Acting like a tough man, Kris ignored my hand and sprang to his feet by himself. I playfully rolled my eyes, pulling my hand away. Once he returned the book back to its place, we stopped by the librarian's desk. She gave me a book while Kris was taking off his glasses. We chirped our goodbyes to her before leaving.

Shouts of the vendors promoting their goods and people's chatters burst through as soon as we stepped outside. A group of kids ran past us, giggling, while the old lady shouted behind them to give her back her apple.

Now the market was buzzing with activity. Although we were strolling behind market stalls to avoid the persistent vendors, some of their helpers still managed to disturb us. Every time one introduced their product, Kristian shyly lowered his head while I waved them away, rejecting their offer, not even minding hearing half of it.

"How is the search for sorcerers going on so far?" Kris inquired. His hands were in the pockets of his brown tweed trousers and his shoulders hunched as if he aimed to shrink and shrink until he disappeared.

During my determined year-lasting searches, I was bound to discover something that could be Gen's salvation, like powerful sorceresses who had once existed in our region. I'd assumed some of them might be still alive, and when I found them, they could help me rescue Gen from the Summer Solstice offering. But I did a thorough investigation, questioned townies about them, and they all declared their eyes had never beheld them in their lives.

"I think they're dead," I said. "Or could be hiding somewhere for some reason."

"Have you tried to go to the pledgers' office and talk to them?"

Although pledgers hosted the offering in the town hall every Summer Solstice and sent information about every youngest person of the family who turned sixteen to the Empire of Beasts three months before the day, I was surprised to learn they didn't know much.

"Yes. They seemed like genuine people, but they couldn't help me when hardly anything depended on them. They could forge the lists, but they don't want to risk morphs finding out a lie only to come here and slaughter us all."

Townies nearby fell into silence, casting us wary glances at the mention of shapeshifters.

Hardly ever one could hear someone talking about morphs. It wasn't forbidden, but it was like an unwritten rule not to discuss them in public, as even mentioning them made people apprehensive. Unlike many, I didn't fear them for some inexplicable reason, even if I should. My sister was going to be offered to the world teeming with them in a mere fortnight and

nobody knew what happened to an offered kid there. But based on the tales featuring morphs, we were inclined to believe the worst.

The way Kris strained under townies' scrutiny caused me to lower my voice. "I'm thinking about travelling to the city's library. The book assortment is wider there. Perhaps I'll find something that might be helpful."

"How are you planning to get there? We don't have any transport, and the city is miles away."

"I'm planning to borrow one of Chase's horses."

Kris nodded without catching a strain in my voice. And I could merely be glad Kris was the only one who didn't care about my engagement, or he did but didn't show it. He didn't have to know that Chase would never willingly hand his horse over with nothing in return. Not even to his soon-to-be wife.

As soon as we reached the forest and took a turn to the right, entering the footpath leading to our home, Kristian relaxed. We were safe from the vendors' helpers' harassment at last.

"You know why I'm not trying to find anything to help Gen?" he said after a while.

"Because you secretly hate that she's smarter than you?"

His pointed look spoke volumes.

I laughed, nudging his arm with my elbow. "I'm joking." His eyes narrowed into slits. "Go on, tell me why you're not trying to help her."

He sighed, letting go of his firm expression. "Because she's been preparing for it ever since she learnt about the risk of her being the one to go. Have you forgotten her plan already?"

"Once she gets through the portal, she flees back home?" I remembered laughing at the nonsense of Gen's plan I'd heard a year ago, taking it as a joke rather than a plan based on reason. "We don't have a map of the empire, and even if we did, nobody has taught us how to navigate with it. Even if she somehow magically found a way home, do you think she wouldn't be killed as soon as she steps out of the portal? We don't know what morphs are capable of, and they're immortal. Anything can be lurking in their minds. She has no chances of surviving there."

"I wouldn't underestimate her. She can pull all kinds of surprises."

"She's too young to be on her own. She still needs someone to guide her. I'm not giving up."

“I know,” he said with a sigh. “Mum said you’d fight until your last breath to keep us safe and lacking nothing. You are a hero, as she says.”

I smiled faintly. “I’m not a hero.”

Tweeting birds snatched the silence settled between us, and in approximately twenty minutes of walking, the wooden house appeared behind the trees’ gaps. Our cottage. My home.

I *could* call it my home or admit to myself that sharing it with three people without having a personal space had been getting on my nerves instead of trying to make peace with living in a cramped room with my siblings, leaving a desire to have a bigger place to reside in for another life. But Chase had a manor where he scarcely showed up. Perhaps marrying him had a bright side for me, after all.

Kris pulled open the door, and once we stepped inside the claustrophobic corridor, Mum’s voice rang from inside the kitchen. “Who’s there? If it’s not my pesky kids, I will not be afraid to use a pan!”

I appreciated her honesty. *Sometimes*. And this was not one of those times.

“Rude!” I shouted back.

Her harmonic sound of laughter came afterwards.

As soon as Kris kicked off his shoes, he darted into our bedroom, leaving his footwear thrown on the floor. Sighing, I placed them neatly beside the entrance, along with mine.

I headed to the kitchen, where my mother was already preparing lunch, as expected. The divine smell tickled my nostrils, and my tummy growled in response to tasty food’s presence in the room. She was chopping some carrots, her chocolate brown hair tied into a bun to prevent it from falling into the food.

She glanced at me over her shoulder and smiled. “How was your day, honey?”

“Decent as any other day.” I drew a book from the back. “I brought you a mystery novel.” I put it on the counter. “Fresh from the city.”

“What is it about?”

I shrugged, causing Mum to huff out a laugh and shake her head. I slid into one of the wooden chairs behind a square table, barely glancing at the bee crawling on the window in a futile attempt to escape.

Mum raised the lid and pushed the diced carrots into the pot. The sight of burnt wallpaper above the cooker sent a pang of guilt through my chest.

Every time I saw it, I felt guilty, albeit it was over a year since the incident.

Once, when I'd attempted to cook for the family, a sudden burst of fire flared up, putting the kitchen and the entire house in danger. Thank Gods above, Gen was nearby to put the fire out as I'd panicked. Ever since that, I'd never dared to touch a cooker. If it hadn't been for my sister, we wouldn't even have a place to live anymore.

I didn't notice that Mum was observing me this whole time while stirring whatever there was in the pot. Faint wrinkles had appeared newly on her forehead, as if she knew where my thoughts had wandered off, but she didn't speak about it. She never did. She wasn't even angry when she'd come back home from the market, only to find one of her favourite pots damaged and a patch of her dainty wallpaper gone. But the fleeting shadow of sadness that had crossed her face didn't elude me, and it was worse than getting yelled at.

"Did you buy a dress?" she asked.

"No."

"Good."

Her declaration puzzled me. "Good?"

"We need to have a serious talk, my honeybee."

"How many times do I have to ask you not to call me honeybee?" I whined.

"But it's adorable." She gave me an appraising look-over. "Suits you well, too."

"Am I that fat?"

She huffed out a laugh. "Oh, please! But you could gain some weight. Mostly bones, hardly any meat."

I rolled my eyes.

She placed a lid on the pot and approached the table where she took a seat before me. As she clasped her hands on the table, she raised her head, her look grave.

I squirmed in the chair.

She parted her lips, ready to speak, but before she could, I blurted out, "Gen didn't go to a summer school today."

She frowned. "I'm thankful for you telling me this, but you're not deflecting away from the topic, Elynn."

"Can we discuss it later? I'm famished."

“No, you’ve been avoiding the talk about your wedding long enough,” she said steely. “Now tell me, what do you think you’re doing by marrying the man you don’t love?”

“Food smells amazing, Mum. What—”

“Elynn.”

I sighed, looking down.

“If you don’t love him, why bother sacrificing the rest of your life for him?”

I forced a short laugh. “You’ve got it all wrong, Mum.” I managed to raise my eyes at her. “I do l-l-loooove him.”

But the words had come out wrong from my mouth. They even carried a bitter aftertaste.

She, of course, didn’t believe me, not after that unforeseen stutter. “Don’t sacrifice your happiness for us, Elynn. We don’t need his fortune. We’re doing just fine. I get orders to sew clothes from townies once a week. They give me a fair amount of money for them. Kristian is clever enough to move into the city and find a well-paid job. And you... you are invited to play the piano at their parties sometimes. Together we’ll survive, so you don’t need to marry someone you don’t love, honey.”

Mum, Kris and I. No mention of Gen. As if she’d already accepted that Gen would be gone soon. But I still had time to prevent it.

“I’m sorry for being the one to tell you this, but you’re getting old, Mother.” She scoffed at my statement, a half-smile touching her lips. “You know you wouldn’t be able to sew clothes for anybody in this town, eventually. My playing isn’t popular. I get requests to play in parties like three times per year—”

“Last year you played five times.”

Ignoring her, I went on. “Then Kristian, no matter how smart he can be, he might not find himself in the government’s heart. It didn’t work out well for Dad, now did it?”

From the altered look in Mum’s eyes, I registered what words had left me. How easily they had come out of my mouth with no conscious thought that I should have shut it once the topic had switched to her husband. My deceased dad.

She dropped her stare, but I’d already seen the heart-breaking look in her eyes: longing and boundless sorrow.

My father used to fish outside the Mortal Region and sell his catches in town to maintain us. Many people were willing to purchase his fish as he was not only trustworthy but communicative and convincing. He used to make a great businessman. But one day, when he left for his daily fishing, he didn't come back.

We'd waited. A day, two had passed. A week, but he'd never returned. He was gone, along with his boat.

"Sometimes I dream about him," she admitted quietly.

I looked down at my hands, feeling uncomfortable.

"That he's alive, and... and for a moment, I keep forgetting that he isn't in that... state. That when I'd wake up, he'd be next to me..." She trailed off. At least she didn't weep, but her low, barely audible voice told me she tried her best to avoid it.

She dragged in a shaky breath. "But he never is."

I pursed my lips.

Dad's death had hit each one of us differently. Mum had fallen into a deep depression, seeing no purpose in getting out of bed anymore. Kris had sealed himself in the studies, coming back home late from the library. Gen had started using baking as her coping mechanism while I'd worried about surviving, since our primary money provider wasn't with us anymore, whereas the other was unavailable. But then I'd tasted Gen's baked goods.

They were so delicious that an idea had struck me. I'd advised her to sell them in the market. At first, she'd been reluctant, thinking nobody would buy them, but as I'd secretly opened the market, it didn't take long to attract townies. They had become obsessed with her creations, and soon requests had been sent to us to bake cakes or other goods for their events. This way we'd survived without our mum. It'd also helped Mum to battle her grief, for once she'd learnt we had something to eat because of Gen, a sense of guilt must have surfaced as the next day, she was out of her bed. Mum had compelled Gen to stop accepting the orders since she'd missed one year of school to keep us fed.

Then my time had come to contribute to the family's welfare. I wasn't as gifted as Gen with baking skills, and not everyone in town could splurge on music, but I had my beauty I could make use of, which I had.

When Chase proposed to me in the stables, I didn't waver. He had enough money to build a better future for my family. It wasn't a loss of my life. It didn't matter whether butterflies fluttered or my heart skipped a beat

when I was around him or not. It didn't matter, as long as my family was safe and maintained.

"You can't bail on your education like that," Mum yelled from within the kitchen.

"What's the point?" Gen's voice came next. "I'm not going to be here in two weeks anyway. So, what's the point of getting an education if I'm still going to die?"

"You are not going to die."

"How can you know that?"

"Elynn is—"

"Oh, Gods, seriously? Elynn is looking for a needle in the haystack. If there was some way to avoid this, she would have found a solution months ago. And if I get murdered, Death won't care if someone dies with an education certificate or not."

"Don't you dare walk away from me, Genette."

The door flung open, and my sister stormed inside, shoving the door with such force that the walls shook slightly. Kris barely raised his eyes from the book, but other than that, he showed no reaction to Gen's outburst.

I'd stopped sketching once the argument had initiated.

Gen raised her hands near her head, close to clenching them while groaning, "Ugh."

Surprisingly, our mother didn't come following Gen. Perhaps she'd understood what Gen had said was true. Death wouldn't care about an education certificate to welcome her to its claws.

Gen fell prone on her bed, burying her face in the pillow.

I parted my lips to say something, but my voice failed me. I wasn't sure what words could put her at ease, so I resumed shadowing a gown with an orange crayon to distract myself, but after a while, I sensed her steel-blue gaze on me.

Unable to ignore Gen for long, I met her sulky face. I wondered whether she would throw her wrath at me. If she did, I would handle it. It wouldn't be the first or the last time.

But she remained silent. A moment later, she looked at Kris. She stared at him for a while, but he either ignored her or didn't notice. Then she released a loud sigh, looked down at the bedsheet and started to pick at it.

“Just say it,” I said before I knew it. She didn’t respond. “Say what’s on your mind.”

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying.”

“You don’t say.”

I patiently waited for her to open up, but Gen didn’t utter another word. I put the sketching book beside me and left the bed. I approached hers, which was only one step away, and perched on the edge. As I clasped my hands together, I turned my head to her. “You are not getting offered in two weeks.”

She huffed, not buying my words.

“I’m serious, Gen,” I said. “You are not getting offered.”

“Did you find anything?” Her eyebrows rose. “A solution? A way to avoid it?”

It was a challenge to look her in the eye and say, “No.”

She scoffed.

“But I’m working on it.”

“You’ve been working on it for an entire year, Lynn!” She threw her hands. “And what did you find? Bloody nothing!”

“Nothing yet.”

“Why are you so eager to find a way?” Her watery eyes were almost burning. “Why don’t you focus on yourself, on the people you surround yourself with?”

“We’re not talking about me now. We’re talking about you.”

“I’m not a child. I can take care of myself.”

“Actually,” Kris chimed in, pushing the glasses up on his nose, “sixteen-year-olds are still regarded as children.”

Gen cast our brother a murderous look. “Oh, shut up. Nobody asked for your opinion.”

Kris focused back on the book, smiling smugly.

“Child or not, you’re not going anywhere close to that portal.” Gen returned her gaze to me. “And it’s the end of this conversation.”

She didn’t retort anything back, to my astonishment. Gen could be as stubborn as a mule and quarrel all day long until she reached her win. Perhaps she was worn out of the fight with Mum and considering everything else that was going on...

“Do you know that those two-faced nuisances are gossiping about you?” she inquired after a short period of quiet.

“Yes.”

“Are you aware of what they’re speaking about you, though?”

“No,” I responded. “But you’re not telling me. I’d rather not know.”

Whatever lies Alise and Irise were spreading, there were far more essential matters I had to deal with. Perhaps a part of me prodded me into learning what they were gossiping about, but my mind demanded that I shouldn’t.

I had to show strength and bravery, if not for myself, then for the sake of my sister.

Only for a little longer.

“I know the market that sells poison,” she revealed. “Maybe I can slip some into their morning tea.”

I let out a laugh.

“Or I can grab a knife,” Kris joined in. “Attack them in the alley. I saw Alise leaving the bar late at night once.”

My eyes widened. “You two are insane.”

Kris grinned.

“As Dad used to say...” Gen began.

“When someone hurts a family member, the family pays back,” we recited childishly in unison. “And no questions asked.”

Quiet, unbelievable chuckles came from us, and a thoughtful silence followed. After a while, I grasped Gen’s hand, lacing my fingers through hers. “I’ll find a solution.” I looked her in the eye. “I always do.”

I’d found a way to cheat on my tests, how to avoid eating broccoli without Mum’s awareness, how to steal pastries from the bakery without getting caught... And Gen was conscious of all of it.

“This is different, Lynn.”

I smirked. “That’s why it is more fun now. It’s dangerous. More exciting.”

“I swear if Elynn finds a solution to this,” Kris said, “I’m moving to the city and getting into the government.”

“You truly think I won’t succeed?” I asked playfully.

“Obviously,” Gen confirmed for both of them.

“Very well, then.” I jerked my chin up, unable to resist a grin. “Watch me because I’m not giving up.”

OceanofPDF.com

III

A RAY OF SUNLIGHT streaming through the window woke me with a reminder of what day it was. Monday.

I'd spent the weekend helping Mum with sewing some clothes women from town had ordered. But now, as the day had come when Chase would be back from somewhere he'd refused to tell me, the trepidation increased with each step towards his manor.

As I was inside, he wasn't here. I wasn't relieved. He would be here eventually, and in the meantime, I admired paintings on the walls as though I hadn't seen them already. But it didn't take Chase long to show up.

"Here you are."

I put on a smile before I turned to him. "Here I am." I took in his outfit. He was shirtless, merely baldric laden with lethal weapons covering his muscular chest, and the archery quiver was peeking from his back. "Were you on a hunting spree?"

He took a step closer. "I was."

I acknowledged his bare, clean hands. "I suppose hunting didn't go well?"

"It didn't," he said half-heartedly and reduced the remaining distance between us by putting his hands on my hips and pulling me closer to his half-naked body. "It's your fault I came empty-handed, Ely."

"How is it my fault?"

His eyes sparkled. The bile rose in my throat while my stomach churned with nausea.

"I couldn't stop thinking about you. You were always on my mind, and I couldn't focus for two days." Chase leaned closer to my ear, and his tongue touched my earlobe. Disgust filtered through me, but I fought back an impulse to shrink back. "Do you want to know what I was thinking about?"

Absolutely not.

"Maybe."

His lips brushed against the skin below my ear. My body remained rigid. But I had to react or else he would know something was—

Oh, who was I trying to fool? Even if he realised something was wrong, he would ignore it. It was his forte to turn a blind eye to everything that was happening around him.

“I thought...” He spun me around. His hands were on my hips as he pushed me against the wall, lips close to my ear. “...how pretty you would look like if I—”

I swivelled my head to look at the end of the corridor where the charcoal-black door was, almost knocking his face, but I didn't, to my disappointment. “What is behind that door?”

Ever since the first time I had stepped in his manor and seen the mysterious door, I'd been speculating on what was behind it. When I was alone, I attempted to get inside, but it was always locked. Whatever was in there, it must be of great value to consider locking it.

“Nothing you should concern your pretty head with.” His strong hands went lower along my hips and rested on the back of my thighs. “Now, where was I?”

“Chase,” I crooned. “What's in there?” I batted my eyelashes.

“Nothing. To. Bother. Yourself. With.”

My hair bristled at his rough tone. I shouldn't have asked him. I shouldn't have—

“If you show me...” I turned to him and dragged my finger down his chest in a slow, seductive way while biting my bottom lip. He was frowning, but his breathing heaved. My seduction was working like a charm. “I'll do anything you wish.”

The lines in his face softened. “Anything?”

I leaned in and whispered, “Anything.”

I earned a satisfied smile from him.

He removed his hands from my legs and as he pulled away, suddenly I was able to breathe. I could only hope my offered services wouldn't be for nought, and whatever was behind the door was something noteworthy.

Chase walked in front of me. My heart was pounding as we approached the door. My curiosity had made me sell my dignity, but perhaps it was all for the better.

He fished out a key from the back of his pocket. Of course, I should have been wiser. I could have borrowed the key when he was asleep instead of humiliating myself. But what had been done was done. There was no going back now.

Chase inserted the key in the padlock and twisted it. "There is nothing interesting to see for a woman's eye," he muttered, and the padlock clicked open. "I don't get why you are so eager to see what's in there."

I didn't respond, and he opened the door, letting the faint light pour in. We stepped inside, and as Chase closed the door behind me, another wave of fright rippled across my already bedecked with gooseflesh skin.

I wasn't sure what I'd anticipated seeing. Perhaps something sick that would make me throw up. But it wasn't anything close to it. The shelves here were laden with crossbows, swords, and other weapons, whilst the rest of the space was dedicated to shields and armour. And so, I felt strong regret.

I questioned why an animal hunter would need to have so many weapons and outfits, but came up with the theory that it must have been a family collection passed down through generations. And now Chase was their possessor, since his parents weren't alive, whereas his youngest sibling had already been offered a long time ago.

I shifted closer to one shelf, which had a different size and material swords, but only the golden one snagged my attention the most. But the more I stared at it, the more my heart rate grew, the more I was paralyzed, the more I felt dread.

"This is Goldy," Chase announced, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. I'd failed to notice him standing so close to me.

He hefted a sword by its hilt. I stepped back, for the first time obeying my instincts to stay away from the sword and the man holding it. "It's about two centuries old."

My eyes never left the shiny sword. Its gigantic and fascinating blade reflected my face, as if warning me I could be its next victim.

"That's a long time."

My voice hadn't come out brittle. I applauded myself in my mind. However, I couldn't tell the same about my quivering fingers, which I had covered behind my back.

He nodded. "It is." His forefinger brushed down the blade. My blood ran cold, but I didn't wrap my hands around myself to quell the shivers. "It's used for killing morphs."

I blinked twice. Three times. Chase's eyes moved from the sword to me, a hunter's smile playing on his thin lips.

I had to collect myself or else I might swoon.

“I thought they were immortal,” I declared.

He laughed, and I didn’t understand what was so funny. “Morphs are stronger than us. They have powers humans could never dream of. It’s a fable that morphs are immortals. They have a life span as we do, but they live longer than us, for about a thousand years unless someone thrusts the golden weapon into their heart and they’re...” He swung the sword in the air with an attempt of showing off, and I backed away more. “...dead.”

With another step back, my back hit something. I turned my head and faced the other shelf loaded with more golden weapons, such as knives, hatchets, daggers, and a collection of arrows. My inner voice was screaming at me to flee, but I stood stock-still with a thumping heart against my ribs.

“W-why do you have so many weapons that could kill a morph?” I turned my head to my fiancé, who had finished flaunting his swordplay.

Chase laughed. He didn’t seem to catch the alteration in my voice or the pallor which must have painted my face.

“Aren’t you too curious, Ely?” He put the sword back in its place. But I still felt tense, no matter if the fatal weapon wasn’t in the hunter’s hands anymore. It was still here, threatening to hurt me, potentially kill me.

But there was another one that caught my interest, too. Beyond Chase was hanging a longer and sharper sword of the colour of silver on the dull grey wall.

“Is that sword used for killing morphs as well?”

I couldn’t compare the feelings that were simmering within me when I’d seen Goldy to the ones stimulated by this sword. As intimidating as it was as Goldy, the silver sword affected me differently. As if some child within my head cowered into the ball and shuddered. I couldn’t understand why my blood curdled and why my body tensed at the sight of those specific swords, but not at the other ones in the armoury.

He followed my stare. “That?” He turned and slid closer to the wall. “It’s for dragons.”

Dragons. All I knew about them was from the bedtime stories Mum used to read to me.

In tales, dragons were depicted as fiends that were a danger to other living kinds. Their variety was boundless, but only the most powerful ones breathed lethal fire and could set the world on fire whenever they desired. However, dragons hadn’t been seen for a long time, which implied they

weren't among the living anymore. If it was true, and they were all gone, it was better for the world.

"What is it made of? Aren't gold weapons used to kill a dragon?"

"Gold doesn't kill dragons, Ely," he said in a rather patronising tone, but I was too interested in learning more about dragons to pick up on his speaking manner. "Only weapons covered in platinum do. It isn't as common as gold, though."

"But it doesn't matter because dragons don't exist anymore, right?"

Chase's doubtful expression didn't elude my eyes.

"You believe dragons are still alive."

"Enchanters obliterated them about ten years ago. They are all dead." But he seemed to convince himself more than me. "Even if some of them could still be alive, dragons aren't the worst creatures a human could cross a path with."

Chase knew quite a lot about other species, which was unlikely for any human, and it got me doubting his claimed profession. I wouldn't be surprised if he turned out to hunt other species, and not just for the fun of it.

"And who is far worse than morphs or enchanters?"

"Half-breeds." His voice was scarcely audible. "Creatures who are a mix of both kinds. They are the ones any creature would fear the most in this world."

I was hearing about half-breeds for the first time. The possibility of someone existing who had morphs' powers to shapeshift and enchanters' powers to enchant and do only the Gods knew what else didn't sound appealing to me.

"How are enchanters killed?" I asked him, pushing the thoughts of half-breeds temporarily away.

"With iron."

"And what about half-breeds?"

An amusing smile pulled the corner of his mouth. "I don't think anybody apart from the Gods knows an answer to this question, Ely."

I surveyed the armoury yet again, endeavouring to rummage through my head in search of more questions to avoid Chase as long as I could, but he had already approached me. His hands were on me, but before he leaned in to kiss me, I spoke. "There's something I have to ask you."

"Questions later," he said, leaning closer. "Now, fun."

But I pressed my finger to his lips before they could reach my own. "I'll be quick. I promise."

The ominous shadow entering his eyes made my heartbeat quicken again. "What is it?"

His tone was just as intimidating as his stare. I tried to swallow the fright, fend it off to ask what I must.

"Can I borrow your horse for a few days?"

His eyes narrowed into slits. "What for?"

"For a trip to—"

"No."

I stared at him, but ignoring the mad heartbeat yet again, I tried. "Please. I would do anything."

"You were already going to do whatever I pleased before I showed you this room, Ely."

"Please, I—"

"No, Ely," he almost growled, his hands tightening on my hips. "Now hush your mouth. I don't want another sound escaping your throat if it doesn't involve pleasure."

He was close to smashing his disgusting lips against mine when I interrupted him again, "I'll do it."

He winced. "Do what?"

"You know what."

Chase's confused stare was buried in mine until his eyes lit and his mouth curved into an expectant smile. "Really?"

"Yes, if you lend me your horse for a few days."

His smile even broadened. I forced myself to smile, too.

"I'll lend you a horse, Ely." He planted a kiss on the corner of my lips and then whispered, "But if you don't give me a boy... consider your family homeless, my love."

Mum was reporting to me gossip she had heard in the town's market today. I found it hard to listen to her when I was drowning in my heart-aching thoughts while stirring a mixture in the bowl.

I was trying to be useful by helping her out in the kitchen. I *needed* to be useful for something since I'd been becoming more and more disappointed

in myself lately. What was I even good for? I could only thank the good genes as apart from my beauty, I had nothing else to be proud of.

Squeezing the spoon tight, I glowered at the stirring mixture as if attempting to burn it. The poor dough had to put up with all my emotions I kept locked inside me under a gazillion of locks.

“Honey,” Mum said, bringing me back to reality. I looked over my shoulder. She was standing on her tiptoes, trying to reach for a bottle filled with dark liquid. “Could you help your old mother?”

With a deep sigh, I paused my work. “You’re not old.” I approached her. Then I raised my hand and reached for the bottle with no effort. “Just don’t put products where you can’t reach them.”

As I extended a bottle to her, I met her face, which had turned incredibly pale.

“Mum?”

Before I could trace what was happening, she grasped my wrist and pulled the sleeve up to my elbow. I attempted to yank my hand from her grip, but she held it with an impressive strength.

Her eyes were fixed on the blue and purple marks marring my bronze skin.

I didn’t react or say anything.

Then she looked up at me. Puzzled and beyond concerned.

I playfully rolled my eyes. “It must have appeared after I hit the edge of the piano.” I winced at the bruise. “Harder than I thought.”

I met her unbending stare and held it while ignoring my conscience.

“Why are you lying to me?” Her voice was as mild as a caressing summer breeze and as brittle as a fallen thin branch.

She didn’t believe my lie. She never did. My mother could read her children as easily as tales. And it got me wondering if I’d also be able to make out what was wrong with my future progeny as well.

But I didn’t want to think about it. Not this way. Not ever.

“I’m not lying,” I mustered a low, but an assured reply.

She released my forearm and pulled away, shaking her head. “You are not marrying that man.”

“What?” I frowned. “No, Chase didn’t do it,” I hastened to say. “I hurt myself by accident. I swear.”

But she kept shaking her head, dodging all my words, refusing to believe my filthy lies.

She stepped towards me, close enough to bring my face into her warm and rough hands. “My dear, dear honeybee, you are worth so, so much more than him. Don’t submit yourself to us. Life shouldn’t be suffocating you, but the opposite. You should breathe through it. You should swim through it. You should be happy.”

“Mum, he’s not—”

“Oh, cut the crap,” she said fiercely, shocking me. It was, perhaps, the first time I’d heard my dearest mother using a dirty word. “You. Are. Not. Marrying. Him.” Her steely voice sent shivers skidding down my spine. “You deserve better. A man who would never say a bad word about you, who would never, *never* lay a hand on you, who would treat you like a goddess. Mark my words, Elynn.”

Tears were already leaking through, and I pressed my quivering lips together.

“You only live once. Don’t waste your time on people who don’t deserve it,” she continued. “You’re only nineteen, Elynn. There’s a whole world ahead of you. Don’t waste it on men like your asshole fiancé or for saving your family. Live. Just live for yourself, for heavens’ sake.”

I endeavoured not to sob, not to falter before her, not to show weakness as I must stay strong and—

“Elynn, promise me you’ll break off the engagement, and follow your dreams, live the life you want to live.”

But my lips didn’t part. I couldn’t make a promise. At least, not from the bottom of my heart, as it would be yet another drop of a lie in the lake of thousands.

“Elynn.” With her thumbs, she brushed the tears off my cheeks. “Promise me.”

It was hard to lie to her, to my own mother. But I tried to put all my effort into my lying skills and do my best to fool her so she’d be relieved.

“I promise.”

She studied me, seeking a lie. I kept my face straight and not averted my gaze.

Eventually, she sighed as if a heavy rock had slid off her chest and brought me into a tender, tight embrace. I buried my face in her shoulder. In secret, I coveted muscular arms holding me instead so that I could drown my face in someone’s chest and succumb to sobs.

But I did not have that someone.

OceanofPDF.com

IV

I'D BEEN GOING THROUGH the city's library books for four days. Even if the assortment here was broader, like I'd predicted, I'd found nothing.

The coins Chase had given me were running low. The accommodation and food in the city couldn't have been more priced up. And yet, on the fifth day of my arrival, I continued to wander through the same library like a desperate beggar in search of something edible. Crossing shelves I'd gone through multiple times over these days, hopelessly thinking that perhaps there was something important I'd missed.

Or maybe I didn't try hard enough. Maybe I should have travelled to the Empire of Beasts and begged whoever ruled the empire to spare my sister from whatever awaited her. But it would have been lunacy. If I'd travelled there, I wouldn't have survived a day in their world.

No human would survive. And my sister was going to die there or be used for Gods knew what.

What if I smuggled my family somewhere overseas? It wasn't like it hadn't been done already. Even if we were offering the youngest sixteen-year-old of the family, since it was unlikely that a younger one would be born when the age gap between them was sixteen years, it wasn't like it wasn't probable. Sometimes a baby was born into a family after one child had already been offered. Fearful that morphs would come and kill them just for it made people hide their newborns or smuggle them out of the Mortal Region. Nobody knew why morphs preferred such an offering system. After all, it made no difference. Every parent lost a child to the portal.

But paying somebody to transport my family... it would be costly, and where would I get the money from? Smuggling them couldn't be feasible.

I almost kicked the bookshelf, wanting to scream with frustration.

How was I going to face Gen once I came back? She knew the purpose of my trip. She might not ask how it'd gone, as she questioned none of my

research. But I could tell she still had faith. And if I didn't come back with something, the flame of hope still burning in her would go out.

There was still something I hoped I wouldn't have to go for, but I'd officially run out of possibilities... and hope.

I'd got wind of people selling their souls in exchange for their deepest, darkest desires to come true. I could sell my soul to save my sister. But first, I needed to learn how to make the Gods below listen to me.

I found myself in the aisle of books about Gods. In a matter of minutes, I held the book about the merciless Gods ruling below. I opened it and sought the keyword of the soul until the sound of *psst* interrupted me.

I let it pass my ears, but then another one followed.

I raised my head from the book and looked to my left. Right at the end of the bookshelf, a small head was poking from behind it. A short, dark-haired boy.

"Come," he said quietly, beckoning me to approach closer.

I frowned, doubting if I should listen to him. I checked around myself, expecting to spot his parents nearby, but I didn't detect or hear anything. Giving in, I returned the book and followed him.

I didn't focus on where we were heading, as my full attention was pinned on the boy. His trousers and tunic were tattered and so filthy that it was impossible to tell their original colour. His bare feet were muddy, but as he moved, he left no trace of dirt behind him.

"Who are you?" I inquired silently, with a tinge of wariness.

He came to a halt and turned to me. His face was as white as a sheet. And his neck... his neck was sliced, smeared with blood.

"Your neck..."

He looked down at his bleeding neck. But it wasn't bleeding. No blood was seeping from the wound. It was as if stuck or... painted. A deceiving image. "Oh, this is nothing."

"It isn't nothing. We should head to the infirmary, we—"

The realisation hit me like a bolt of lightning.

The boy wasn't a boy. Not quite. He used to be a boy, but he'd died, and it was his spirit I'd followed.

It was the first time I'd encountered a spirit. Teachers had informed me they only showed up two days prior to the Summer and Winter Solstice. But what baffled me was that it was precisely two days, not five, unless teachers had made a mistake and spirits emerged whenever they liked.

The boy's spirit was no older than ten, and I couldn't help but wonder what kind of monster would kill the kid by slashing his neck this cruelly.

"You're a spirit, right?" I inquired, only to make sure.

The boy nodded his head, smiling widely. "Right in the bull's... eye." His smile fell quickly, and he cast his eyes down, starting to fiddle with his fingers. "You're the first one from the living to see me in forty years."

"How old are you?"

"Ten," he answered. "Well, I died ten," he amended with a smile, but it soon faded as though he'd realised something.

"Who slashed your throat?"

Only after such an inquiry had left my mouth, I acknowledged how insensitive it'd sounded. I didn't understand how I had the nerve to be curious. I might hurt the soul talking about his death, but the boy lifted his head, brown eyes flickering instead of being pricked by my blunt question. Then I realised. Perhaps the boy was excited that somebody from the living was talking to him. He'd mentioned that nobody had seen him for four decades. He was alone, roving as a spirit wherever spirits resided. Perhaps someone talking to him, even if the topic was about his own death, brought a beam of joy to the boy's ghostlike heart.

"I..." He pursed his lips, eyes afar as if thinking. "I don't know. I'd been sleeping when it all just... went black."

"Did you feel any pain?"

He grimaced. "No."

My heart twinged for the boy—for dying this young. At least his death was painless, but that didn't compensate for the fact that he would never experience all the ups and downs of a human's life.

At last, I tore my gaze off the boy to observe my surroundings.

I'd inspected every part of the library, but I couldn't recall being here before. I'd never stumbled upon it, but how could it be possible?

The shelves were filled with old tomes I'd never seen before. I took one out of the shelf carefully. The book's pages were rusty, and I was tentative to touch them, for they seemed like they could crumble into dust at the merest brush of my hand. Gingerly, I opened the random page of the book. The font was old, written by the ancient hand.

"What is this place?" I asked.

His eyebrows drew together. "A library?"

I smiled faintly. "I'm aware it's a library, but as long as I've been here, I haven't seen this aisle before. I'm sure it doesn't belong to the library."

He frowned. "Yes, it does."

"No, it doesn't."

"But it does."

"It doesn't."

The boy slapped his forehead with his palm and dragged it down his face. With a sigh, he raised his head and stated in a precise serene manner, "It's a part of the library, but only those who search can see it."

I raised my eyebrows in incredulity.

The boy smiled. "You've been searching for an answer for over a year. My ancestors were kind enough to give it to you."

I didn't question how he was aware of my research. He was a spirit. I supposed spirits had nothing else better to do than to pry into the lives of the living. "If you're talking about my research on how to save my sister, then you're wrong. I don't have an answer."

The spirit's smile turned smug. "Don't you?"

I looked at the ancient book I was holding in my hands. "I don't..." But when I raised my eyes back at the boy, he wasn't there anymore. He had vanished.

I concentrated back on the book, reading the page. I felt a smile pulling the corners of my mouth once it filtered through what the boy had meant.

Could it be that he was a spirit sent to be my sister's salvation?

As the answer might be the one I was staring at right now.

When I was back home, it took me a few days to prepare everything: make a plan, gather supplies and invent reasons to avoid Chase's repelling company.

He invited me to his manor to practise fencing, but I avoided it by feeding him with a half-true that I needed to spend the time I had left with my sister. His frown told me he wasn't thrilled, but eventually, he let it go, and this way, I was spared from his lessons.

Girlfriends continued urging me to shop for a wedding gown, but I shunned them, too. But I wouldn't need to invent excuses to avoid people I didn't like if my plan worked out.

Next week, I was ready with all supplies, but not emotionally. However, the night before the Summer Solstice, I was close to being psyched up. The most challenging task I'd saved for last. I needed to prime my mum, but before I did, I tarried in the living room where the rest of my family was and played the piano. For one last time, if my precarious plan was going to succeed.

Mum, Gen and Kris were silent as my fingers danced through the piano's keys. I closed my eyes, allowing the music to send me to a peaceful world and fill not only the room with caressing tunes, but my soul.

For the first time in my life, it didn't feel as if my chest was sinking or my mind disagreed with everything I forced it to take as given. Perhaps this was how it should be. Perhaps I'd found my true path.

Once I finished playing, I caught the whimpers coming from Mum. She had Gen engulfed in her arms while whispering her soothing things. Mum had reduced Gen to tears, for her face was buried in her chest as she sobbed.

Kris stood up and walked from the room without a single word. When aura became low-spirited, it was hard to bear for anyone, but to Kris, it was beyond endurance.

I didn't leave like Kris, but didn't shed a tear, either. It met no purpose.

That same night, I faced Chase. I had no clue how he had appeared here when I was eluding him, but here he was fuming with rage, flailing his Goldy at me like a madman.

He thrust it into my chest and pulled it out. Blood spurted out, splattering on the floor, on his clothes, everywhere.

"Traitor," he hissed, eyes bloody. "Traitor of our kind."

I tried to utter something but couldn't. My mouth was sealed like a casket, preventing me from speaking up.

I collapsed on the floor, and he blew another strike into my abdomen.

"Traitor."

The sound of what seemed to be quiet weeping aroused me. At first, I thought it was I who couldn't keep the tears suppressed anymore, but that wasn't it. I breathed covertly through my mouth to steady my laboured breathing and pounding heart. I collected my thoughts, telling myself it wasn't real. Merely a nightmare. I was alive and safe.

In my periphery, I saw Gen's chest rising erratically behind the sheets, as if she was striving to stifle her whimpers to not wake us. I returned my gaze to the ceiling, wanting to tell her there was no reason to cry and reassure her

she'd be fine because it wasn't her who was going through that portal, but I couldn't.

Not yet, I couldn't.

OceanofPDF.com

V

THE SUMMER SOLSTICE. The sole day in a year when the sun illuminated the grounds the longest. This day, all spirits could roam around the earth until the next day, early in the morning, they were back to their graves. This day, people mourned their youngest children while others watched them getting swallowed by the portal leading them to the unknown.

I'd witnessed every detail of the offering. I knew what to expect. But this year differed from the previous ones. Because today I wouldn't be one of the witnesses. Today I would be one of the offered.

Gen was getting ready. Mum was combing her hair while Gen was sitting cross-legged on the floor before the mirror, staring blankly at her reflection. Every now and then, Mum glanced at me while I was brushing my own hair.

Yesterday, I had steeled myself for telling her my plan. As foreseen, Mum hadn't looked as if she was about to throw a party, but I hadn't given her any choice other than to respect my decision and help me achieve it.

Gen was clueless about everything, confident today was the end of her life. She hadn't peeped a single word since yesterday—evidently lost in her head. Tired and hopeless, as if she'd already given up. I fought the urge to get ahead of myself and spill the beans to spare her from her misery, but then I would jeopardise my well-thought plan.

Kris was in the living room. He would go along. I hadn't primed him either, but I was positive he wouldn't object since he always accepted the change faster than the rest of us.

"Did you know gold kills morphs?" I broke the gloomy silence, unable to bear it any longer.

"I've heard something about it," Mum replied.

When I'd been scheming my plan, I'd contemplated the idea of taking a gold knife from Chase's armoury. However, once I remembered how terrible I'd felt at the sight of his Goldy and shuddered just at the thought of it, I hadn't bothered creeping into his manor to steal one.

“Perhaps every townie should have a gold weapon in case morphs one day decide to attack us,” I mused.

Morphs could strike any day, after all. So far, they hadn’t, but it would be foolish to disregard such a possibility. Who knew what was lurking in their beastly minds.

“Enchanters can be killed by iron,” I added.

I assumed sharing information about everything I had learnt from Chase about morphs and enchanters with my family was a must. It might be handy if other species attacked one day, and I wasn’t here to share my knowledge, they’d be prepared for it. Gods forbid, of course.

But no one had spotted any single creature, despite ordinary animals in the forest for a long time. Sometimes I doubted if morphs even existed and if we hadn’t been told tales for our entire lives. In any case, I would be the one to find that out soon.

When I was done taming my waves into a plait and sharing everything I knew about the unfamiliar world, I glanced at the jewellery on my right hand, debating if I should keep them.

An emerald shone from the sunlight streaming through the window on the ring. I could take it off, but opt to keep it for now. Then I also wore a bronze bracelet day and night. It was surrounded by stars, leaving the centre with the sun and a crescent on top. My parents had gifted it to me when I was merely a babe. This, with no consideration, I ought to wear wherever I went.

“Lynn?”

I jerked my head up, meeting Gen’s weary gaze in the mirror.

“Yeah?”

“There’s something under my pillow for you.”

“Did you steal something?” My eyebrows rose. “Again?”

Mum winced but said nothing.

“Oh, no worries, Mum,” Gen said, noting our mother’s concerned expression. “I didn’t steal anything from townies.”

“So, you *did* steal something.”

She smiled, and it was apparent that I was right. Shaking my head, I couldn’t fight back a smile. I stood off the bed and got to hers. As she’d told me, when I raised the pillow, there was a folded piece of paper lying underneath it. I gave Gen a dubious look. She wasn’t the only one watching me, though. Mum was interested, too.

“You stole a treasure map?”

She huffed out a laugh. “I wish,” she said. “Come on. Open it.”

Chuckling, I drew out the paper. In a slow, teasing way, I unfolded it to toy with their nerves. But as soon as I saw what was portrayed on the paper, my heart stuttered, and my muscles froze.

In no time, I snapped out of my stupor, folding the paper while keeping my emotions hidden from my family’s curiosity.

“What was that?” Mum inquired.

“Nothing.”

Gen huffed. “Not nothing,” she said, earning a warning glance from me. “Just a man.”

Mum’s eyes widened in surprise as she stood up. “What man? What? Can I see it?”

I hesitated, my heartbeat quickening. Eventually, I extended the paper to her. It wouldn’t do any harm, right?

She looked down at the paper, then raised her eyes at me, reluctant. But as I was about to change my mind, she took it. She unfolded the paper, and I could have sworn I saw a fleeting sparkle that lasted only a second in her irises.

She looked up at me. “Did you draw this?”

“Yes, and Gen stole it.” I shot a pointed look at my sister, who grinned, reminding me of a wicked witch.

I’d forgotten about the drawing, which I’d created out of sheer boredom. I hadn’t encountered it for a while until now. When I hadn’t found it one day, I’d made peace with its disappearance. A little pinched my heart since I’d done my best to represent the glimpse of the black suit I had seen the mystery man wearing in my trance. A man who perhaps didn’t exist.

But my heart whispered otherwise. And I silenced it.

“Is he real?” Mum resumed her inquiries.

I hadn’t told her about my trance. Hadn’t told anyone, for that matter.

“Of course, he’s not,” Gen denied before I could. “I’ve never seen anything similar to him anywhere, and oh... how I searched!”

I blinked, incredulously, at my sister. “You searched?”

“Of course.”

I huffed.

“Is he truly not real?” Mum asked once again. She had never stopped staring at me.

“No,” I assured her. “He’s not real.”

Mum pouted. “What a pity. You drew a very handsome man, honeybee.”

Once she returned the sketch, I folded it before I could catch a glimpse of the representation of my wild imagination.

When I’d had the trance during piano play, all I’d seen was a man’s broad and tanned hand as he’d been fixing a black cuff sticking out of a brocade jacket sleeve. But I’d felt him—the smoke—as well as I’d heard him.

I feel you too, stranger, he’d said in a deep but somehow soothing voice.

His voice had rung in my head for days, but over time, I’d forgotten its resonance. If I ever heard it again, I didn’t think I would recognise it as much as I didn’t believe I would ever meet this mysterious stranger in real life.

Mum was back to combing Gen’s hair into a braid. Then my eyes locked with Mum’s in the mirror, and she stealthily nodded her head. I returned to my bed and let go of the sketch, letting it fall. As I lifted a mattress, I pulled the shackles I had bought from one vendor in town. With no pointless inquiries of why they had the single shackles lying on their stall, for I needn’t know, I’d given them a shilling and paced away, hiding my purchase from the prying eyes.

As I exchanged places with Mum, I caught Gen’s stare. Slight lines formed on her sun-touched forehead. I sent her a brief smile, and before she could trace my movements, I seized her wrist and attached one shackle to it while another to the leg of Kris’s bed.

“Lynn, what the...?” Her perplexed look darted from her imprisoned wrist to me, then to our mother.

“I’m sorry, Gen.”

She frowned. “What the hell is this?”

Mother handed me Gen’s hair strand. Gen gave her a puzzled look. “Can someone tell me what is happening, for Gods’ sake?!” She jerked her seized hand, intent on pulling it free. But she had no chance of escape when our mother had a key.

I drew out an already prepared vial with the liquid I’d mixed yesterday from my pocket. As I uncorked it, I dropped Gen’s hair strand into the vial.

About the so-called Conversion Potion I’d read in the book I’d picked first when the spirit of a boy had led me to the invisible aisle in the library. I’d bought all the ingredients I needed to make it. The only missing piece

was Gen's hair. According to instructions, I had to drink it, and if the book was right, my appearance would turn identical to Gen's for twenty-four hours.

"You're not going through that portal tonight." I shook the essence between my fingers. "I am."

"Elynn..." Her blazing eyes shot up at me. "Release me!"

"Your sister is going to sacrifice herself to keep you here safe, my little bird." Mother caressed her silky hair, and Gen instantly drew back from her touch as if revolted.

"Three hells, no!"

Gen's hair piece had dissolved in the dirty brown liquid, and I swallowed hard. As I steeled myself for drinking what might be poison, I lifted a vial to my lips. Gen was watching me. She needn't voice what was in her mind as her withering expression had it covered.

Accepting her unsaid dare, I poured the liquid into my mouth down to the last drop. With a swallow, all I felt was bitterness mixed with an acid taste, making me wince.

The room was in silence. Mother stared at me, waiting for an effect to manifest itself as I was. Meanwhile, Gen was throwing darts with her eyes, expecting one to hit me.

I didn't feel anything. It wasn't working. The boy's spirit had tricked me, or I'd done something wrong.

But I'd followed every step meticulously, reread it multiple times to make sure I'd always been doing everything right.

"Nothing?" I asked with hope.

Mum shook her head.

"Let me go," Gen grunted. "I need to face my fate, not you, Lynn."

Searing pain stung my wrist, and a yelp flew from my mouth. Gnashing my teeth, I looked at it. The skin under my bracelet mottled with red stains, which were only spreading with my stalling. Hastily, I removed the bracelet, and the burning ceased.

But it was a warning before a storm.

Something unfathomable twisted inside me, and my vision blurred. I couldn't maintain balance anymore. I dropped to my knees and clutched my head as if it could spare me from the tremendous pain dancing not only inside my head but in every single bone, nerve and cell.

My whole body was aching, burning, as if I was set on blistering fire. Insides itching, bones seemed to measure down within inches. But it all had come to an end shortly.

And when the pain was over, the thud once some object hit the ground got me wincing. It was a hairbrush that must have slipped from Mum's grasp.

I raised my head and met Kristian hovering at the threshold.

He was staring wide-eyed at me. "What the..." He trailed off, his stare shifting to Gen, who was gaping at me.

Mum's reaction was the same as her two children's.

"Did it work?" I asked them.

Gen didn't say anything, but my mother said in awe, "I have two twin daughters."

A joke, but not one of us laughed. It was not a suitable situation for the one to laugh. Not when my sister was glaring at me while I tried my best to convince myself I was doing the right thing.

As I was changing into Gen's clothes, she was cursing me the entire time. Mum scolded her for saying such cruel things to her sister, as cursing could bring bad luck upon me. At least that was what Mum said. Kris had been mystified at first, but Mum had filled him in on everything.

I barely glanced at the mirror, but enough to see if I looked like myself. And I didn't. Mind-blowing, let alone uncanny, it was to behold two lookalikes and see myself looking like someone else entirely.

The bracelet was back on my wrist. I wasn't going to leave the last piece that reminded me of my family behind. At least it wasn't burning my skin anymore.

"Think about positive things, Gen," I said, putting on her shoes. "You can decide your own fate now." With a glance at her, I dared to put on a broad smile.

She showed me a finger with her free hand.

"Genette Lucida Startel!" Mum exclaimed.

Gen acted as though Mum wasn't even here. "You shouldn't have done this. I was ready, prepared for what could happen to me in the empire," she said with strong tartness in her tone. "But no. You *had* to play a hero."

A weird feeling—close to guilt—passed through my chest but to squash it, I assured myself yet again I was on the right track. I'd guessed it would be like that. In Gen's shoes, I would have been furious about the turn of events she hadn't seen coming, too.

"I heard you crying at night," I said, throwing a glance at the silent Kristian, but he didn't seem to notice it. Perhaps he was a heavy sleeper, but I believed he could have heard our sister's muffled sobs as well as I could. "It didn't look as if you were prepared for what was coming at all, Gen."

"It doesn't matter. You can't save me from everything. I'm not a child anymore."

As I finished putting on shoes, I leapt to my feet—which felt strange since I was shorter than usual—and walked over to her. I crouched before her and tucked the strand of her hair behind her ear.

"I know, but..." I took a sharp breath. "It feels right. Doing this. I believe it's been my purpose all along. To be offered instead of you on the Summer Solstice."

Gen frowned. "You did this behind my back." Her ruthless eyes darted between Mum and me and even Kristian. "You all did this."

"Whoa, Whoa, Whoa." Kristian held his palms up in defence. "I had nothing to do with this. I'm still having a hard time processing what's happening. That Elynn looks like Gen, Gen looks like... Oh, heavens..." He pressed his hand against his forehead and breathed out a puff of air.

"This was all my idea, Gen." Gen's blazing gaze shot back at me. "Kristian, as you see, had nothing to do with this, and Mum didn't have any choice but to go along with it. She would have lost either of us anyway. But she should lose me instead of you." Mum opened her mouth to object, but I hastened to continue before she could. "I might have married Chase for the fortune we have never seen in our lives, but I doubt if he would have given me some without..."

I drew in a breath. "I'm not an eminent pianist; my playing wouldn't have granted our survival. I wouldn't have followed my mother's footsteps by sewing either, as it doesn't obtain much money. I don't know how to bake delicious cakes, unlike you. You maintained our family during the crisis, and if needed, you can do it again."

Instead of flames, now tears bathed Gen's eyes. "I hate you so much."

I smiled at her, holding back the pack of tears. "I love you, too, Gen."

As I embraced her, I'd assumed she wouldn't hug me back because of the pride, but she did, surprising me. When we let go of each other, I stood up and secretively wiped away the tears that had slipped through my shields.

Then I turned to my mother and Kris. "Let's go?"

As if there was a choice...

She barely nodded, water running down her face. "Let's go."

"Kris?" I addressed my brother, who seemed to be somewhere else.

He flashed back to earth. "Yeah, yeah, let's go."

I didn't forget to snatch the folded sketch and shove it in the pocket before I left.

OceanofPDF.com

VI

HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE thronged the town hall—more than last year. I wondered if they had come to offer the emotional support for the offered or watch the show.

Gen was at home, handcuffed to the bed. Remorse nibbled at me, but it had to be done or else she'd have exposed me. Kristian and Mum stood beside me. Both were quiet, but Mum's silence was unlike her. I figured she didn't feel like talking when she was about to see one of her daughters vanishing into nowhere forever.

The ceremony hadn't begun yet. Nobody was on the dais: no pledgers and no outlandish portal.

Sixteen-year-olds were offered over forty years, and yet it felt like the ceremony we all dreaded had been around forever. But before that, the Summer Solstice had been a traditional holiday for humans to gather and celebrate. It'd been one of few days when murdered animals were offered to our Almighty Gods. Afterwards there came drinking and dancing until feet hurt, as Dad once had told me. But the times had changed.

Now instead of offering dead animals to the Gods, we offered minors to the Empire of Beasts, and it wasn't merriment that followed, but buckets and buckets of endless tears.

Or before, as some people were already crying.

At least Mum hadn't shed a tear since we'd left the house or else I would have fallen into pieces I'd struggled so much to amass.

No one had ever returned from the empire before. None of us voiced, but we all knew. Today was the last time they saw me.

"I thought about something..." Mum inhaled deeply, as though she was about to cry. "When you told me what you were about to do."

"Don't cry, Mum." I placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and squeezed it lightly. "Please."

The corner of her lip quivered into a weak smile. "I'll be all right," she assured me, but I doubted it. "But I must tell you—"

"Mrs Startel."

My whole body strained at the sound of a too familiar voice, whereas Mum looked in the direction where it'd come from. No muscle on her face

twitched once she saw a man who was still my fiancé.

“Greetings to you too, young man.” He punched Kris’s arm in greeting.

Kris rubbed the arm Chase had just touched as he composed a weak smile through a wince. “Yeah... hello to you, too... *man*.”

“Chase,” Mum greeted him coolly. I wasn’t looking at him, nervous that he might recognise me even if I was a clone of Gen. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to support my fiancée,” Chase declared. “Where is she, by the way?” He looked around, expecting to find me nearby.

No concern for my sister, nothing. As if he didn’t care about Gen’s offering. But I shouldn’t be surprised. He had never shown any concern for Gen. Not once since we’d begun dating. He never cared to ask anything, being acutely aware she was going to be offered one day. As if she was no one, nothing. But what could I expect? Neither did he show any interest in me, not in the matters that didn’t involve my body, at least.

“Away,” Mum answered, her voice impassive, even cold.

“Why? She didn’t come to give Genette a send-off?” My mother shook her head in response. “Really? It isn’t like her...”

The unreadable mask Mum had donned was flawless. Chase, ignorant as he was, would never suspect a thing. “My daughter doesn’t want to see her sister pushed into that portal. She has already said her farewell and decided to get away, to be *alone*.”

I couldn’t tell whether Chase believed her. I wasn’t going to look at his face, the face I wanted to wreck with my fist that was clenching the material of Gen’s sky-blue dress.

“If that’s so,” he said, “I’ll also say my goodbye.”

He smiled down at me. “Goodbye, Genette. Unfortunately, you wouldn’t be able to be Elynn’s bridesmaid at our wedding.”

A sense of resentment as familiar as breath rushed through me, but I just nodded, keeping my real feelings for him at bay for one last time. Chase waved goodbye to us and strolled off. I heaved a sigh of relief.

“What a prick,” Mum mumbled.

“I don’t know,” Kris said. “He seemed decent to me.”

Both of our eyes were on Kris now.

“He used violence against Elynn, Kristian.”

Kris looked at me questionably, and I nodded, confirming my mother’s statement. His jaw clenched and bluer than grey eyes glowed with fury as

his head whipped in the direction where Chase had disappeared. He pushed his sleeves back, readying himself to go after him, but I seized his wrist before he did.

His angry eyes flicked to me.

“Don’t.”

“When someone hurts a family member, the family pays back, Lynn.”

“You’re better than that, Kris. Besides, you wouldn’t take him down. He’s a hunter, and you’re better with your brainpower than throwing punches. You’ll only hurt yourself.”

He was pursing his lips hard, but as time passed, he let go of them along with the breath. “Fine, but I’m not going to—”

Loud trumpets slashed through all the noise. I swivelled my head to the dais, releasing Kris’s wrist. Three pledgers, who wore a shade of sun robes, emerged in the middle of the platform from the stairs. The hall and trumpets fell silent.

Pledgers smiled at us benevolently, but I couldn’t tell if their smiles reflected their eyes. I was too far away.

The woman in the middle gestured at someone, and soon the portal rose out of the floor behind them gradually. Some people gasped as if they beheld it for the first time, even though they didn’t. It used to inspire awe in me, too. Perhaps the portal was the most magical object in our region. It was made of rectangular shape, the top forming an unstable oval. Its thick wooden edges had grown with moss, embellished with blossoms and leaves, whereas the inside of it was filled with pristine, mellow-yellow liquid. It was one stunning masterpiece with a deceiving image in mind. Its looks were harmless and spellbinding when, in reality, its purpose was to send minors to the deadly world for them to perish.

No one knew how the magical portal had appeared in our world, and nobody dared to question. Even if somebody was curious enough to ask, I doubted the pledgers knew the answer. They were just following the rules, doing their job, raising no questions. Not to put themselves at risk, as they were the only ones who could communicate with the empire.

Even a simpleton would figure out that the portal always remained in our world and didn’t come out of nowhere only for this particular day. Thus, it got me thinking. Could somebody besides the offered kids go through it out of curiosity? Couldn’t someone have done it already?

“There’s no easy way to say this,” the woman standing in the middle spoke, her blackish hands clasped before her. “The news hit us like thunder in the morning.” She glanced at the white man next to her, as if pleading for help.

The man’s hand grazed hers, and she gave him a weak smile. He then looked back at the utterly quiet crowd.

“A sixteen-year-old boy was found dead in his home this morning.”

People remained silent. No gasps. No questioning. Nothing. No one was shocked.

At least once in five years, a suicide before the Summer Solstice took place. Perhaps the boy had assumed it was better to take his own life than to face whatever was waiting for him behind the portal. Perhaps it was grim death lurking there—a worse death than suicide.

We all fell under a minute of silence to pay respect to the loss of young life. After it, the woman in the middle cleared her throat, drawing everybody’s attention back to her.

“This year, we have ten names of sixteen-year-olds. You may begin saying goodbye to your loved ones.”

I looked at my mother, intertwining our hands. She slightly squeezed my hand and gave me a small, reassuring smile.

If I hadn’t been scared before, now I was terrified.

I was about to go through the portal and never see my family again. I wasn’t ready. I’d thought I was, but...

No. I needed to pull myself together. Not to show how I was afraid. Not in front of my mother, who would shatter if I exposed how frightened I actually was.

Pledgers began calling one minor by one in reverse alphabetical order. Families walked on the podium to say goodbye for the last time to their children, grandchildren, siblings.

I squeezed Mum’s hand harder as slowly it was coming to my—Gen’s name.

My heart was pounding in my chest, skin running with cold sweat. To ignore the trepidation, I glanced at my hand, at the ring finger.

I slipped my hand from Mum’s and pulled off the ring. As soon as it was gone, my finger weighed lighter. I took her hand, planted a ring on her palm, and closed it. Mum was tracking my every movement.

“Sell it,” I said. “Don’t return it to Chase. If he asks about the ring, tell him I have it.”

Mum nodded, and I was glad that she didn’t argue.

“Genette Lucida Startel!” the pledger called.

Here it goes...

My legs began carrying me on their own through the crowd. I gripped the sleeve of my mother’s dress, pulling her along with me towards the dais. I glanced over my shoulder to make sure Kris was following. Indeed he was. Then I looked back, where pledgers were already waiting. As we approached the guards, they showed us where to climb. While we were going together up the flight of steps, I thought I was about to faint here and now. I had no clue how I managed to mount the rest of the steps. Perhaps someone else was making me walk while I had an out-of-body experience.

My brain had a hard time fathoming that this was actually happening.

“Genette?”

Once I met the woman’s stare, she summoned a serene smile that didn’t touch her eyes. She was extending something.

It was a small leather bag. Did she hand the bags like mine to everyone? I hadn’t noticed. But I didn’t stall long and took it as I didn’t see why I shouldn’t.

“What is in it?”

“An emergency kit. Things you might need, dear.”

I issued a thank you and glimpsed at Mum, who, without any hesitation, pulled me into a tight, loving embrace.

“I love you,” she said quietly and drew an uneven breath to add, “I will always love you and will never forget you.”

“I know, Mum,” I mumbled, trying not to break. “I love you, too.”

I couldn’t describe how painful it was to say the words meaning an everlasting goodbye. I had voiced them seldom. Perhaps if I had to, I could count on my fingers how many times I said the three words built of eight letters. This time, however, I’d said them the most sincerely throughout my existence.

For the very last time, I inhaled the scent of my mother. Roses and vanilla. A smell of home to remember until my last breath.

As we pulled away from each other, I met Kristian’s gaze. Letting out a sigh, I invited him for a hug by spreading my hands.

“Come on,” I prompted him with a cheeky smile. “You have to hug your sister for the last time, Kris.”

He pressed his lips together, hesitating, but still stepped towards me, and we embraced for the first time. For the first time, I learnt what it was like to hug my brother, as neither could be described as huggers. Especially not him.

Since now I was shorter, he was towering over me when our height had been almost alike before taking the potion.

“It shouldn’t be this way,” he muttered, surprisingly not letting go of me.

“It should be this way.”

He looked doubtful. “Should it?”

I nodded, somehow assured. “I feel it.”

I didn’t lie this time, which was new. It indeed felt right. Yes, I was afraid with every bit of my bones, which might shake soon, but if I had to pick, I’d better go through the portal, discover whatever was behind it than stay and marry... that man.

“If you feel it’s right,” Kris said, “then what brother would I be if I argued?”

I chuckled, and as I raised my head at him, I tousled his brown hair. He winced, but there was a shadow of a smile on his lips as he smoothed it back.

“It’s time,” the woman notified.

The warm aura between Kris and I vanished, along with our smiles. He backed away from me, and I glanced at Mum, who was staring with a broken gaze. Swallowing, I forced myself to look away before I changed my mind.

I couldn’t change my mind, however. There were too many eyes. Even if there weren’t, I wouldn’t choose to bail. I couldn’t.

I faced the portal. Innocent, even inviting, lucid portal. My feet were close to dragging *me* towards it. Every step taken was a challenge. The closer I got to the portal, the stronger I had to battle the urge to run back into my mother’s arms and ask her to hold me and never let go.

But I didn’t. My brain knew better. I listened to it, as my heart could only betray me.

As I halted a half-step away from the portal, I turned around to catch the last glimpse of my family. Kris was nowhere to be seen, but I didn’t look around to find where he’d gone when I saw the tears washing Mum’s face.

I hated that she saw Gen, not me right now. I could tell that she didn't like it either. But it had to be this way.

Unwillingly, I pictured her the way she was. A few wrinkles on her forehead and below her blue eyes. Dark-brown hair tied into a bun, revealing a grey hairline she didn't try to conceal. *My mother*. The last memory of her to treasure until my last heartbeat.

Again, I quelled the desire to run back into her arms and hold her.

She would be fine. Sooner or later.

At last, I stepped back, raising my hand to wave my farewell, but the portal swallowed me before I could. Everything that had been before me a mere second ago disappeared, consumed by the dazzling yellow light.

OceanofPDF.com

Part II: Notes of Beasts & Bones

OceanofPDF.com

VII

THE PORTAL SPAT ME OUT LIKE a disgusting drink. I tumbled, scraping my knees against the hard ground. Despite the searing pain there, my ears were ringing, and all I could see was pitch-black darkness. For a brief moment, I got terrified that I'd lost my eyesight, but the green dots began to replace the blackness, and the ringing was fading.

My eyes had a hard time shaping the figures surrounding me. First, it was a chaos of green shades mixed with black, but as black disappeared, brown joined, and bit by bit, I was finding my bearings. It all reminded me of the trees. Yes, trees. I must be in the forest.

But not alone.

Minors, who had been hurled out of the portal, writhed on the ground. Half of them were wailing, some of them were retching whilst the rest were throwing up.

I searched for the portal, expecting to find a similar one I'd walked into on the dais not long ago, but it wasn't here. Only trees and sick adolescents.

At least I wasn't suffering from such a severe nausea that I'd need to spill all the undigested food on the grass. I was a trifle dizzy, but not as much as I'd been when the portal had got rid of me.

Grasping the leather bag—which miraculously I hadn't lost when I was thrown out of the portal—I managed to rise to my unsteady feet. The forest itself wasn't the one I was accustomed to seeing behind the cottage's windows. The tree trunks here were so tall that I had to crane my head back to catch the sight of the sky veiled by the thick branches and broad leaves.

"Fascinating, isn't it?"

I started, flicking my head to the speaker. A woman was staring at me, no younger than thirty. She smiled, but her smile didn't reach her ocean blue eyes.

I was too distracted by the woman's livery to say something. She wore a white shirt with an embroidered paw on her chest, a long skirt of a similar shade to the portal, but it was more of a faded tint of yellow. If I was

correct, she was wearing a uniform that belonged to *this* world, but I could be wrong.

“What is this place?” I asked her.

“The Empire of Beasts.” I opened my mouth to clarify myself, but she continued, “You’re in Casidiarn’s territory.”

“Casidiarn?”

“Casidiarn is the capital of the Empire of Beasts.”

I didn’t even know what the Empire of Beasts looked like, so how could I know the name of the capital? Our town and the rest of the Mortal Region were against anything that involved morphs, including their dwelling place. But if I was in the capital, it only screamed the danger zone to me.

“What’s your name?” she asked me before I could question her more about Casidiarn.

I didn’t hesitate to reply. “Genette.”

She looked at the leather notebook she had with her, which I had failed to notice before. “Genette Lucida Startel?” She lifted her gaze from whatever she had written in that notebook.

I nodded curtly.

“It says here you’re a good baker and a cook, is that correct?”

In my dreams. “Yes.”

The woman glanced behind me at the rest of the adolescents, who were still puking in the grass. Her nose wrinkled.

“Who are you exactly?”

Her eyes returned to mine. “I’m Holland.”

“I didn’t ask your name, *Holland.*”

“You’re bold,” she said. “That’s bad.”

“How is being bold bad?”

She was as expressionless as I, betraying nothing. “You’ll find out sooner or later.”

Her focus returned to the rest of the teenagers instead of answering my previous question. She tucked her notebook under her armpit and clapped her hands loudly to bring everybody’s attention. “All right, enough with the crying,” she addressed the rest. “It’s time to stand up!”

I turned to them as well. Minors remained to curl on the ground while incoherent sounds left their mouths. But only one peculiar girl snatched my full attention.

She was leaning against a tree, her arms folded across her chest, flawless coal-black curls falling on her shoulders. Her dark eyes were watching me as if she knew something I didn't.

And then I understood why she was staring at me like that.

I glanced down at my hands, at the skin which was back to its normal self—honey bronze. I was back to the body I was accustomed to—*my body*. And the girl knew that. Supposedly, she'd been the last one to enter the portal and had seen me disappearing in it as another person. She wasn't affected by nausea, unlike the others. Not even a hint of sickness was visible in her ebony face.

I hoped the suspicious girl wouldn't be a problem.

"Stand up," Holland repeated herself since nobody stood on their feet, her tone turned stricter.

I turned my head to her. "They are unwell."

She looked at me, emotionless. "Side effects are common. *They* won't care about them if we are late, kid."

"Are you talking about morphs?"

"Yes."

"What is our purpose here? What do humans do for morphs?"

Holland's face remained as hard as a stone. I couldn't discern any emotion. Nothing that would give me a clue of what was in her mind.

"Our purpose here is to serve them," she said the words as if she'd rehearsed them.

"How will we serve them?"

"Water," someone rasped behind me.

It was a blonde, light-skinned boy—one of few of his offered gender.

"You have water in your bag," Holland said, with no concern.

"I can't see," he cried.

Pursing my lips, I spread my leather bag. I searched for something that could help the boy, and I was glad to detect a canteen. The pledgers had proved they weren't cold-hearted people. They'd made sure to provide us with necessary stuff we might need as not only a canteen of water source was in the bag, but a small sheathed golden knife.

As I was drawing a canteen from the bag, I endeavoured my best not to brush my skin against the knife, even if its blade was sheathed. And I succeeded.

I squatted in front of the boy, flicking the lid off the canteen. Then I pushed his chin up and pressed the bottle's edge to his dry and desert-like lips.

"Drink," I said mildly.

I poured the water into his mouth as soon as it parted. He gulped it eagerly, as if he hadn't had a drop of water for days. In a matter of seconds, my water canteen was empty.

"Thank you," he mumbled.

Saying nothing, I shoved the empty canteen back in the bag and secured it. As I stood up, I glowered at Holland unabashedly. "They can't stand on their own, and if you expect them to walk, you're insane."

"If they're not willing to fight those side effects, they are more likely to become their dinner."

I clenched my teeth, wincing at the insensitive woman. "They. Can't. Walk."

"Listen, girl." A cloud of exasperation passed through her. "Today is the Summer Solstice. Today, not only humans are offered to the Empire of Beasts. It's *their* holiday. The lords and ladies, the queen and kings, the empress and emperor are feasting. They won't be pleased if something doesn't go according to the plan. My task is to guide you to the lands where you are going to do the work *they* need you to do. You don't have to listen to me and go with me. But if you don't go, they will hunt you, and they will make a delicious meal out of you."

My knowledge about morphs and their world was lacking, but when Holland had mentioned the eating part, something told me she hadn't exaggerated. Morphs could do that. They could eat humans. And if others remained here, they would be dead by night-time.

I surveyed the wretched kids and clenched my jaw tight. I had many questions for Holland, but first and foremost, I needed to help her with these minors. They would not be morphs' dinner. Not today.

I crouched before the boy, the one I had offered my water source for, and placed my hands on his damp cheeks, forcing him to look at me. It didn't seem that he saw me. His focus was on nothing and no one.

"You've heard her," I told him, but he didn't react. "Focus on your other senses while you can't see. We need to get moving."

"I'll try," he mumbled.

“No, you’ll do it.” I removed my hands from his face and put them just above my knees. “You’ll do it.”

I stood up and took in the rest of the teenagers. Seven were left. I sighed and turned my head to Holland. “How much time do we have?”

“Lesser and lesser.”

I frowned and glanced at the tree where the suspicious girl was the last time I’d seen her. But she wasn’t there anymore. Instead, she was helping one girl to get up. Our eyes met. She held my stare, but I looked away first to help the others out with walking and try to convince them to fight the side effects of the portal or else this day would be their last.

Most managed to walk on their own and even help others among them. I helped the boy, who didn’t receive his vision after all. I’d learnt his name to be Franz.

The girl, who had regarded me suspiciously when I’d first beheld her, was helping another girl. Her presence got me strained and vigilant. She could tell Holland I was an impostor, even if she said nothing so far. That, however, didn’t mean she wouldn’t.

The sun was heating hotter today. Gen’s overly tight dress was clinging to my sweaty back, and a few sweat beads had collected on my forehead. I needed water, but my canteen was empty, whereas Franz had lost his bag. We had been walking for a while, and so far, I hadn’t seen or heard any creature in the forest. It was like the rainforest wasn’t a habitable biome. No chirping of the birds or a panther watching from the trees. Nothing.

Holland was striding in front, leading the way. When her hair moved, a nasty scar peeked through on her faintly tanned nape. A wound before it’d become a scar must have been deep. I wondered how she’d received it in the first place.

“I can see,” Franz announced. “Just a little.”

“Nobody gets blind permanently,” Holland noted.

“It’d be nice if you explained what our purpose is here.” I didn’t hide how irritated I was about her keeping us in the dark.

Holland barely glimpsed at me over her shoulder, somewhat interested. “I’ve got a list.” She raised the leather notebook with a wave. “All of your names are written here, your skills and what kind of job you’ll be doing and where.”

Why couldn't she just spill everything out? Why did I have to question her to extract something valuable out of her?

"What job?" The question came not from me but from the suspicious girl who'd been a silent mouse until now.

"You all are going to have a main job, but there will also be informal ones you'll have to do if you want to survive," Holland said.

Still not an answer.

"What jobs, Holland?" I hissed, the bracelet on my wrist faintly heating my skin.

"I'm feeling sick," Franz mumbled, but I paid no attention to him.

"You're going to serve royals as maids, guards, or something else."

The suspicious girl scoffed. "You mean slaves."

Holland nodded, not denying her words. "Those will be your main jobs, but you'll have others as well. Not as pleasant as the main ones." She drew in a long breath. "If some morph asks you to do something for them, you'll do it or else you'll get hurt."

I wasn't scared, but others exchanged wary glances.

"The scar on your neck," I said, softer this time. "Is it morphs' doing?"

She didn't respond. I took it as a positive answer.

Franz here doubled over and vomited right next to me. I scowled, coming to a halt and whipping my head away. But I held Franz firm by his arm, regardless.

"Disgusting," the suspicious girl said.

I shot her a glare. "Do you have a problem with something?"

She looked at me, unbothered by my biting tone. Saying nothing, she continued walking with the fatigued girl beside her.

I looked at the sick boy. "How are you?"

He straightened himself and looked directly at me. From the stable look in his azure eyes, I could tell he'd gained his eyesight back.

"Better."

"Can you walk on your own?"

"Faster, you two," Holland urged.

I ignored her.

"Yeah, I think so," he assured me.

I smiled a bit and let go of him. He began walking. Better than I'd expected. He'd do just fine on his own.

The further we went, the more it seemed like the rainforest was endless. Minors were gradually regaining their strength. Those who had been sick were now trudging like Franz. Left with my head as a companion, it was natural for resentment to start poking at me.

They were only sixteen, offered to the Empire of Beasts, where they were forced into slavery. How was this fair?

And Holland's warnings didn't leave me for peace of mind either. If a morph demanded them to do something, humans would do it if they didn't want to obtain a scar on their bodies or worse—get killed.

All I was sure of by now was that I'd done the right thing—coming here in Gen's place. Regardless of how strong my sister could be in all ways, how she could endure anything life threw at her, she was my family. I needed to protect her from anything at all costs. She was safer in the Mortal Region anyway. I knew with all my heart that I hadn't made a mistake.

Nobody talked anymore. I didn't attack Holland with questions, and neither did the suspicious girl. Holland was hard to interrogate. Besides, I had a feeling—which could be deceiving—she'd revealed everything she needed to.

Holland came to an abrupt halt, and we followed. She turned to us, drawing something out of her pocket. Then she cast the area around herself, as if afraid that something might be watching us. And perhaps we weren't alone after all. I scanned around myself as well, but didn't spot anything lurking behind a lush foliage.

"Take this, girl."

I looked back at Holland, then at what she was handing me. A pill was on her palm—a green, innocent-looking pill from which I expected the worst.

I raised my eyes back to her. "What is it for?"

There was no way I was taking the pill without being aware of its effects.

"Take it," she ordered, relentless.

But I hesitated. "What does it do?"

Her lips pressed tightly. Clearly, I was getting on her nerves with my defiance, but I didn't care.

Sighing, she leaned closer and whispered, "I'm on humans' side, Genette. I was in your place once. I advise you to take it for your own sake or else..." She swallowed the unspoken word, and an emotion sparkled in her face. And it was genuine fear.

She wouldn't have whispered anything like that to me if we were the only ones here. She would have told that to the rest. Out loud. No doubt somebody was watching us, making sure we took the pills Holland handed us.

She pulled away, and her begging eyes convinced me enough.

I looked at the others. They seemed all mistrustful except for the suspicious girl staring at me as if she saw a fraud in me.

I looked back at Holland and took the pill from her. She didn't react or show anything that could mean relief or approval when she passed to the other minor.

While I stared at the green pill, Holland was handing out the same ones to everyone. They took them without hesitating, and didn't argue as I had. I was surprised when the suspicious girl didn't refuse the pill either. I'd thought she would put up some fight.

As Holland stood in front of us, she ordered, "Swallow the pill."

I didn't linger and threw a tiny pill into my mouth. I swallowed it without taking the time to savour the taste.

The others swallowed it as well.

But nothing befell my body senses that would suggest the effect of the pill. I felt just the same as before, which included my physical health. Well.

In my periphery, someone fell. A girl. Then, one by one, they all began dropping like flies. My eyes widened.

They aren't dead, are they?

But before I could ask Holland, everything around me began spinning, and the oblivion took over.

VIII

WHEN I AWOKE, I stared at the ceiling for a while, and not a single thought passed through my mind, as if it was blank. Not until a reminder of what had happened before I dozed off threw me out of my haze.

Falling asleep, however, would be an understatement. A milder version of what had actually happened.

I'd been *drugged*.

Instantly, I shot into a sitting position, and my hands darted over my body to make sure I was real and safe and sound.

I felt myself.

I was alive.

But I didn't sigh from relief; the realisation didn't ease the pounding of my heart. As I barely shifted, the bed creaked underneath me. Only then I acknowledged my surroundings.

The candle on the table issued just enough light to see the room. Besides the creaking bed and the dusty table in the corner, there was no other furniture in this claustrophobic bunker. Not like something else could fit in here anyway.

Where was I—I had no idea. How long I'd been unconscious, I couldn't tell either. If only the room had a window for me to at least have a clue of what time of day it was... But there was no window.

But there was a dark-wooden door across from me.

Once I crawled out of bed, my head began to spin. I blamed it on the pill Holland had made me and everybody else to swallow if it wasn't because of the ridiculous smallness of the room. In a dizzy state, I managed to totter towards the door. As I planted my hand on the doorknob, I attempted to open it vainly, since it was locked.

As if I wasn't sure that I'd opened it right the first time, I twisted and pulled the knob until I was convinced that I was locked in here.

I tried not to get consumed by panic. *Inhale. Exhale. Inhale—*

"Let me out!" I screamed, rapping my fists against the door. I had no clue what could be lurking outside, but I didn't care about any other dangers

at the moment. I needed to get out of here. My heart had reached the speed which could get me fainting. I'd never been this terrified in my life. Terrified to be crushed by the room.

If I stayed here any longer, I'd go mad.

But the door didn't open.

I held onto the last straw. I began to pray. And I prayed, prayed and prayed unstoppably under my breath like a madwoman to Gods above to save me from this cruel torture.

I don't want to die. I don't want to die.

I'm not ready...

The door opened, and I fell headlong. I cursed under my breath, then inhaled to fill my lungs with some air.

My heartbeat remained chaotic, but at least the walls weren't threatening to squeeze me into a pancake.

"A-are you all right?"

I'd forgotten there was a person here.

I raised my head and faced a brunette with fair skin clothed in a dirty-brown dress, which reminded me of what a maid would wear since a white apron was a part of the attire. I managed to stand up on my unsteady legs, towering over a girl.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Who are you?"

She lowered her gaze to the pile of neatly folded clothes in her hands. "I'm Thea."

Shyly, she tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear, her pinkie finger quivering. Presuming she didn't like to be stared at, I glanced over the slightly lit corridor instead.

"Where am I?"

"In the Realm of Bones mansion."

My focus returned to the timid girl. "In the realm of what?"

She smiled. "Realm of Bones," she replied in a mild voice. "It's one of the five realms of the Empire of Beasts."

I needed a map to have a clear image of the empire. It irritated me that the Mortal Region had disposed of most sources about morphs' world, as knowing the map would really come in handy right now.

"How did I get here?"

"Well," she said. "As all of us. Through the portal."

"I meant how I got *here*, not in the empire, Thea."

She let out an awkward chuckle. “I-I don’t know.”

Perhaps it was not the best idea to question the girl, no younger than seventeen. Judging from her shyness, she hadn’t been here for a long time, clearly serving in this mansion as a maid. A human, too, I figured. I wasn’t sure what morphs looked like, but I doubted they would be shivering from me like Thea was.

Sighing, I pointed at the clothes she had in her hands. “Do I need to wear this?” I couldn’t disguise a repulsion in my inquiry.

Holland’s warnings of morphs chimed in my mind. In other words: *disobey, and you’ll get punished*. The ugly scar on her nape—which I could wager was cruel beasts’ doing—was just an example of what I’d receive or what might happen to Thea for not succeeding at her task that must have been to come here and hand me this tasteless uniform.

She nodded without voicing it.

I took the clothes. “Am I a maid of this mansion?” I returned to a claustrophobic room and hid behind the door. I threw the given clothes on the top of the door before I started wriggling out of Gen’s tight dress.

“Imogen told me you were assigned as one because Asenah was missing one maid.”

“Who’s Imogen?”

I winced while putting on the brown dress. But I couldn’t expect to wear beautiful clothes while working for morphs to keep myself alive. This had to do. Not like I had a choice anyway.

There were some scratches on my knees. I must have gained them after the portal had spat me out. At least the long skirt covered all the wounds.

“She’s the chief cook here.” I slid on the white apron, which didn’t help to improve the look. I bound the straps into the best bow I could make without having eyes on my back. “She’s kind to good people. If not... she could be... a little bit mean.”

Done with an apron, I didn’t forget to pull the folded sketch out of Gen’s dress and shove it in an apron’s pocket. After untying my hair, I swept them into a bun.

Since there was no mirror in the room, I couldn’t see my final appearance. Whether the bun turned out to look appropriate or not. But then why would it matter? I didn’t need a mirror to know that the ugly uniform didn’t suit me at all, especially when dirt brown almost blended with my

skin tone. The messy hairstyle wouldn't ruin my appearance more than it already was.

As I stepped from behind the door, I scanned the room for a bag I'd brought with me to this world, but it was nowhere to be seen.

Of course, *they* had confiscated it. It had a bloody golden knife inside!

I turned to the girl who still lingered in the corridor. I swiped my palms through the waist to smooth out the creases. "And who's Asenah?"

Something strange flashed in Thea's soft onyx eyes. Fright, perhaps.

"S-she's..." She swallowed as she took a noisy breath. "She's the Queen of the Realm of Bones. A morph," the last word she whispered. "The mistress of the mansion."

My stomach dropped.

The queen of one of the realms. Not of the empire, thank the Gods, but she was still a *queen*. She had power. She could be formidable, which, of course, she must be.

"Is she bad?" I asked probably the dumbest question I could come across.

Of course, all the morphs were *bad*. Dangerous species to any human. I'd read enough written tales about them to be aware of their barbarousness.

"Asenah is... well, it's better not to disappoint her. But her twin cousins..." She tucked the strand behind her ear once again. "It's better to avoid them if possible."

I scrawled a mental note.

"We should go," she said. "Imogen is about to finish making dinner. We're going to have to serve it to the morphs."

I shivered at the thought of seeing the morphs for the first time ever tonight. I hadn't braced myself for it.

"Dinner?" As we left the room, she closed the door. "How long was I unconscious?"

We walked side by side. I felt slightly uncomfortable being about a head taller than Thea. Like a mutant standing beside such a short and petite girl.

"Just two days," she answered.

"Just?"

Two days was a long time. I wondered what my family had been up to after I'd left. Gen must be all right. Hopefully, Chase didn't spit his anger on my family when he'd learnt his *fiancée* was gone.

But I wasn't his fiancée anymore. I'd left the emerald ring to my mother to sell and receive a sufficient amount of money from it. I hadn't missed anything involving that ring. I despised the colour of it, as it reminded me of his hungry eyes every time he beheld me.

"Usually, when a person is brought here, they stay unconscious for about five days. The pill has that effect. But you were unconscious only for two days, which is surprising," she clarified.

I didn't give it too much thought. "What about the other sixteen-year-olds?" My mind buzzed about one boy in particular. Franz. Was he here? "Are they all here?"

"No, they were sent to other realms to serve. All Asenah needed was one kitchen staff member, a maid and someone who could take care of the garden since the previous gardener was—"

She didn't finish her sentence, compressing her lips as if to prevent her tongue from talking. I didn't question her silence.

We ascended the stairwell. I presumed the room I'd awoken in was underground since as soon as we climbed upstairs, there appeared an arched window looking out upon the lawn and beyond it to the scenery of pines.

The corridors here were much taller and wider and more elaborate than the ones at Chase's manor. However, it wasn't fair to compare the human's manor to a mansion of morphs' *queen*. Of course, their world would outstrip ours in every way.

"In what animal can Asenah shapeshift?" I asked.

"A wolf."

"Oh, not the wolves."

Wolves and felines were deadly. Not as much as dragons, but they didn't exist anymore. There was no reason to fret about encountering one. Wolves, however... a red zone.

Thea smiled a bit.

"How do morphs look exactly? Like us?"

"They have limbs and posture similar to ours, but... their skin is furry or made of feathers or other types of skin. It depends on the animal. And well, Asenah and her cousins look like wolves."

I didn't want to meet them, but after Thea's description, I couldn't deny that I was also intrigued to see for myself what they actually looked like.

As we turned the corner, the other girls passed us, wearing the same attire as Thea and me. Thea waved almost imperceptibly at them.

Finally, we reached the kitchen. When I smelled food, my stomach growled in response to the divine smell, informing me I was hungry. For two days, I'd been unconscious and had no food in my belly. I *needed* something edible in my mouth. But something told me I wasn't going to receive a meal any time soon.

The kitchen itself was quite enormous. There was a mammoth dark-wood table in the centre where some people were chopping vegetables or stirring something in the bowls. Wooden counters had all sorts of tools placed on them. I recognised some of them as bowls, pans, and pots, but most of them were new to my eye.

I wasn't an expert when it came to kitchen matters. Not as Gen was. I bet she would have liked the assortment of kitchen gear, but she couldn't have this fate where she ended up as morphs' slave.

The people in the kitchen didn't notice us. Too preoccupied with the work in their hands. I counted six of them. One of them was a woman with ample hips wearing a white cap to prevent her auburn hair from dropping into the food, shouting orders to chop or taste something in a south-eastern accent. No doubt she was the same Imogen Thea had told me about. The other five must be the kitchen staff who helped her to prepare food.

Not to hinder them, Thea and I stood by the door.

"Ten minutes left, and we have to carry the meal," Thea said quietly.

I nodded, continuing to observe people bustling around like workaholic bees until a bell rang.

My heart jumped at such an obnoxiously loud sound. I followed where it was coming from and on the right, there were two rows of bells and the one that was ringing had *Dining Room* written below it.

"It's time," Thea said and began walking towards the wall.

I hurried after her.

The bell ceased ringing once we approached a counter where a stack of silver trays and covers were arranged neatly on the table. Thea explained how I was supposed to do my job, which was the same as hers.

In short, the dinner was made of appetiser, main meal and dessert. First, we'd have to carry an appetiser to the dining room. We'd remain there until morphs were about to finish eating it. Then we would have to serve the main meal to them and stay there until a time to carry dessert came. And after bringing one, we'd vanish out of the morphs' sight. Nothing too tricky and complicated. I believed I'd do just fine.

When we got the food on our trays, the other maid helped us take an appetiser to the dining room. I paced behind her.

We reached double wooden doors guarded by two human-looking guards. Their eyes fell on us. Thea greeted them quietly, and both of them smiled at the girl. They must be humans.

I inhaled, trying to poise myself for what I was about to face within the grand dining room, but the guards put their hands on the door handles and opened the door before I was ready.

Since I was the last in the line, I couldn't see what the doors had revealed, regardless of my height. Thea stepped inside noiselessly with the other maid and me in tow.

And then I saw them.

A tray almost slipped from my hands, but thank the heavens it didn't.

When Thea had described morphs, I'd only roughly pictured their appearance. Thus, I hadn't expected them to be exactly how she'd characterised them—three wolves in the shape of humans.

The woman sitting at the head of the table had two wolf-like ears protruding from her long, jet-black hair. Her face matched a wolf apart from her eyes that could be compared to a human. Grey-blue. Just like my—no, not my sister's. *Definitely* not my sister's.

She must have been the infamous Asenah, the Queen of Bones, the mistress of this impressive mansion.

As uncanny as it was to see the wolf sitting at the dining table, she was also wearing a chestnut satin dress. I couldn't see all of its grandeur as the table covered the lower part, but after taking one look at it, I could tell it was an expensive and well-designed one.

But a wolf wearing a gown! Could this world be taken seriously if it was full of bizarre creatures like in a carnival?

Other two brown wolves that looked alike sat beside her, garbed in less formal attire: white shirts with brown suspenders. One of them had short black hair, another longer but secured in a lower bun.

I figured they were cousins of Asenah, the same ones Thea had warned me about.

Thea didn't linger to approach Asenah and set an appetiser covered by a shiny silver cover before her.

I followed her moves with the other maid and placed an appetiser before one of the brothers. I sensed their stares at me but ignored them, along with

the warning voice in the back of my mind yelling at me to flee.

But where would I possibly go if I fled?

As I uncovered their appetiser, I stepped back with a tray and a cover in my hands. My inquiring glance shifted to Thea, not sure what to do next. She walked to stand by the double door, her back facing the wall, face emotionless. I stood next to her and imitated the void look of hers without putting in much effort.

As Asenah reached for the cutlery with her hands, to my surprise, they weren't paws. Despite the fur, their shape was identical to mine. She ate her appetiser, wielding a fork and knife better than I would have, or most humans could. I endeavoured not to appear marvelled so I'd not draw unnecessary attention.

"How was your meeting with Amyas?" Asenah asked.

T-they could also speak?

She opened her wolf-like mouth and bit the cherry off the fork.

But didn't wolves prefer meat instead of berries or fruits? They were predators, after all.

"Boring," the short-haired male replied.

The long-haired nodded, agreeing with his brother.

Asenah took a sip of the red wine. "I hope you two didn't embarrass our entire kin while being there."

If not for her wild exterior, I'd say she was a well-mannered lady, but it was impossible to look at her and turn a blind eye to animal features outweighing human ones in her.

Wolves exchanged glances, which only they knew what they signified. "No," the long-haired said.

Asenah didn't look at them as she took another delicate sip. "Did you get to know your future wife during the visit, Lupin, or their servants instead?"

The short-haired one put his hand on his mouth as though to cover a smile while his brother, Lupin, winced.

"First of all, cousin," Lupin began, "I don't come on to servants, unlike Fillan." Fillan barked a laugh while Asenah was chewing the bite and watching Lupin from the corner of her eye. "Second of all, dear Kayla was mostly away." He raised a glass of red wine to his mouth. "And finally, Amyas is having doubts about whether to let his precious sister marry someone like me or not."

Asenah's jaw tightened. "What?" she growled through her gritted teeth.

Now *that* was more like a wolf's behaviour.

"He might not have invited me for a little chat to explicitly tell me he doesn't want me to marry Kayla, but his attitude insinuated that he dislikes both me and Fillan." He took a sip of his wine and swallowed it before he spoke again. "I don't think the wedding is happening anytime soon, cousin."

"No." Her tone was unbending. "That's not happening. I'll talk with Amyas myself. Perhaps I'll coax him better than you two simpletons can."

"But why her?" Lupin asked, avoiding Asenah's challenging stare. "I mean, the princess is quite... horrible-looking."

"Hideous," Fillan added.

"We all look hideous, you fools," Asenah said.

"But she was also unattractive at the Spring Equinox!" Lupin whined.

"Ugly or not, you're still marrying her," Asenah said. "We need an assured alliance. Only the Gods know when Drayard is going to snap."

Silence fell over the room.

Lupin and Fillan exchanged looks. A hint of fear passed through their identical faces as they swallowed hard, their throats bobbing.

Asenah's reaction was different. She seemed more lost in her thoughts than frightened, unlike her cousins.

I didn't understand why they'd fallen silent after mentioning some Drayard, needless to say, were afraid of him.

Fillan leaned closer to Asenah. "Careful with his name," he whispered so quietly that if not for the silent room, I wouldn't have heard him. "You might summon him by accident."

"Yes, only Gods know what *he* is capable of," Lupin agreed in a whisper, too.

"The Bloodsucker won't step into our lands," Asenah assured, and for a second, I believed I'd forgotten how to breathe, but I must have misheard the word she'd said as there was no way... "He has more important things to do in his own realm than to stalk us. On top of that, we haven't seen him in years. Summoning him is the last thing of which we need to concern ourselves. However, that he's been too silent after his father's demise, that's something we ought to be taking seriously. He might be planning something unholy."

"Enchanters murdered his father, not us." Fillan sighed. "Why would he want to attack us?"

Asenah shook her head. “Not attack us, but force us into helping to avenge his father.”

“It’s been six years, so far nothing. We don’t have to worry about the alliance with the Realm of Talons,” Fillan protested. “Lupin doesn’t need to marry an uncomely girl and spoil our family line with her horrible genes. The Bloodsucker won’t do anything.”

The Bloodsucker.

By now, I was sure I hadn’t misheard *that* word.

But there was no way, no possibility, that they were talking about the same monster.

He didn’t exist. He couldn’t—

Thea nudged my arm, snapping me out of my frightening thoughts. I whipped my head to her, and she stealthily beckoned me to fetch their main dish.

But before we left, my ears caught Asenah’s following words. “Perhaps, but we still have to be prepared for anything that might befall us. The Bloodsucker or not.”

IX

I WAS THE ONLY ONE stuck doing dishes in the scullery. Thea had left early without giving a hand to any of the staff. Imogen had sent her to sleep. One of her staff girls had whispered to me that Imogen always pampered Thea. I paid no heed to such a remark when my concerns were elsewhere.

Asenah and her cousins hadn't talked much after the appetiser. Even if I was still processing everything I'd learnt about morphs in one day, it wasn't what concerned me either.

The Bloodsucker had been on my mind ever since they'd mentioned him.

I couldn't believe they were speaking about the same beast. The same monster my mother had read a tale about every time I'd misbehaved. She'd assumed it would intimidate me enough to think better about showing my tantrums next time, but she'd been wrong. I was more ensorcelled by it than scared.

The Bloodsucker was fictional. He couldn't be real, let alone be walking on this same earth. And even if he *was* real, he couldn't be *alive*.

"Oh, heavens, you're scrubbin' like a crone."

Before I knew, Imogen snatched the scrub brush out of my grasp and pushed me gently from the sink. She continued rinsing dishes herself, much faster than I. I hadn't even seen her enter.

"I'm sorry," I murmured.

She handed me a dripping plate. "You're lucky that I'm no morph or else you'd be mah dinner."

I took it, gripped a cloth and dried the rest of the dishes as fast as I managed, putting them in the cabinet. While being in such a hurry, one bowl almost slipped from my hands. She observed me, daring me to drop the bowl. I didn't. With a sheepish smile, I placed the unharmed dish in the cabinet.

She did the scrubbing; I did the drying. The grim silence weighed down the atmosphere, and I couldn't bear it much longer. "Asenah talked with her

cousins about someone during dinner.”

“One rule of bein’ the maid is that ye cannot listen to what morphs are talkin’ about, lassie. Didn’t Thea tell ye that?”

“No,” I replied. “It’s not possible to stand and not hear anything.”

“Then act like you’re not listening to them. If ye show any emotion which would betray your ears are catchin’ every single word of thairs, they’ll kill ye without a seicont thought.”

I swallowed hard.

I didn’t think anyone had noticed me listening. All three of them had been too immersed in their conversation and food to check if some new maid was eavesdropping or not.

“So, what thay were talking about?” Imogen whispered, intrigued.

“About someone called Drayard.”

Imogen halted her movements, holding the wet glass above the sink. Then she resumed washing the dish as if nothing had happened.

“Is he...” I dampened my lips. “Is he the same Bloodsucker from *A Tale of the Bloodsucker*?”

She neither confirmed it nor denied it, but started washing the same glass harder, even if it was already clean.

My heartbeat increased. Her silence had confirmed Asenah and her cousins were speaking about the same monster, who might not have been fictional after all.

“Is he?” I persisted, despite my increasing pulse.

Silence.

“Imogen?”

“Yes,” she blurted out. “He’s the same. The one and only.”

I had to lean against the counter, as I might have swooned. “But... how?” I asked myself more than her, but expected her to answer. “Since when are tales real?”

“You’d be surprised how many tales ye’ve heard throughout yer life ur based on true stories, lassie.”

She handed me the last glass, and I wiped it in an utter daze. It wasn’t every day you learn that your favourite scary tale of all time was very much real.

“I don’t understand how someone like him can exist, let alone have a *name*.”

“Oh, he doesn’t have only a name,” she said with a raise of her auburn eyebrows. “He’s also a king. *The King o’ kings an’ queens and the King of Embers realm, too.*”

I blinked, stupefied. “A monster is... A monster is a royal?”

“Yes.”

Oh, my... “Have you seen him?”

“Dear Gods forbid something like that happening someday.” She crossed herself. “No. I haven’t seen him. Thank the Gods.”

As I finished drying the last glass, I returned it to the counter. “I used to think that the Bloodsucker was a monster, not an actual person with a form. He’s one of the species, right?”

She nodded. “He is.” She dried her hands with a towel and pushed the loose strands away from her eyes. “A half-breed,” she specified. “A half-breed of a bat an’ a dragon.”

My lips parted.

“Yes, dragons still exist,” she confirmed my fears. “At least one o’ them. His entire kind was assassinated by enchanters six years ago.”

Chase had mentioned something about it.

“Why?”

“Dragons were a threat tae enchanters. Thay feared them. However, thay missed killing th’ most dangerous o’ them all.” She drew in a breath. “The Bloodsucker, Drayard Emyur and the bastard son of Arragon.”

I’d heard about Arragon before. Again, I knew about him because of tales. In a war that had lasted for one hundred and five years but called the Hundred Years’ War instead, enchanters and humans had been fighting to liberate themselves from morphs. And Arragon, being the King of kings, had been the one who’d led morphs into their not entirely triumphant victory.

But I had never heard of his son. At least not by his real name.

“Arragon had a child with a bat morph?”

Imogen nodded. “Rumour has it she was a harlot bat. Drayard was conceived by accident, an’ his mother left him behind his father’s castle gates. He was called a bastard, but later on, he earned the Bloodsucker’s nickname, an’ no one has dared to call him Arragon’s bastard ever since.”

I wasn’t familiar with that part of the story. All I knew was that during the Hundred Years’ War, the same fearsome Bloodsucker—who apparently had an entire identity—sucked the blood from people, set on fire those who

had tried to stop him, and feasted on the offal of the fallen. After the war, stories of missing children ensued, suggesting that the Bloodsucker was also responsible for that.

And he was *real*, walking on this earth, terrifying not only human but inhuman species, such as morphs.

“Try not tae question everything ye hear, lassie,” she advised with a sigh. “Curiosity is what kills us humans. Be careful with that trait o’ yers. It’s not safe for one to possess it in this world.”

I nodded, but didn’t take it seriously when there was a lot I had to process.

“It’s late,” Imogen mused. “Do ye know your way back tae your room?”

I winced at the reminder of the room that had almost caused me to lose my marbles. I hadn’t thought it’d be my permanent bedroom when I was preoccupied with other matters.

“I can’t go back into my room,” I said, earning a quizzical look from Imogen. “I’m claustrophobic.”

She seemed like she was considering something. “Mah room’s bigger,” she said. “Ye can sleep in mine tonight.”

One pebble of thousands rolled off my chest. Imogen wasn’t bad. She may be a little strict, but she was a kind person, just like Thea had informed.

“Thank you,” I uttered from the bottom of my heart.

Three days later, I was still sleeping in Imogen’s bedroom, which was slightly bigger than the one I’d woken in. Imogen’s room didn’t have any windows either, but at least its size didn’t trigger claustrophobia. Imogen was kind enough to move into a smaller room and relinquish hers to me permanently.

The staff was calling me by my sister’s name. It was confusing, but I was always quick to grasp that they were calling me and not Gen, believing I was her, a sixteen-year-old girl whose skills were baking and cooking. Thank heavens, no one had tried to put my supposed skills to the test yet.

I was already feeling homesick. Despite it, I came to miss the sound of the piano. There wasn’t one in the mansion. I’d checked. But even if there was one, I wouldn’t be allowed to play it. At least I had a pencil and papers I’d found in Asenah’s study room after cleaning it yesterday.

My routine was pretty much the same every day. Wake up early in the morning. Carry breakfast with Thea and another girl named Jill, who was also a staff manager, to wolves. After that, clean the kitchen and help prepare lunch with Imogen. Serve the lunch. Clean and help again. And last but not least, serve dinner, which was more complicated than breakfast and lunch.

But today, when I entered the kitchen, a surprise awaited me there. Imogen was explaining something to a boy I hadn't seen here before. He had blonde hair—

“Franz,” I whispered under my breath.

Imogen noticed me staring. “Guid mornin’ , lassie,” she said. “Here, come.” She gestured with one hand while walking over to the cupboard. I followed. She drew out a basket and gave it to me. “Go tae th’ greenhouse and fetch me some tomatoes with brussels sprouts, and I don’t want to hear any complaints or else you’re getting a raw potato fer dinner tonight.”

She wasn’t kidding. The last time I’d resisted bringing flowers to Imogen from the garden, telling Thea would be better at this job than me as she wouldn’t get lost as I had once, Imogen had given me the bread with a jam for dinner while everybody else was eating cooked beef. I’d surely learnt my lesson.

I picked a basket from her. “Sure thing, Imogen.”

“All right, where was I?” Imogen turned to Franz.

“I...uh...” Franz scratched his temple. “You talked about how this Asenah loves milk in her morning tea?”

“Aye. She also...” She glanced at me from the corner of her eye. “And why are ye still doing ‘ere? Those vegetables won’t come here by themselves!”

Franz and I exchanged glances. I could tell he was feeling a bit out of place, but he would get used to Imogen’s tough personality and everything else his work entailed. I gave him a reassuring smile before I left to carry on with my task.

The greenhouse was in the rear of the mansion, close to a forest. Many flower beds bloomed along the paths. One path diverged into the heart of the garden, which I hadn’t got an opportunity to explore yet. I also skipped it this time, rushing towards the greenhouse where all the vegetables were.

“Elynn Startel.”

My stomach dropped, and I shifted to a halt at the sound of *my* name. I looked back, meeting a girl who had left my memory until now.

The suspicious girl.

She had a wry smile on her face. Instead of wearing clothes she'd worn the day we'd got through the portal, she was dressed in garb smudged with muddy brown as if she was rolling in the dirt with it.

Oh, she was that new gardener.

How lucky I am...

I turned to her wholly, crossing my arms. "I'm not scared of you."

The girl huffed out a laugh. "Me neither. I just want to know how you changed into Genette."

"How do you know Genette?"

"I know everyone in the town. It's not that big, Elynn. If you paid more attention to people around you, perhaps you would have known who I was in the first place."

I glanced around, alarmed that someone might be in the garden, but nobody was there. However, it didn't make me less worried. "Don't call me by my name. Someone might hear you."

"Nobody will."

"How can you be so sure?"

The suspicious girl's smile turned out to be lopsided. "You didn't answer *my* question."

I gritted my teeth, the bracelet on my wrist heating as a reminder to calm myself. And I did. "I don't see a reason why I should answer you."

"Which you should," she noted. "I could tell morphs your true identity, which would get you in trouble if you haven't figured out where I'm heading with all this."

Scoffing, I shook my head in disbelief. I'd supposed the suspicious girl would be a problem. "What good would it do for you if you had access to that information?"

"To feed my curiosity. I'm sure you're familiar with such an urge."

I clenched my jaw. Did I have another choice apart from telling her?

"All right," I breathed. "I've learnt about one potion in the library and gave it a try."

"There's no book about potions in the library. You ain't fooling me."

"I was in the city's library."

"The city doesn't have such books either."

Yes, it didn't. She didn't know there was a mysterious aisle in the library meant to be seen for the ones who searched, as the boy's spirit had claimed. Of course, the girl wouldn't buy a vague version of the story.

"You won't believe me if I tell you more."

"But I will," she assured me.

A moment of silence sank between us, but eventually, I spilled the beans about the boy's spirit to her. I told her he'd shown me the invisible shelves, leading me to the book that had saved my sister from her fate. But I said nothing about the boy's death. If she didn't ask how he'd died or who he was, there was no need to tell her that.

"Seems plausible," she acknowledged.

"What's your name, blackmailer?"

She clicked her tongue. "Clare."

With no goodbye, I pivoted on my heel, intent on resuming the task when she said, "Chase Holter will be looking for you."

My guts twisted. I didn't want to dwell on anything associated with him when it evoked the worst memories I wished I could erase from my mind entirely.

I glanced at her over my shoulder. "He won't."

I stepped forward, but apparently, she wasn't finished.

"But anything's possible. Chase had been a bachelor for quite a while and didn't look at a single girl until he saw you and became obsessed with you. He's a hunter, and he wouldn't miss a chance to hunt down some morph to save his fiancée."

"I am not his fiancée," I almost hissed but collected myself hastily. "Besides, he's not that stupid to step into morphs' lands."

"Is he?"

I didn't respond. I was aware of Chase's obsession with me, but he wouldn't risk his life to come here. He was not that dedicated to our relationship. He might have already found another girl to wed. Alise perhaps. She was an inferior version of my appearance. She would have *loved* to live my life.

Pushing away the thoughts about my past, I walked off to find a greenhouse, gather the vegetables Imogen had asked me to bring, and not think about Chase left in the Mortal Region.

I *tried* my best to chase thoughts about him away, but that night I had a nightmare where he conquered the place of a monster. And there was no

hero to protect me. Only me. An actress in my own play.

OceanofPDF.com

X

NIGHTMARES ABOUT CHASE hadn't ceased haunting my nights ever since Clare had mentioned the possibility of him coming here. But apart from my incessant nightmares, being morphs' maid wasn't as terrible as I'd predicted it'd be after Holland's warnings. I'd choose to serve them instead of being Chase's wife for the rest of my life if I had to again.

However, I remained alert. Although neither Asenah nor her cousins paid much attention to some servant, I still had to be prepared for anything. After all, something had happened to the former gardener whose disappearance everybody was silent about. When I'd asked Thea's and Imogen's separately about the former gardener, they had both dodged the question. All Imogen had said was that curiosity could bring me death. Again.

One night I refused to sleep as I couldn't deal with another nightmare. Instead, I found myself wandering around the mansion while everybody was asleep. I was aware of the morphs' heightened senses, their sensitive hearing in particular, so I didn't go anywhere close to their chambers.

I padded outside, only inhaling the smell of pine air put me at ease and sometimes chased the nightmares away.

At a snail's pace, I neared the end of the garden, stepping into the moonlit forest. I made sure not to head too far, as getting lost or being spotted by any morph, and getting myself murdered wasn't in my interest. Except for the flitting bat, I sighted no creature in the wild.

I paused, knowing I shouldn't venture any deeper, but when I was on the point of turning back, a gold light gleamed in my periphery.

I watched it as if hoping it would disappear, but it remained there, tempting me to investigate.

I had to head back. Even if the strange light was like a magnet drawing me in, calling me to proceed forward, I had to head back. I *must*.

But I didn't move.

Drawing in a breath, I surrendered to curiosity.

The light grew brighter the closer I got to it, and the night's light breeze brushed against my skin. I wrapped my arms around myself, but it didn't warm me when I was wearing a short-sleeved nightgown that wasn't made for night-time adventures.

As I halted before the hovering light, it didn't dazzle me, as I would have expected.

I had seen nothing like it before: the size of a melon yellow orb streaming soft light while levitating above the ground. What kind of creature was it?

"Shapeshifters of the empire turn into beasts..." The chorus of voices shifted from within the light in a fluid echo.

Entirely spellbound, I took another step further, looking for a source from where those words had come from, but there was only light.

"...but shall return to their true form when days last as long as nights."

Was the light the one who talked? But how was it possible?

But I was working for a queen who looked like a half-beast and half-human. Anything was possible. Something like a talking light orb should be the least staggering thing in these cursed lands.

"The meant to be, yet doomed to fall, shall bear them lost and found whose creation's blood shall be spilled once the longest night falls."

The voices swelled into a clamour, sending a gazillion of invisible, minuscule spiders crawling over my back.

By now, I believed I was dreaming or hallucinating. The latter seemed more plausible since I hadn't experienced a decent dream before. My nights were usually dreamless. Only recently, nightmares had signed a deal to trouble me.

"Only then, humanity may take over their shapes for life!"

The light orb vanished along with the voices, and deadly silence returned, leaving me flummoxed.

The meant to be, yet doomed to fall? Some creation's blood shall be spilled once the longest night falls? What was the purpose of all this? A trick to addle my already tired brain?

I needed to return to the mansion. That was all I was currently sure of.

But once I turned around, there was a wolf standing in front of me. A real dark-brown wolf. Not the ones I was familiar with, in the shape of a human. No.

A wild wolf.

The beast bared his teeth, and his polished fangs glinted in the moonlight.

I tried not to move so I wouldn't show that I feared him. "Good boy," I said.

Good boy? Wasn't there anything dumber you could have thought of to say, Elynn? I chided myself.

He proceeded forward, and I retreated a step. He snarled, advancing again.

My pounding heart was about to crawl out of my parched throat. I made to scream for help, but then I remembered I was in the Empire of Beasts. No one would come to my rescue, but the opposite. I would get slaughtered instead.

Run.

Listening to my instincts, I swivelled and began running where my eyes saw without throwing a single glance back.

I didn't need to assure myself if he was behind me as I could hear his steps threatening to reach me.

Turn right!

What?

Turn right!

This voice did not belong to me. Not sure why, but whoever had sent me a demand, I submitted to it. As I veered right, I was close to tripping over a branch, but spotted it just in time to overleap it. The rush of adrenaline pushed me to keep going.

I couldn't, however, run forever. I wasn't in the right physical shape for it. I was already panting, my heart flying, and cold air stinging my lungs. Wolf would catch me at some point. I had to hide. Climb on a tree...

A wave of panic coursed through me. It was impossible to detect a tree that wasn't a pine one. They weren't climbable.

I was doomed.

Keep running forward.

Here was that unrecognisable, demanding voice again.

Who are you?

No answer.

I must be having a bad dream. It was all too... surreal. It had to be a nightmare. But on the other hand, in nightmares, I couldn't stir but be

rooted to the spot, and running was out of the question, which was the opposite of what I was doing now.

As I thought my minutes were counted—not even minutes, but seconds—someone thought otherwise.

As if the miracle had fallen right from the heavens, the lone oak tree shone in a circle of pines.

I believed my eyes were deceiving me. There was no way... But after concentrating on one spot in the distance, the more real oak seemed to be.

I exerted myself to increase all my remaining speed, and with a heart slamming against my ribs, I lurched to a halt for a mere second to grab at the branch and climb onto it.

When I was little and fond of climbing trees, Mum used to warn me I would fall and break a bone someday, but I never had. Hopefully, it wouldn't be the case tonight, considering it'd been a while since I'd dared to claw my way to a tree's top.

My elbows were already on the branch when something sharp dug into my ankle. Grounding my teeth and perhaps committing a mistake of the Universe, I glanced back.

Wolf was gripping my ankle with his teeth.

This bloody wolf was about to eat me alive!

He was pulling me down. I held onto the branch as long as possible, although the death was already breathing down my neck. As I thought I'd be the wolf's late dinner, there came a yelp that didn't belong to me. I didn't feel anything on my ankle anymore except for the pain. I peeked to see why the wolf had let go of me. He was rolling on the grass as if trying to get rid of something on his fur.

What the...

But I couldn't gape like an owl to figure out what was wrong with my predator. I looked away and pulled myself up, despite the pain in my muscles while clenching my teeth. I heaved my other leg on the branch and hoisted myself up, but didn't linger for more than a second to climb on a higher one. The smell of my blood dripping down my ankle might be already attracting more beasts, but I couldn't care about that now. A retching sound below me made its way to my ears, but I didn't sate my curiosity by looking down this time.

I reached for the higher branch to lessen the chances of him catching me, but as I did, my foot slipped. I managed to hold on to the wood while my

legs were dangling in the air. The wolf would tear me into ribbons this time if I didn't push myself to move, despite my aching muscles.

Not letting the panic overwhelm me and refusing to give up, I hauled myself up, getting onto the other branch.

As I ensconced myself in a tree, I pulled the hems of the nightgown up to my shins. As predicted, blood was seeping through the bitten area.

I looked down at my attacker. The wolf was already staring at me. His copper eyes shimmering with wrath and... disgust. I recognised those eyes. They used to glance at me during dinner or lunch or breakfast once in a while.

I swallowed my fear of him and sucked in the air, releasing the hold of it with a shudder. The wolf turned around. Was he going to leave? Impossible.

But he *did* leave, and yet I wasn't relieved. Not even when he disappeared out of my sight. He might have gone to fetch his brother or the whole pack and wait for their meal to climb down for them to finish me if I wouldn't die from the blood loss or infection first.

There was something that the wolf had left behind. Blood on the grass. Had he been retching from it?

The blood glistened.

I winced.

Then it began to change.

I blinked twice. Three times. Mystified. This wasn't possible. Hallucinations blinded my perception. Wasn't that what happened from the loss of blood? As it couldn't be genuine what I was witnessing now.

Crimson transformed into yellow.

Once again, believing my eyes were playing tricks on me, I blinked, but nothing changed. My blood was yellow. Sparkling yellow. *Golden*.

The moonlight must be playing with lights and shadows, but I found myself doubting that theory.

It was golden. It turned from crimson into *golden*. And it began to boil, bubbles popping atop the liquid until it flamed up. My heart skipped a beat. I was going to die in the fire, which was going to spread across the forest...

But I didn't need to worry about that as the flame vanished together with the blood. All that was left was the scorched patch of grass.

I looked down at my bleeding ankle, anticipating golden blood, but it was dark red as it should be.

I placed my palms on the ankle to stem the bleeding. But it didn't stop anything, painting my hands with crimson instead.

Chase had once talked about surviving. I hadn't listened much about it, but the information must have been at the back of my mind to recall it at times like this.

I ripped off the hem of the nightdress and wrapped it around my injured ankle. Once I tied it into a knot, I clasped my wound tight. Then I started mumbling prayers of surviving until another day.

It wasn't safe to go back to the mansion. The wolf might return any minute. I had to wait until I was sure it'd be safe to go back. *If* I would ever be safe if I ever returned.

I shouldn't have gone into the forest.

Curiosity is what kills us humans, Imogen's wise words smacked me as an ironic reminder.

I'd been too caught up in finding out what was that light shining in the forest. And I hadn't found out at all who it was. I'd only heard a bundle of voices reciting words that were now stuck in my head.

I pressed my forehead to my knees, sobbing.

I'd handed myself to the hands of death. And it was all thanks to my curious nature.

XI

I HADN'T DIED. I was merely overreacting.

At dawn, somehow, I hobbled back to the mansion unnoticed. My leg ached, and the fabric tied around my ankle was blood-soaked.

I limped into the kitchen. Thank my lucky stars, there was not a soul inside. I poured water to damp my parched throat. Only then I got some to carry downstairs.

I descended into the servant quarters while supporting myself against the wall and slid into the tiny bathroom. I didn't close the door, which was a risk, but I'd rather be walked in on fixing a wound than being caved in. I put a glass on the edge of the cracked bathtub, hoisted my injured leg on it and unwrapped the bloody fabric. And as soon as I spilled cold water on the ankle, I released a sigh of satisfaction, closing my eyes for a second.

As I washed off the dried blood, I uncovered four deep fang-marks on my honey skin. Judging by how deep they were, they'd take a while to heal.

For the first time, I was thankful for the maid's floor-length dress covering the wound. It was pointless to take a nap because of all that had happened, I wouldn't be able to close my eyes.

The wolf had been either Fillan or Lupin. The dark-brown fur and copper eyes betrayed them. And if they'd recognised me... I didn't want to dwell on what might befall me. Would they finish their meal or do something else I had no idea about?

Walking around as if the wolf hadn't dug his fangs into my ankle a few hours ago was challenging. My heart was already racing once the time to serve breakfast arrived.

I breathed in; breathed out. I didn't utter a single word to anyone apart from exchanging hellos. Thea either didn't note my uncharacteristic behaviour, or she did but didn't say anything for one reason or another. Better for me. Nobody had to be aware of my latest venture.

As the guards opened the double doors, I stepped behind Thea and noticed one figure missing at the dining table right away. Fillan.

“Is your brother hungover again?” Asenah asked, hardly showing any interest.

I placed the plate with a silver cover before Lupin and uncovered it. Then I made my way to the door, eyes downcast.

“I don’t know.” Lupin’s voice was hoarse. “I haven’t seen him since we left the bar.”

“Perchance, he mistook the beds again?”

“Perhaps.” But there was a flavour of doubt in his tone.

“What happened to your leg?”

I went still. As I turned my head, Franz was staring at me, waiting for my answer. It was almost dinner time. I’d been growing confident that nobody would question my odd gait, and my nocturnal adventures would be only for me to remember, but Franz must have destroyed my hopes.

As I opened my mouth to lie, Imogen emerged out of the blue and shoved a tray with a covered plate into my hands. Stumbling back, I almost dropped it but gathered my balance fast.

“Carry this tae Fillan’s chamber,” she ordered.

My eyes widened. “W-what? N-no.”

Was Fillan back already? I’d hoped he was gone forever.

Oh, who was I trying to fool? My wishes never come true. Of course, he was back. And he was back to finish what he’d started.

“What do ye mean, no?” Her eyebrows knitted. “Do yer job, lassie.” And she walked off.

I scanned the kitchen in search of Thea.

“Thea’s helping in th’ greenhouse,” Imogen informed.

With a frown, I pivoted on my heel and left the kitchen. But before I ascended the stairs, I propped my head against the wall and endeavoured to breathe to calm my pounding heart.

I would only have to step into his bedroom, place a tray on the bedside table and depart. I would be all right. But after the night’s events, it was doubtful I would get out of his room with no harm.

I headed to the third floor and reached his chamber. The doors were already standing ajar, and voices were coming from the room.

“And he came back feeling like this?” an unfamiliar voice of a man spoke.

“Yes,” Asenah answered.

I slipped into the room, keeping my gaze low to my feet. I was invisible after Thea had taught me the wonders of walking like a mouse. Covertly, I took a peek at morphs. Asenah and Lupin stood at the foot of Fillan’s bed. Next to the bed was another morph in sparrow’s form, and Fillan was lying under the covers. For a split second, I thought he wasn’t breathing, but the sheets were barely rising. Fillan seemed... half-dead.

I set down a tray on the bedside table, shooting a furtive glance at the sparrow, who seemed to play the physician’s role. Then I hurried out of the room but didn’t leave the corridor yet.

I hid behind the opened door and leaned my back against the wall where no one could spot an eavesdropping maid.

“Alcohol poisoning isn’t the case here. Morphs can handle alcohol overdose extremely well,” the physician informed.

Retching sounds followed, no doubt belonging to Fillan.

“Do you recall trying something you aren’t likely to eat, my lord?” the physician asked.

“No,” Fillan mumbled.

“Not another creature, by any chance?”

“I said...”—another sound of throwing up—“No.”

“Hmm,” the physician hummed. “In most cases, dryads, Ascended Sorceresses and enchanter’s blood cause poisoning. This appears like poisoning, my lord.”

“He might have eaten a dryad, Mr Willbourn,” Asenah intervened. “Those troublesome creatures are all over the forest. When my cousin’s strong suit isn’t wisdom, precisely when he is intoxicated, he might have eaten one.”

“If that’s what it is, dryad’s poison will get out of his body in a matter of days. It depends on how much he ate of it,” Mr Willbourn said. “But we can’t disregard the possibility of enchanter’s blood, which could cause much worse—”

“Enchanters can’t get into this land unnoticed, Mr Willbourn,” Asenah interrupted. “Ascended Sorceresses are also out of the question. They all have sacrificed themselves for the Spell, and the un-ascended ones are in Casidiarn. I’m confident he ate a dryad.”

I’d heard of Ascended Witches, but not Sorceresses. Weren’t they the same, just called differently? Ascended Witches were full of wickedness in

their hearts, unlike normal witches. To become Ascended was a complicated ritual of which there was no further information.

But the sacrifice for some unknown Spell was something brand new to me. What Spell, and why was I hearing it for the first time ever?

“Our birthday is in two weeks. He’ll be fine by then, right, Mr Willbourn?” Lupin inquired, concerned.

“I’m certain he will be.”

As the physician moved on to a less interesting topic, which was how to treat Fillan from a dryad’s poison, I left.

It wasn’t a dryad, however, who’d made him vomit. It was me.

A hunch whispered that my blood had played a significant part in this. I hadn’t been dreaming or hallucinating when I’d witnessed my blood turning golden and then flaring up, disappearing after. I couldn’t comprehend what had caused my blood to do the impossible, but as the light reflected off my bracelet, a theory came to mind.

The same bracelet had burnt me before I turned into Gen’s lookalike. I had to remove it, as the pain was unbearable. It’d burned me later in the empire, but it had never done such a thing before the Summer Solstice. Perhaps the bracelet was not only an accessory but...

I didn’t have an inkling of what the powers of this bracelet were, but something was definitely up with it.

The dinner time passed, and as always, I was left alone with Imogen in the kitchen area. I had many questions to ask her, but none of them left my mouth.

“Why have ye been dragging yer shank all day?” Imogen asked.

Bloody hells.

I’d expected this question now. Franz had asked me that before, but I’d been lucky to avoid the answer, which would be harder to do with Imogen.

I summoned my acting skills. “What happened to my leg? Did I hear it right?”

“Yes,” she said, deadly serious, “ye did.”

I winced. “Nothing happened.”

My tone of voice was on the spot. There was no way she was—

“Don’t lie, lassie,” she said. “A’ve seen ye limping th’ whole day.”

I took an annoyed sigh. “I fell off the stairs. Now it hurts.”

Imogen stared at me for a while. Probably deliberating whether I was telling the truth, reminding me of Mum. My heart twisted.

At last, Imogen's sceptical gaze moved to the sink, and she resumed scrubbing the dishes without questioning about my change of walking style anymore.

Either she believed me or saw no purpose to extract the truth out of me.

"What do you know about Ascended Sorceresses and Witches?" I inquired, since I'd figured she wouldn't lecture me on this question. "Or are they one and the same?"

She glanced at me. "Why do ye ask?"

I shrugged carelessly, attempting not to expose that I'd once again eavesdropped on something I shouldn't have. "It's not much written about them back home."

"That's because such information is transmitted from generation tae generation o' witches an' sorceresses, which, by the by, are not one an' th' same."

"So you don't know anything?"

"Weel." She dragged in a breath. "Sorceresses ur followers of th' Universe while witches serve the Gods. Once they're born, thay don't serve anybody, unless they choose to ascend tae gain all th' immeasurable power. Ascended Sorcerers, especially if thay come from th' powerful bloodline, with the Universe's blessing are Gods compared tae morphs' abilities."

"And Ascended Witches are blessed by Gods?"

She nodded. "That's right."

I dried the glass while I composed myself for another inquiry. "For what spell did Ascended Sorceresses sacrifice themselves?"

I placed the glass back into its place while Imogen remained silent. Another sigh left her as she handed me a clean glass to dry. "I see, human lands still haven't figured it out."

I glanced at her quizzically. "Haven't figured out what?"

"Before th' sixteen-year-olds' offering started, Ascended Sorceresses' coven had sacrificed themselves tae create the Spell that now protects the Mortal Region from unwanted visitors. No magic has been working there ever since. This way, morphs cannot step in th' Mortal Region without getting harmed."

I halted my movements, perplexity skidding through me. "If no morph could step into the Mortal Region, then sixteen-year-olds at the Summer

Solstice are offered for no reason at all,” I thought aloud. “The threat that if there’s no offering, morphs will come and kill us is an absolute lie.”

Imogen nodded.

I was an ounce close to crushing the glass. If not for Imogen taking it from my hand, I would have broken it. The bracelet was already heating my skin as I curled my hands into fists.

They had tricked us.

“Ur ye all right, lassie?”

I didn’t reply, but exhaled the heat of rage swimming through my blood and unclenched my fists. When the burning on my wrist lessened, I looked at concerned Imogen. “But how is it possible for humans to forget about the sacrifice?”

“They can’t forget what they don’t know.” Imogen put a glass in its place and closed the doors. She snatched a fresh towel and leaned against the counter, wiping her hands. “It was the sorceresses’ mistake. Thay didn’t tell anyone about this. Sorceresses are... secretive and not the ones tae be likely tae cooperate with humans. Most of thair families were mutilated by morphs. I assume, thay thought it was wiser not tae tell a living soul about it tae protect thair other generations.”

“But how did morphs learn about the sacrifice in the first place?”

“How do ye know thay know about the sacrifice?”

Her suspicious gaze was bored into mine as I answered in a steady voice, “It’s not hard to guess. They must be aware of it since no morph has ever stepped into our lands. At least it isn’t noted in the records.”

She observed me with a sceptical eye. I didn’t betray anything. Her expression softened. “I believe ye already know the answer. Morphs actually travelled tae the Mortal Region, but when they didn’t return, it wasn’t hard fer th’ rest tae realise that something was wrong. Morphs had thair own human witches—traitors,” she spat the last word in revulsion. “While being there, thay found out about th’ sacrifice, an’ that magic doesn’t work in human lands. Then thay reported it tae morphs.”

My jaw clenched.

“Moreover, morphs decided to pay back the sorceresses an’ invented the sixteen-year-olds offering. Of course, their witches helped to implement it. Only human witches an’ sorceresses can step into th’ Mortal Region despite thair non-functional powers. But they’ve learnt how tae create a portal and the rest ye know.”

I frowned. "And that's why morphs need humans? To pay back the dead sorceresses because they can't get into the Mortal Region anymore? When they have already slaughtered their families?"

"Yes, and no," Imogen answered. "Four decades ago, morphs weren't the way they're now. They were like us, humans, but only with a power of shapeshifting, more acute senses and longer life span."

"They weren't animals?"

"They *could* turn into animals, but they could also be in their human form if they preferred it that way."

I couldn't believe my ears. Had I been living under a rock this whole time? I hadn't known what morphs looked like before coming here. I hadn't known about the sorceresses' sacrifice until I'd arrived here as well. What were other things I had absolutely no idea about? That no human knew?

"What happened to make them the way they are now, then?"

Imogen inhaled and let out a fatiguing sigh. Slight remorse gnawed at my chest for keeping her here when she was tired, but I needed to know. Besides, she didn't complain. "After feline morphs attacked sorceresses' village and burned it, sorceresses decided to do something about it. A curse was what they thought of.

"Curse's terms are that morphs stay as beasts forever, only at the Spring and Autumn Equinoxes they can turn back into their true form, but the rest of the year they stay as beasts."

Shapeshifters of the empire turn into beasts but shall return to their true form when days last as long as nights...

It wasn't some nonsense words coming from the strange light bulb creature. It was a whole curse.

Now I understood everything since my first experience at morphs' dinner. Asenah had pointed out they were all looking horrible when Lupin claimed Kayla had looked unappealing at the Spring Equinox as well. One of the two days in the year when all the morphs could shapeshift back into their real forms.

"But why did morphs attack the village in the first place? Was there a reason behind their attack?"

"I don't know. For centuries there's been hostility between sorceresses and morphs. That must have been the reason."

Morphs were brutal creatures. There had been no doubts before, but now... after learning this...

They'd killed innocent people, they—

That boy's spirit from the library... He said he hadn't remembered how he'd died. Only had told me no one had seen him for forty years. His throat was slashed. Perhaps he was one of the village's victims. All the pieces connected, after all. If it was the case, morphs had slaughtered an innocent boy, and not just him. Morphs were monsters. They didn't deserve the curse. The curse was a sign of mercy when what the sorceresses should have done instead was to obliterate morphs for massacring their kin.

If only I had a golden knife—no matter that I got shivers being close to a weapon made of gold—I'd go upstairs and kill them in their sleep. First, I'd begin with Fillan, then the rest.

“But how do you know any of this, Imogen?”

The end of her lip curved into a knowing smile. “A've been servin' morphs for over a decade now. I've heard a lot since then.”

If only I could somehow warn humans about this, how many lives would be saved! But there was nothing I could do. I was stuck here. Even if I tried to flee, I wouldn't survive a day in the wilderness without the necessary survival skills.

But I could always pour my blood into their glasses of wine...

That night I schemed how I could make morphs suffer, but drowsiness overtook me, and I fell into a deep, tranquil slumber.

XII

THEA AND I HAD TO weed the greenhouse, working like horses. Well, Thea was while I was cursing under my breath because of the dirt stuck under my nails. Thea seemed like she was content with it, humming a tune I could easily play on the piano if I had one.

Her speed was incomparable to mine. In less than an hour, half of the greenhouse had been weeded. Thea was already watering the plants while I was still uprooting weeds from my side of the greenhouse.

I didn't have a green thumb. I wasn't capable of doing any labour. I could hardly, however, trouble myself with my lack of skills at the moment. I'd become irritated only because I had to do gardening. It was Clare's job, not ours. Perhaps I shouldn't be complaining when the garden was massive, and Clare was the only one taking care of it, but such a thought didn't end my vexation.

"Do you miss your family?" I asked since it'd been silent long enough apart from Thea's humming, of course.

Thea ceased to hum and tilted her head in my direction. She put a loose strand behind her ear. "I try not to think about them too often."

I stopped pulling the weeds. "Me, too." I rose to my feet and walked to get some water. Lifting the canteen, I opened the cork and took a few thirsty gulps. "I have two young—older siblings. I miss them every day."

"I have five older brothers."

"That's a lot of... brothers."

She nodded. "They took care of Mother and me while Father liked to have a bottle or two..." Thea's chin dipped as she sighed, resuming to water the plants. "He used to abuse Mother, and one day my eldest brother, Drake, tried to stop our father from hitting her once again and... accidentally killed him."

My eyebrows rose in astonishment.

She drew in a breath, as if to compose herself. "I miss my brothers and mother dearly, but not my father. He shall burn in three hells," she muttered

in slight hatred. “What about your family?” She raised her head. A weak smile, just like her voice, was plastered on her face.

I debated whether to lie that my family was just as flawed as hers or not. But in the end, I knew I couldn’t lie. She was honest with me; I was prompted to be honest, too, regardless of my family being perfect compared to hers.

“My parents fell in love at a young age, when they were only kids,” I began. “They knew they’d spend the rest of their lives with each other all along. Once they got married, they wanted to have a child, but they tried, and every attempt was unfortunate.”

From here, I had to alter the story as I was supposed to be the youngest child. Meanwhile, Thea stared at me with curiosity.

“But after years of trying, my sister, Elynn, was born. My parents couldn’t have been happier, couldn’t have asked for another miracle, but then my brother made an entrance into this world, me following him a year later.

“They called us three the best miracles that had ever happened to them.” I took another sip of water. “My parents weren’t very pious, but after all those miracles, they celebrated the Spring Equinox for the first time. They travelled to the town hall to offer a dead doe to the Gods as gratitude for their kindness.

“My dad was a fisher. Five years ago, he didn’t return from his daily fishing. He’d died somewhere in the ocean.” I pressed my lips into a thin line as the shadows of the memory slid through me. “It’s been my mother, sister, brother and me since then.”

“I’m so sorry,” Thea said.

“It’s all right.” I managed an assuring smile. “I made peace with it a long time ago.”

In fact, not only I’d made peace with my father’s death, but that I’d be serving morphs for the rest of my life. Sometimes, when I thought deeper, I couldn’t help but wonder how I managed to stay this strong?

“Once, my mother told me that what was dead never truly dies,” Thea declared. “All the dead return as spirits two days before the Summer Solstice.”

I nodded. “I’ve heard about that, too.”

But I didn’t tell her I’d seen one before I was offered to the Empire of Beasts.

“I think I saw one once,” she said. “It was the spirit of my father.”

She placed an empty watering can by the entrance. “He tried to apologise for what he’d done. I thought I was dreaming, but it was real. He asked for my forgiveness, but I didn’t give him one. I... I couldn’t.”

“It’s understandable.”

She looked down at her toes and then tilted her head to the left side of the greenhouse. More than half of the ground was full of weeds, waiting to be uprooted by me. “You should finish this.” She gestured with her hand at the weedy side.

I sighed. “Well, I’m trying.”

As she sent me a half-smile, she walked off the greenhouse, leaving me here to finish the work I was tasked to complete today by Jill. So far, I hadn’t seen the end of it.

I got back to pulling out the troublesome weeds, working what seemed like hours, grunting every once in a while.

“Didn’t your father fisherman teach you how to work faster?”

Perfect. The last thing I needed right now was her.

“It’s your job, not mine,” I retorted, not bothering to even glance at her.

“But don’t you remember what such a wise woman Holland said?” Her voice was dripping with sarcasm. “That we won’t be doing the main work all the time? We’ll have other labour to do as well?”

If she’d come to spar with me verbally, she was wasting her time.

“Mind your own business, Clare.”

Silence enveloped the greenhouse, and I thought she’d left, but I couldn’t have been more wrong.

“It’s truly bizarre to see a girl who had been living in the forest for most of her life turning out to be a snail at chores.”

Clenching my jaw, I propped my forearms on my knees and tossed a glance over my shoulder. Clare was leaning against the glass while picking the dirt from under her nails.

“Don’t you have work to do other than aggravate me?”

“My work is being done by you. I came to watch,” she revealed. “Troubling you is the most fun I’ve got here.”

At least she was honest.

“Do you have any friends, Clare?”

“No.”

I imitated one of her many wry grins. “Hmm. Shocking.”

Clare frowned at me but then huffed, focusing on her nails. "I don't waste my time on people who don't deserve it, unlike you, Startel."

I knew what she had in mind, and it didn't bring the best feelings. I hadn't thought about Alise with Irisa for a long time. Why should I when they weren't my real friends? Gossiping behind my back? Spreading lies I had no idea about?

Pretending as if Clare didn't exist, I resumed working or otherwise, I'd never leave this greenhouse.

"Your ankle seems to be healing pretty fast."

I stiffened.

How was she acquainted with the state of my ankle? I hadn't run into her while I was hobbling.

My head whipped over my shoulder. "How do you know?"

Clare didn't even deign to glimpse at me as she said, "Just a lucky guess."

"You couldn't have possibly guessed that."

"Perhaps I could, perhaps I couldn't, but does it matter?" Her notorious wry smile graced her full lips. "You won't find out how I've learnt about Fillan's bite and that your blood poisoned him either."

I studied her without bothering to mask a suspicion. By now, I was one hundred per cent sure I wasn't the only one hiding something.

"My blood didn't poison him." I attempted to lie, even if she and I knew better. My blood had poisoned him, thanks to the bracelet.

She scoffed. "Save your lies for others. You'll need to try harder than that to convince me."

"All right, I won't try, but at least be less loud while you're spilling out things the ear of a morph shouldn't catch," I snapped quietly.

"Don't worry. Nobody's listening. Fillan has been in an agonizing state for the past five days, his brother Lupin somewhere in the city, and Asenah has gone on a trip. Only we, humans, are left here." I didn't ask how she knew all of this, as she wouldn't bother to answer me anyway. "If you want to get out tonight for a while, it will be the best time to do so. No wolf will bite you this time."

She pushed off the glass, spun on her heel and left.

With a shake of my head, I carried on with rooting out those pesky weeds.

OceanofPDF.com

XIII

THE HALF-MOON swapped places with the sun, reigning over the starry sky in all its magnificence. It cast only a faint light upon the ground, unlike the full moon that had illuminated the darkest nooks of the forest the night I was attacked.

However, the lack of light didn't deter me from taking an amble through the garden.

I carried a sketchbook I'd made by tying parchments together and a pencil with an eraser I'd borrowed from the study room with the intention never to return them. I'd figured nobody would miss them as morphs' rooms were abundant with stuff they couldn't care less about. And weeks had already passed, nobody had noticed. Only to me, those three objects were my prized possession, my only escape in this beastly place. Although I'd experienced a great disappointment that I couldn't find anything to colour my designs with.

My ankle had healed. I could walk as well as before the bite, but the marks of the wolf's fangs remained as a permanent reminder of my encounter with Fillan. Scars, which would always remind me of the night's adventure I was reckless to take.

I didn't go further than the beginning of the forest. I'd learnt my lesson. Although Fillan was still confined to his bed, and the other two were gone, the forest wasn't safe for humans.

I sat down on the bench and drew up my legs, resting the sketchbook on my knees. As I opened the sketchbook's blank page, I began drawing the woman's body outline. Once I had a figure to work with, I surrendered to my imagination and sketched a new design of one of many dresses and gowns I had drawn over my lifetime.

Dresses and gowns I'd never be able to sew, let alone wear.

No matter how absorbed I was in sketching, the odd silence, apart from the sound of graphite against the paper, unsettled me. I'd noticed it before at the rainforest, but had never truly acknowledged how quiet it was in the Realm of Bones as well.

In the Mortal Region, the forest was always full of noises. Owls hooting, cicadas caterwauling, crickets chirping in harmony once the sun went down every night. The silence here was almost ominous. No animal, no insect, no bird in sight. I hadn't paid attention to such a minor detail the night I'd been attacked since all my focus was drawn to the light orb creature reciting the words of the four-decade-old curse. And now, when I did pay attention, I was tempted to go back to the mansion.

But then someone wept somewhere behind me.

I was startled at first, but didn't dare to look to see who it was. The last time I allowed curiosity to get the better of me, I almost became a wolf's late-night snack but got away with a scar on my ankle instead. I wouldn't repeat the same mistake twice.

Choosing to ignore it, I resumed sketching, but then another, a louder cry accompanied the previous one seconds later, tearing my focus off my work. Sighing, I set the materials down on the bench, rose to my knees and squinted into the dark. Something twitched at the end of the garden, by the neatly cut shrub.

It was a short figure which didn't seem either human or a morph. Dissimilar size of leafy branches protruded from his head, and his ears were pointy. The entire body of the strange creature reminded me of a tree. A tree clad in a tunic of leaves.

I recognised the creature from the drawings and descriptions in the fairy tales. It was a forest nymph, a dryad.

As I stood up, I walked about the bench, interested in taking a closer look at the little weeping dryad.

Dryads weren't something one ought to be afraid of. They weren't dangerous. I needn't fear them, especially not a dryad who was merely a child.

As I took another step further, somehow dryad heard me. He stifled his cries, his wooden bottom lip quivering as his eyes shifted up at me. White-blue, as radiant as a comet.

"P-please don't h-hurt me," he stumbled on his words, striking like a bunny cornered by a fox.

I nearly laughed. A dryad was frightened of me. Me! But I restrained myself, for it would be unsuitable, let alone rude, to laugh.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said gently, not to scare him away.

But he trembled while backing a step away. "I-I don't believe you."

I didn't move any closer, confident that such a choice of mine would only frighten him more than he was already.

What was a dryad doing in such a dangerous zone anyway? Perhaps I should leave him be, but even if curiosity could doom me someday, it wasn't possible to put it on a leash. Being curious was a vital part of me.

"I swear by all the six Gods that I won't hurt you," I tried again.

As expected, he was hesitant. "Promise?"

I nodded. "Promise."

He looked away, wrapping his hands around his tiny frame.

"What are you doing here?" I took a half-step towards him, and he didn't back away. I assumed he trusted me by now or didn't notice decreased space between us. "It's not safe for you here."

Dryad sobbed aloud, which got me glimpsing at the mansion. The wolf with sensitive hearing was sleeping there. I didn't know what state of health Fillan was in, but he must have gotten better. If he decided to get out of his cosy chambers into the garden—

"I'm lost," he cried.

I turned my head back to him. "Lost?"

He nodded. "I... I don't know where to go. My p-parents are somewhere in the forest." He looked down. "I don't know where." And then he exploded into another set of tears.

I took two full steps towards him. Dryad was smaller than me. His height barely reached my chest. I extended my hand to comfort him, but my hand stopped short in mid-air before my fingers grazed him. He was like an animated tree. Did I truly want to touch that?

I pressed the hanging hand to my thigh. "How did you get lost?"

"T-there w-was a light," he stammered through the snivels. "I-I wanted to catch it, but I'd gone too far."

Was he talking about the same light orb I'd had an encounter with recently? The same one that had almost sentenced me to death?

"You'll die if you stay here."

Perhaps he wouldn't, but if someone from morphs detected another creature in their land, the last thing they would do was to invite him for some harmless cup of tea.

"I... I don't know where to go." A sob left him. Quite a loud one than I'd have preferred.

“There’s a morph in the mansion,” I warned him. “You can’t stay here. Crying.”

Dryad gazed at me hopelessly. His bottom lip stopped trembling, and something else shone in those unearthly eyes. Not desperation, not misery, but as if a realisation. “You understand me.”

“Of course, I understand you.”

A faint smile appeared on his face. “You understand *our* language.”

“What?”

“You can help me.” I frowned, and he specified, “Help find my parents.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

His smile faded, as if it had never been there before. His eyes returned to the watery state, and he let out another sob. “I-I don’t know.”

He covered his face with his wooden palms—fingers like sticks with tiny leaves replacing nails—and burst into tears again. At least he was quiet this time.

I should go back to the mansion. It was pretty late. But another voice within me whispered otherwise. It told me not to leave the poor dryads’ youngling all by himself, only for morphs to find and do Gods knew what to him.

My inner voice was a fool. He’d got lost. There was nothing I could do to help him.

But I tarried, observing the tearful, pitiful dryad. His tiny shoulders shook with each sob as his face was masked with his aquiver fingers.

Oh, bloody hell. I’m so going to regret this. “You couldn’t have gone too far from them.”

Dryad peeped through the gaps of his fingers.

“I’ll try to help you find them,” I said.

But despite my unfaltering voice and assuring smile, I felt anything but confident of my decision, which could only position me in another danger. One I might not be lucky to survive this time.

The deeper we went into the forest, the more my brain nagged me to turn back and return to the mansion. But my body moved regardless.

I must find dryads. Any dryads except for the one who was dragging his feet beside me.

At least he’d stopped crying.

But how was I supposed to find a dryad? It wasn't that they were seldom, which they weren't. They were only hard to find—timid creatures. But I'd assumed their lost child would make them emerge, eventually. However, the time passed, and there was nothing else apart from dryad's and my footsteps shuffling through the silent forest.

He craned his head at me. "What's your name?"

"Elynn."

After a sound left my mouth, it dawned on me that I'd told him my real name. Panic hooded my nerves, but it faded in a fracture of time. There was no point in being apprehensive. A dryad wouldn't spill my secrets.

"It's an honour to meet you, Elynn." He smiled tentatively. "I'm Juniper."

We continued to stroll through the forest in silence until I succumbed to my swelling curiosity. "You said I understand you as if I shouldn't. Then how is it possible?"

"I don't know."

"What *do* you know?"

Juniper stopped, recoiling slightly at the harshness of my tone as fright entered his face.

My expression softened. "I'm sorry."

His gaze shifted down. No word left his mouth or mine again as we continued walking.

This was pointless. We would never find his parents. Juniper would have to cope with the fact he'd forever be a lost child.

He halted, and I gave him a puzzled look. "Why did you—"

Something slimy seized my uninjured ankle and yanked me down from behind before I saw what it was. I dropped flat, banging my forehead on the solid ground.

"O-ow..."

The pain robbed me of my senses. I might have cracked my skull. But despite being in one hell of a lot of pain, I forced myself to lift my chin. Tears made it difficult to make out anything in the semi-dark forest. I tried to stand up, but something holding me by my ankle didn't let me. Roots... Yes, *roots* slithered around my wrists like thin, endless snakes, impeding my further movements.

I had no power to help myself in any way when roots held me captive. I could already hear a bell of grim death chiming above me. I'd known it

would be a terrible idea to pose as a hero as all that I'd earned from it was nothing but pain, possible concussion and then death. And I wasn't sure if I was ready to face it.

No, I was sure. I was *sure* I wasn't ready to *die*.

Then why did you go into the forest, Elynn? My inner voice inquired mockingly.

I knew the answer, and if I could, I would spit on my kind heart and beg my brain for forgiveness.

As probably another root wrapped around my scarred ankle, I was lifted off the ground. In a sharp motion, the roots jerked me back and tied me to something rigid. As I glimpsed over my shoulder, I faced the tree's trunk.

Only then it occurred to me that someone was speaking to me.

"You kidnapped our child," someone hissed somewhere close to me.

I searched for the source from which the voice had come, but didn't see anything. The forest was... empty. Only pines tottered lightly as a crisp breeze brushed against my broken out in beads skin.

"You're going to suffer by attempting to end our child's life," another hiss, but much deeper than the previous one came. "You shall be torn limb from limb."

Were those creatures who were threatening me invisible? I squinted. Was that a little whirl of pine needles in the distance?

Roots on both my wrists and ankles tightened, and little by little, they began pulling them off my body. More tears slid down my cheeks. I was about to beg for my life when a pleading voice beat me. "Mom, Dad, stop!"

"You shall become a cripple, and may morphs eat you alive," the male growled.

"Dad, please," Juniper's voice begged. "S-she helped me. S-she helped me f-find you."

The wind intensified and in front of me materialised a male whose appearance was almost the same as Juniper's, but he was taller and more muscular and more ancient. Behind him, a few steps away, a female was holding a little boy. A two-part dress of leaves adorned with flowers glided down her wooden legs. Her husband, or whoever he was to her in the nymphs' world, was also leaf-clad.

"Dad!" Juniper screamed at the top of his lungs.

At last, I didn't feel the tearing pain anymore, apart from the itchiness where my appendages connected to my body. However, roots seemed to

refuse to leave, lingering on my wrists and ankles.

The male dryad looked at his son, whose eyes were covered in tears. “S-she did nothing wrong. S-she saved me. Without her, I wouldn’t have come here and f-found you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, sweetie.” The female dryad caressed his wooden cheek. “Their kind is a foe to us.”

“N-no.” He shook his head vehemently. “I saw a glosse and went after it. That’s how I got lost. Nobody kidnapped me. I came across some garden, and she saw me. She understood me and went into the forest to help me find you. Elynn did nothing wrong. She *helped* me.”

The female dryad’s green, shiny eyes shot to me. They were burning for a second but calmed down incredibly fast and wandered to her male. “She isn’t a villain,” she claimed in earnest.

The male dryad was hesitant. He turned to me, his countenance unreadable as the roots carefully landed me on the ground. They slipped off my ankles and wrists, disappearing deep into the earth. I watched in awe.

Dryads could manipulate plants. They were like one. I knew that but had forgotten about their powerful ability when the death had blinded my thoughts.

Abruptly, weakness struck me, making my knees to buckle. I was about to collapse when a male dryad’s wooden hand clutched my arm, keeping me steady on my feet. His skin felt strange. Not only was it firm as it should be, but warm, unlike a tree.

He stared at me with the same eyes as the little dryad’s. Blinding white-blue. “You saved my son’s life.” His voice came out genuinely soft and reflected his eyes that had been cruel only a few seconds ago.

I didn’t manage to utter a word or make any sound, for that matter. I continued to be wary and stupefied by... everything.

“She doesn’t understand you, Nash,” the female dryad said.

I opened my mouth to object, but the boy was faster than me. “She understands,” he assured, rubbing the tears off his eyes.

The female glanced at him, astounded. Juniper shrugged and gripped into her skirt.

“Whether you comprehend us or not,” Nash addressed me, and my focus returned to him. “We are in debt for bringing back our son and hurting you. Forever.”

All I did was stare at him, unable to produce a single sound. I might have lost my voice.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely, and let go of me. I leaned against the tree so I wouldn’t fall.

The male dryad went over to Juniper, whereas a female approached me with an elegant gait, as if a light wind carried her towards me. She studied me, and as she was about to stroke my most likely injured face, I pulled away. While her hand was hovering, a benevolent smile curved her lips. “You have the right to be afraid,” she noted unsuccessfully, for I felt as alert as before. “But your face must be treated unless you want to walk with scars?”

I’d figured my face to obtain some nicks from being kicked to the rock-hard ground covered with pine needles. It was a miracle I hadn’t lost my consciousness and could still think with clarity, but would that last when the headache was getting worse?

However, I didn’t want scars. I didn’t want any pain in the first place. Was this female dryad going to help me with it? Doubtful. Still, I shook my head.

“So I supposed.”

With that said, my body began to relax. I couldn’t understand whether it was her voice that turned angel-like all of a sudden or something else, which got me feeling less strained and dazed.

“Can I touch your face?”

I nodded.

Once her fingers touched my cheek, the pain disappeared before I could note the ebbing process. The headache was also gone, and I felt as much as intact as before the incident. I hadn’t been aware there was wind around us until she backed away, and a warm breeze embracing my bare parts vanished.

“Please, accept our apologies.” She bowed her head, the gesture almost reverent. “For the damage.” She looked at me one last time before she gracefully spun to her family and returned to them. The male dryad was resting his hand on the boy’s shoulder when they all turned away at the same time.

“Wait!” I exclaimed.

Somehow, I’d found my voice.

The family came to a halt and glanced at me over their wooden shoulders.

“I don’t know my way back.”

The dryad lady gave me an amiable smile. “The trees will show you.”

The cocoon of wind intermingled with pine spikes rose from the ground in a whirl. And once it vanished, the dryad family was gone, too.

OceanofPDF.com

XIV

WHEN I WAS heading to the kitchen, I almost shoved the door in one girl's face.

"Oh, sorry," I said.

She mumbled something, but it went past my ears when the kitchen's staff had my attention.

They were always working like bees, but today their fussiness was at a brand new level.

Thea walked in, and as if she read the hanging question, she answered without needing to ask. "Princesses from realms of talons and woods are visiting for a few days."

"How great," I muttered. "More morphs to be aware of."

At least my sarcasm made her smile.

"Thea an' Gen, please stop your chatters an' come tae help."

Imogen was standing before the cooker, stirring the pot with a wooden spoon while the other hand was planted on her hip.

Thea and I exchanged glances—mine was irritated, hers was soft-hearted. After sending me a small smile, she approached Imogen, asking politely what she could help her with.

I copied her moves, but Imogen pointed at the unoccupied counter with her pinkie before my mouth could open. A few vegetables—which I'd brought from the greenhouse this morning—were set on it.

I hadn't slept tonight since I had a long night helping a dryad boy to find his parents, only to be accused and stricken for even bothering. Even if dryads had apologised and trees had guided me back to the mansion, the damage had been done. I would never step into those woods again. This time I was sure with all my heart.

I was worn out and so over this—

"Chop, chop," Imogen prompted.

I zoomed back to the present, back to my problem with vegetables that were only menacing to expose me.

The thing was... I didn't know how to chop.

My hesitation did not elude Imogen's already suspicious gaze. She extended me a sharp knife. I dropped my wary eyes to the tool that could easily be turned into a weapon. "Ye know how tae cook an' bake. Show off yer chopping skills, lassie."

I made to protest, but even if I wanted to, I couldn't. I was taking Gen's place. Nobody had to become suspicious to dig deeper and find out my secret, apart from Clare, of course, who had figured me out, seemingly, from a single look at me.

Compressing my lips into a thin line, I took a sharp knife by its hilt. I shifted towards the counter, took a cutting board and put it down. As I picked a tomato and placed it on the board, I stared at it intensively.

It couldn't be *that* hard to cut a tomato. *Just position a blade and press the tomato until it reaches the cutting board.*

I endeavoured to do just that and learnt it wasn't as hard as I'd thought it'd be. But it didn't mean I was enjoying it. Every cut came with an effort, and beads of perspiration had already collected atop my brow. The slices of tomato had to turn out to be perfect. Masterpieces. I wasn't aware how long it'd taken for me to chop a single tomato into neat slices. Certainly longer than it should have.

"Oh, dear heavens! What are ye doin'?"

Imogen took a knife from me, and I stepped back. "Slicing a... tomato?"

She huffed out a laugh. "A turtle would slice a tomato quicker than ye, lassie."

I didn't doubt her. I could wager a turtle would be better at everything that involved labour and cooking matters than I would ever be.

"Move, I'll do it myself."

I stepped aside, giving her plenty of space.

"Go stir th' pot," she ordered.

I approached the cooker, took a spoon and started stirring whatever sauce was inside the pot.

"Mix 'til it heats."

She sensed something was off, for she gave me a suspicious glance every now and then. Perhaps she was questioning if I was who I claimed myself to be. But she was silent, didn't ask anything. Too many ears were in the kitchen.

By the time the food was finished, Thea, Jill, other maids and I took our trays with desserts and headed to the grand dining room.

Double wooden doors opened in front of us. Thea was going first, as usual, the rest behind.

“How’s our abode, Fawne?” Asenah’s voice reached me as soon as I walked in. “It’s your first time here, isn’t it?”

From the corner of my eye, I saw two new individuals sitting at the table.

One girl with a yellow beak appeared quite hideous to my eye. Her whole face was eagle-like except for the part of the pale-blue eyes and snowy hair, which almost matched her fur, fixed into a coronet. She was the first morph female whose animal features didn’t get along with human ones. She was... a great disaster.

The other princess’s appearance was also ridiculous in her accursed form, but she looked less ugly than the other one. Her chestnut-brown hair was combed in the elaborate updo, and large ears akin to a deer stuck out of her scalp.

“It is,” the deer morph agreed. Asenah had mentioned her name. Fawne. “Your mansion is extraordinary, Your Grace.”

Jill put a plate before Asenah. Apart from Asenah and two princesses in the room, Lupin quietly sipped the wine, whereas Fillan was nowhere to be seen.

I placed the appetiser before Lupin and walked over to the wall.

Jill and Thea joined me while the other two left the room. There was another plate set in front of the unoccupied chair. A seat where Fillan used to sit before attacking me. I felt my body strain at the possibility of him showing up here.

“Lupin and Fillan are going to show you around the mansion tomorrow,” Asenah said while biting the raspberry off the fork. “Where’s your brother, by the way?” Her inquiring eyes shifted to Lupin.

“He must be—”

The double doors swung open, and the other brother sashayed inside. My jaw clenched, and I utterly forgot I shouldn’t lay bare any sort of emotion towards morphs. But here I was, glaring with all unmasked distaste at one.

Fillan looked better, way better than the last time I’d seen him. It was one week ago when he was puking his guts out in his chamber. He’d looked then as if death was going to dispatch him to one of the hells. But now, his appearance was the same as the first time I’d beheld him: full of life and brutality.

“Here I am, here I am.” He sighed and halted, noting his guests. Fillan bowed his head to each of the princesses, greeting them separately. “Kayla, Fawne.”

The eagle-like girl acknowledged Fillan with apparent alertness.

Kayla’s name had been mentioned before. She was Lupin’s betrothed, if I recalled the conversation at this same table correctly.

Thea prodded my arm with her elbow. I glanced at her sidelong to ask what she needed from me, but her concentration was onwards. It hit me then. She’d caught me staring where I shouldn’t be.

“Forgive my cousin for his lack of punctuality,” Asenah said. “The poor boy ate a dryad and suffered from its poisoning for an entire week.”

Fillan huffed, plopping down in the chair. Next to him, Kayla squirmed, trying to shift away from him without anyone’s notice. But that didn’t go past my eye.

“You ate a dryad?” Fawne inquired, her brows raised in amazement.

“Well, that’s what they told me.” He held up a glass, and Thea hurried to fill it with wine.

Fawne and Kayla exchanged puzzled glances.

“You don’t know if you ate a dryad or not?” Fawne asked incredulously.

Fillan parted his mouth, but Asenah interrupted him before he could utter a word, “He was inebriated.” She raised a glass of wine. “Too inebriated to remember it.” With that, she took a delicate sip of wine.

Fillan didn’t add anything else. Either he truly didn’t remember he’d bitten me and my blood somehow had affected his body, taking the theory of eating a dryad for granted, or he indeed recalled everything but remained silent for some incomprehensible reason. I could only hope it was the case of the former.

As they came to the end of eating their appetiser, the girls and I scurried back to the kitchen to fetch a proper meal for them. Once we got back, I heard Lupin ask, “And when is the wedding?”

When I was silently placing a plate of food in front of him, I caught Fillan’s copper stare. In a heartbeat, I averted my gaze and returned to the wall. I felt his stare on my back, but when I turned around, his eyes were on his brother instead.

“What about the Autumn Equinox?” Asenah suggested. “I have no wish for the wedding to turn into a caravan of animals.”

“It’s so soon,” Fawne mused quietly, jabbing the lamb with the fork.

“Why wait?” Asenah inquired. “Autumn is precisely majestic in the Realm of Bones.”

Lupin decided to interject, “Actually, it is much more beautiful in—”

But he didn’t finish. Shrinking, he grimaced as if in pain and stole a glance at Asenah, who was savouring the wine as she watched Fawne.

“The Autumn Equinox is an *ideal* day for a wedding,” Asenah boasted, not tearing her intense gaze from Fawne. I spotted a trace of irritation, as though she didn’t like that Fawne didn’t give her the same amount of attention as she did.

“Yes, it is.” She tilted her head to Asenah’s side. “But it’s my father who makes decisions, not me. You may have to discuss matters about my wedding with him, Your Grace.”

So, who was marrying who exactly? Wasn’t Lupin going to wed Kayla?

Asenah’s mouth formed a wolf-like smile. “Very well.”

“You know...” Fillan said. “I’ve been patiently waiting like a good boy I am for somebody to ask me about *my* wedding that I’ve learnt about only *today*, but here I am... still waiting.”

All eyes were on him now.

Asenah’s slender, furry fingers wrapped around the knife in her hands. Tight. “Perchance, you’d like to marry an enemy, Fillan? Just like Tatyana Haroun?”

“I wasn’t—”

“Tatyana didn’t marry *him*.” Fawne frowned at Asenah.

“Who knows? Perhaps she did.”

“No. She was in love with him but not married to him. Their bond would have brought the end to our world.”

Who is Tatyana?

“Not the end of our world, but a threat to our empire, darling.”

“And for it, let’s thank the Gods, Tatyana was exiled before she could bear Aytigin’s child.”

And who’s Aytigin?

“Where was Tatyana exiled, again?” Fillan inquired.

Asenah was cutting a lamb’s shank. “Only the emperor and perhaps empress know where their traitor sister is.” She put a bite into her mouth, chewing it without showing any sign of enjoyment of the well-prepared food.

Were they all this snobbish to show no respect to Imogen's and her staff's prepared meals, which were a blessing once my tongue touched it after a long, laborious day? Or was it *I* who had a peculiar taste?

"And what about Aytigin Cresenbar?" Fillan questioned, earning a pointed glance from his cousin. "What was his fate?"

"Haven't you heard the whispers?" Fawne asked Fillan.

"That he was flogged and then guillotined in front of his people?"

Fawne nodded. "That's what is rumoured."

Fillan snorted, lifting his chin contentedly. "That's what happens to traitors. Even degenerates know how to deal with them. I'm impressed."

That was the last interesting sentence spoken throughout dinner, as the rest of the conversation was about Fillan and Fawne's wedding. I'd expected Lupin and Kayla to marry first as they'd been promised to each other longer than the former couple, but apparently, that wasn't the case.

I turned a deaf ear to the tedious discussion, but I couldn't ignore Fillan's eyes straying to me once in a while. Eyes that perhaps guessed something, but weren't entirely sure whether it was true or not.

XV

AFTER ANOTHER CLEANING SPREE in the kitchen, I was ready to go to my room, fall into bed and sleep like there was no tomorrow, but Imogen had other plans for me. She made me stay. I had a guess why, but she hadn't spoken to me until all the staff was gone. But as soon as we were alone, she didn't wait to ask, "Ye know that lying about yer skills won't bring ye any good, lassie?"

"I'm not lying."

From the unbending look, I could tell she did not believe it. For the first time, apart from my mother, someone else had read me through. But Imogen had clear evidence. Only an ignorant fool would not spot a lie in me.

"Really?" Her eyebrows lifted, fist pressed to her hip. "Ye didn't know how tae slice a tomato. If ye don't know how tae chop a vegetable, ye don't know how tae cook at all."

"I wasn't having a good day."

Imogen sighed. "Why did ye lie in yer biography?"

I analysed her face. Perhaps she wasn't aware of my incognito, after all. She merely thought I was untruthful in the file Gen had to fill.

My acting skill button switched on, and I was prepared to fool a woman who'd been so generous to me. She'd given away her room when I couldn't have stayed in the one I'd awakened. I should return the favour and at least be genuine, but I couldn't trust her. Even if I'd been here for almost a month, I wasn't naïve to spill my secrets. Not even to Thea, who I could boldly call my friend. Well, she was a much better friend than the other two in the Mortal Region anyway.

"I'm sorry." I dropped my gaze, acting as if I was drenched with guilt. "I-I didn't want to seem like an utter loser because... because I had no useful skills. So I lied."

It wasn't a completely false tale. Overall, I didn't have useful skills. At least not the ones that could help me do the jobs I was assigned to do every day quicker.

“Useful skills?” Imogen asked. I lifted my head, maintaining a remorseful expression. “What do ye count as useful skills, lassie?”

I took a sharp breath and began naming, “Cooking, baking, gardening, hunting, fishing...”

Imogen’s stare was so observantly intense that it was astonishing how I wasn’t sweating yet. “An’ what skills do ye have? The ones ye stayed silent about in your biography?”

“I have none.”

“That’s impossible,” she said. “Ye must have at least one skill, lassie.”

I pursed my lips.

Perhaps it wouldn’t hurt to tell her about my unfeigned skills. I couldn’t foresee that somehow revealing them would envelop me with regret, let alone put me in danger.

At last, I said, “I can play the piano.”

Imogen’s lip corners curled up. Was that a sheen of admiration in her eyes? “That’s wonderful.”

I half-smiled. “And I can sketch clothes,” I added, my chest easing off. “Mostly dresses. Also, I know how to sew.”

“And do ye think playing th’ piano an’ creatin clothes are useless?”

“Perhaps they are not entirely useless. I played the piano back in the Mortal Region and sometimes got paid for performing in townies’ parties. But...” I released a heavy sigh. “...skills like that can’t be helpful *here*.”

“Offered people were sorted by thair skills,” she said. “If ye hadn’t lied, perhaps ye would have been in some other realm, servin’ lesser morphs who couldn’t hurt you as much as Asenah with her cousins can.”

“So far, they’ve done nothing bad to me.”

Yet another lie slid off my tongue with zero effort. Fillan would have killed me, but miraculously I’d eluded death. But Imogen needn’t know any of it.

She sighed. “Weel, let’s hope nothing will.” With a faint smile, she redid her bun. “Now, let’s teach ye the basics of th’ cooking.”

My eyes widened. “No.”

“Yes.”

“I can’t.”

“This *I can’t* of yours isn’t in my vocabulary. And it shouldn’t be in yours. You can, and you will.” She took an empty pot and extended it to me.

I grimaced at it. "Come on. Ye never know when cooking can come in handy for ye."

"Imogen, if I try to cook anything, this kitchen will burst into flames."

"Not on mah watch."

But I remained resistant. "I'm not putting my hands of failure on any of these pots."

From the unyielding look in her eyes, I knew she wouldn't let this go easily.

"I'm not kidding, Imogen. This could end in a lot of worse ways."

"Then how ye'll make a guy fall for ye if you don't learn how to reach his heart through th' best way of them all?"

I rolled my eyes. "Haha. How hilarious." But despite my misgivings, I gave in quite quickly as I was already picking up a pan, mostly because I was interested in learning something new. "What are we cooking?"

"For starters, scrambled eggs."

I nodded and placed the pan on the cooker.

"Now, now, is that really how ye start?"

I glanced at her quizzically.

Right.

"Of course, I'm mixing the eggs first, just *after* heating the pan," I said, acting as if I knew it all along. "How stupid you think I am, Imogen? You hurt my feelings."

She scoffed while I headed towards the icebox from where I picked the butter. I deposited it near the cooker, which I turned on. Imogen was watching my every move like a mentor watching their student.

"Knowing your unhurried pace, I wonder how fast ye'll whisk th' eggs 'til the pan heats."

I didn't respond to her remark, returning to the icebox. "How many eggs should I take?"

"Four," she answered. "And don't forget tae wash them with water."

I took four eggs and closed the icebox door with the push of my elbow. As I walked carefully to the sink, I tried my luck. "At dinner, they mentioned some Tatyana and Aytigin."

She frowned. "You cannot listen to thair conversations. It's risky."

I dared to roll my eyes again.

"I'm serious, lassie."

“I know that.” I placed the eggs near the sink. “But who are they? Have you heard of them?”

“What did I tell you about curiosity, eh?”

I let out a deep sigh while cleaning the eggs one by one, making sure not to crack them by accident. “Curiosity is what kills us humans.”

Even if curiosity could kill humans, so far, I was alive. With a scarred ankle but breathing, heart beating.

“You sound like ye don’t believe it,” she mumbled, as if offended. “I know it doesn’t sound believable, but it’s true.” I picked the bowl and began cracking eggs. “I knew people like you who were curious about everything they heard comin’ from morphs’ mouths. And none of them lived long.”

I scrutinised her, hunting for a sign of lie, but I didn’t find one. She wasn’t lying.

“Don’t forget to season the mixture with salt an’ pepper.”

With a slow nod, I did just that. “What happened to the people you knew?”

“If I answer ye, do you promise to never question anything that goes on in morphs’ lives anymore?”

That was surely not happening. I was always going to question everything. Perhaps I wouldn’t ask Imogen as she was hardly willing to answer my questions. She’d been kind enough to tell me about the Bloodsucker and a curse and the Spell, but she wasn’t going to respond to anything I eavesdropped on anymore.

It was natural for me to lie again. “All right.”

I couldn’t tell if she believed me or not as her face betrayed nothing. I put a bit of butter in the already heated pan and whisked the mixture.

“Once Asenah caught one maid eavesdropping on her conversation with a noble morph,” she began. “The lassie disappeared that day. Two years later, one guard was caught by Asenah wandering in th’ library, searching for Gods knew what at late hours. He was deliciously eaten at th’ Spring Equinox.”

My lips parted. Imogen only nodded, assuring me that every word of hers was real.

“Remember th’ previous gardener ye questioned about at first?” she asked.

“Yes.” I poured the mixed eggs into the pan but watched her from the corner of my eye. “What happened to him?”

There was no way she was going to tell me what was his fate now, was she?

“He was curious.” Anger glinted in her eyes. “He communicated with a creature in th’ forest called a glosse.”

Glosse. That dryad kid had mentioned this creature to his parents when his dad was about to tear off my limbs. If Juniper had described a glosse right, I’d met it as well. The creature had told me the curse I’d had no idea about. Why it had introduced me to it, that was what I’d like to know.

Imogen continued, “Glosses know what one needs tae hear beforehand, n’ gives them a cryptic message or a riddle. When he stumbled across one in th’ forest, it told him a riddle, which he figured out. Lassie, focus on th’ eggs.”

Distracted by her narration, I had forgotten all about them.

“I don’t know what else to do.”

“Just gently pull th’ eggs across the pan.”

I grasped a turner. “Like this?”

“Aye, just be gentle.”

“Imogen, they’re *eggs*.”

“Be gentle.”

I sighed and softened my movements.

“Then lift an’ fold until no liquid remains. Don’t stir it constantly. I’ll tell when tae stop.”

I did as I’d been told. “So, what was the answer to the riddle?”

“Ways tae kill a morph. Enchanter’s blood an’ a piece of a dryad’s skin. But he didn’t know that one of thaim was false. Glosses really like tae spread false information.

“Finn knew what he was doing when it came to hunting an’ makin weapons. He captured a dryad an’ took a piece of his skin with a knife. He made an arrow’s head of it an’ was ready tae aim. Poor Finn was sure it’d kill Asenah, but as soon as th’ arrow hit her heart, it didn’t do her any damage. The glosse had deceived Finn. Only gold an’ enchanter’s blood can be fatal tae morphs.

“Asenah retaliated by chopping off Finn’s head in front of the audience of servants afterwards. That’s why no one has dared to speak about him ever since.”

Imogen lowered her eyes. She inhaled, but it sounded like a stifled sob.

This Finn couldn't have been just a gardener to her, but most likely a friend she'd lost to his attempt to kill Asenah.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I said, but words seemed to come out ill.

She took a deep breath and wiped a tear off her cheek. It was strange to see Imogen shedding a tear. It was an intimate moment from which I became uncomfortable straight off. "Don't ask me or try to seek answers elsewhere." She looked at me, her eyes as serious as always, but glistening. "For your own sake, lassie."

All I could do was give her a nod, but no loud promise that I'd listen to her advice.

"All right, stop with th' stir," she ordered.

I pulled away from the cooker and whipped my head to her. "Who was he to you?" I asked. "Finn?"

She pursed her lips into a thin line, sorrow crossing her face.

Not a friend. It could not be just a friend. She'd been acquainted with every detail of his plan. Perhaps a lover?

"Eggs are done now. Remove pan from th' heat and don't forget to turn off the cooker," she instructed. "Have sweet dreams."

She pivoted on her heel and made her way towards the exit.

"Imogen?"

She halted at the threshold. A sigh left her. "Finn was mah twin," she said in a whisper, but I heard her regardless. "He was my twin brother."

I opened my mouth to ask how it was possible as only one of the youngest siblings had to be offered to the Empire of Beasts, not two, but Imogen left before I could. Positively conscious of what my question would be, which she might not have answered anyway, just like the other one about Tatyana and Aytigin. It was left as a mystery to solve on my own.

XVI

THE PRINCESSES LEFT a few days later. Before leaving, they had given the impression that they were about to flee far from the mansion and never return. Well, Kayla had while Fawne had taken her time to share a courteous farewell with the falsest smile ever. Asenah was smiling the same.

Surely, those girls were no friends to Asenah, only allies. Their arranged marriage was nothing more than a reliable bond against the Bloodsucker, who might seek vengeance against enchanters. Neither Asenah nor two other realms wanted to join him once he would. She'd made it seem as if it would be a suicide.

After all, the Hundred Years' War hadn't gone smoothly. If enchanters hadn't initiated a truce, for morphs were too prideful to take the first step, the war would have continued, spilling more blood of soldiers and innocent people.

If I understood correctly, this Drayard Emyur, the Bloodsucker, would be a fool to go against enchanters. But then again, he was the bloody Bloodsucker who murdered uncountable people in various cruel ways. *Morphs* were terrified of him. *Asenah* was cautious of him. And she struck as a tough, merciless female who slaughtered many humans for their curiosity.

Gods forbid, my paths with the Bloodsucker would never cross.

So far, I was listening to Imogen's advice. Even if I heard something intriguing in the dining room, I didn't question it, choosing to forget instead. If prying killed humans, I wouldn't risk my life over some silly questions. Despite being a slave, I had no desire to die yet.

For I'd made a vow to myself, I hadn't stepped in the woods ever since dryads' attack either. If I couldn't sleep, I lit a candle and sketched more designs. I was doing it almost every night until I turned lethargic, and sleep fairies took me to their kingdom.

At least I didn't dream about Chase anymore. My former "lover" had at last left me for peace of mind.

Currently, I was sorting books in the library. It was one of the few jobs I could do without messing anything up. I felt quite accomplished. Besides, arranging books in alphabetical order wasn't hard or irritating, but the opposite—quite relaxing.

The mansion's library wasn't as big as the one in humans' city. But this one had newer versions of books that didn't look as if they might crumble at the mere touch.

In the back of the library, a vast map of all the three worlds was nailed against the wall. I'd seen the Empire of Beasts map before in Asenah's study, but never had the opportunity to examine it. The library itself wasn't often used; I didn't have to worry someone might walk in on me doing what I wasn't supposed to, and therefore, I took my time to study the map.

The Empires of Beasts and Skies were much larger than the Mortal Region, which was severed from this empire by the Blue River. The Empire of Beasts was divided into realms like the Realm of Bones, Woods, Talons, Wilds and Embers, and had a capital, while the Empire of Skies seemed to contain the same ruling principle since their lands were also divided into realms and had a capital.

I'd learnt from school all three different worlds had been created merely fifty years ago. Before that, all kinds had lived together, being ruled by a morph emperor. Enchanters hadn't been particularly pleased with it as they didn't have equal rights. Neither had humans to the morph kind.

Such injustice was one of the reasons that led to the enchanters' and humans' rebellion, which escalated into a war lasting for over one century. Not one of them won, but enchanters were the closest to the victory. Consequently, morphs had to cede more than half of their lands to enchanters and a small part to humans. And ever since, the three kinds had been separated from others, ruling their own worlds.

"You've never seen a map before?"

I almost leapt out of my skin.

As I whipped my head to one of the wolf brothers behind me, my body strained. Lupin was watching me as if he hadn't had water in his mouth for days.

I curtsied to him, already disgusted with myself. But if I hadn't done it, my head would have most likely been chopped off.

"My lord."

I figured since his cousin was a queen, it granted him and his brother lords' titles. Besides, a physician had called him one. Gradually, I was getting the hang of this world.

Once I straightened my back, I was made to retire, but he shot me a daring look, rendering me rooted to the floor.

"You didn't answer my question, human," he spoke playfully, like a cat playing with the mouse. In this case, like any other time, I was nothing more than a mouse.

"No, I haven't seen a map, my lord."

A half wolf-like grin, which sent me alarming signals, appeared on his mouth. "I believe every person, human or not, should know the world's map."

I wasn't sure what to say. All I wanted was to leave now, but I had to agree with him instead. "Yes, my lord."

Lupin's grin widened, eyes glimmering with starvation and thirst.

Run. Run. Run! screamed every instinct of mine.

But I didn't move. I didn't have another choice but to stay here and wait for his dismissal. And until that, I was to remain still.

"You're new." He took a step towards me. I clutched my maid's skirt. He didn't notice it. "What's your name?"

"Genette."

I could bet on my life that he could hear the pounding of my heart. His senses were more sensitive than mine. But he must have been used to it. Every human's heartbeat would be frantic while standing this close to a morph. The creature that could eat the human alive only because it could.

"Genette." He tasted my little sister's name as if it was the most delicious dessert. I suppressed my disgust. "You'll be at our service today, Genette."

Bewilderment struck me. "Pardon me, my lord, but I don't quite understand what you mean."

Miraculously, my voice sounded still, unlike my quivering fingers.

"What a clueless, pretty human."

He took another approach, closing a healthy distance we'd had. A reek of alcohol drifted from him, irritating my nostrils. I was made to step back, but he wrapped one hand around my waist and pulled me against him.

"Forgive me, my lord, but—"

I was interrupted by his mouth, crushing mine. I endeavoured to push him off me, but his furry hands seized my wrists while his stinky mouth attacked my lips. I was pursing my lips tight, and he growled, which got my body rippling with tremors.

He shoved me against the wall. I grimaced in pain, but Lupin didn't care. He ripped the maid's dress off me with his claws, exposing me. I was only left in my bloomers, which scarcely covered a tiny part of my legs since I had trimmed it when it had been given to me.

"No undergarments?" he inquired in disbelief. "Interesting slave."

My hands raised to cover my bare chest from his ravenous stare, but he smacked them away. A sickening smile pulled his mouth as he eyed me from head to toe, flicking his tongue over his mouth. Once his eyes rose, meeting mine, I shivered.

"P-please don't."

But he didn't listen.

He lifted me off the ground, tossing me over his shoulder, and carried me out of the library.

Tears spurted through, and I could hardly see anything when the water was blurring my sight. "P-please, I beg you."

He didn't respond.

A dreadful reminder entered my head—words Holland had uttered once.

Other jobs.

There would be other jobs for us to do if we wanted to survive. It included not only cleaning and cooking and doing other menial chores, but being their play tools. I should have realised that sooner. But even if I had, there was nothing I could have done to avoid what was about to happen to me.

"Stop crying or else brother and I won't go easy on you, human," he snarled.

I pursed my lips, repressing another sob.

"Good human."

The door opened, but I couldn't tell where we were when I was turned towards the corridor. No doubt it was some bedroom of theirs.

"It's about time," another male's voice arrived.

Fillan.

I was thrown onto the bed. Immediately, I shielded my chest, and two brothers barked a laugh.

“She’s shy,” Lupin crooned, glancing at his brother with a crooked, nasty smile.

“They’re all shy, brother.” Soon Fillan’s wolf-like face hovered over me. “Don’t be afraid, *human*.” His furry thumb brushed across my bottom lip. “You’ll enjoy it.”

“P-please. I beg you... Don’t.”

He laughed at that.

I couldn’t do anything. I was nothing here. Nothing but a slave. They could do whatever they desired to do with me. Whether with my permission or not. They were lords, and I was nothing but a weak girl at their disposal.

I didn’t cry. Lupin had ordered me not to. I held tears under my shut eyelids, demanding them to remain there as long as possible.

“Open. Your. Eyes,” Fillan commanded.

I forced myself to look, and Fillan showed his maws along with a broad, repulsing smile.

Both of them had their hands on me, and not only that. Moving me as they liked. Positioning me however they pleased...

Help, I beseeched inwardly.

No pleas for them to stop escaped my mouth ever again. It was pointless. They were famished animals that didn’t care about asking or listening to any objections. If they wanted it, they made sure they had it.

Help, I attempted once again, as if some almighty power might hear me and save me. But of course, it didn’t, and I found myself holding onto the last straw.

When I’d been with Chase, my mind was always on the stranger I’d felt in my trance, endeavouring to sense him, to forget where I was and what my body was going through.

And this time wasn’t an exception.

Once twins finished with me, they shoved me in the corridor like some used rag. But I felt worse than that.

I wrapped my hands around my bare chest and finally released the tears I’d been containing this entire time. My body ached, bruised by their claws they’d liked to use so often. But I didn’t care about it too much. I couldn’t. I

couldn't dwell on what had happened. I needed to get out of here so nothing like it would repeat.

I approached the stairs with wobbly legs. I could barely see anything when water flooded my eyes, streaming down my cheeks and touching my quivering lips.

With each step, it was harder and harder to move. All I wished to do was to find some safe spot, curl into a ball and weep.

But I did not slow down my pace. I could not stay here. I had to go as far as I could from Lupin's and Fillan's chambers. Because if they changed their minds...

The likelihood of it happening again made me shudder even more than I'd been shaking before.

I prayed no one would catch me walking like this. At least one thing could actually come true. The help I'd waited for while they were ruining me hadn't come. But I was begging for what didn't exist. Even if sometimes I could hear somebody's voice apart from mine in my head during perilous situations, I was inclined to believe it could be explained logically.

I merely imagined things to ignore this brutal reality, the crystal clear truth that I was all on my own here.

When it seemed like an eternity had passed, I reached the underground. Everybody was already asleep. I didn't want to go to bed like this, coated in their repulsive smell. But I couldn't risk fetching enough water to clean myself from upstairs either.

I was close to the bathroom door when someone called.

"Gen?"

I raised my chin, meeting startled Thea with a candleholder. I could only visualise the image she could see before her—a girl whose tears were washing her face, body trembling, and bare.

In the candlelight, I watched her cheeks paint red. She averted her gaze to the wall, causing more tears to flood my eyes.

"Were you..." She swallowed. "...by them?"

All I managed to do was nod when the sob was constricting my throat.

"Do you want to... talk?"

I shook my head without hesitation.

The girl looked down. "I... I can draw you a bath. If you're okay with it." I nodded.

When Thea passed me to bring me what she'd promised without glancing at my side, I slid into the bathroom and curled up in the corner as I'd wished. As soon as I clamped a hand over my mouth, a sob broke out of its cage.

I knew what had happened. I was utterly aware. But still... a part of me hoped it was just a terrible, *horrible* nightmare from which I was going to wake up any minute now.

But I did not.

As I composed myself, I let the sickness escape my guts into the bucket nearby. Then I turned away, taking a sharp breath.

But nausea had never truly left me. It lingered. And perhaps it would never leave me. It would always stay, reminding me of this day and its events forever.

As Thea prepared a bath, I rubbed my skin countless times but the sensations from their fingers and tongues and teeth never disappeared.

All red from scouring my skin as though it was the dirtiest floor, I got out of the tub and wrapped Thea's brought towel around my body.

Marks of their claws and teeth stained my chest, my neck and my arms. Another bucket of tears filled my cried-out eyes, but this time not because I was sorry this had happened to me, but because I was livid. Although not enough to return to their chambers and kill them in their sleep. I would die if I tried to do that. And I couldn't perish until I didn't have my sweet revenge on them for doing this to me.

Thea was patiently waiting behind the door, my nightwear in her hands. I took it from her without forgetting to thank her and dressed up inside the bathroom. As I left it, I encountered Thea's moistened eyes.

"Have you been crying?" The question came out hoarse after screaming.

"No."

"Why did you cry?"

As she blinked, a traitorous teardrop rolled down her cheek, which she wiped away with the back of her hand.

"It's not right." She sniffled, looking up at the ceiling and blinking away the tears. "What they're doing to us... what they..." More and more tears ran down her face. She didn't wipe them off this time.

I didn't understand why she was conducting this way. Perhaps she was just an empathic person who could get affected by others' emotions. Or—

"They did it to you as well."

She stayed silent. Although she didn't say yes, she didn't deny it either. I wasn't the only one. Of course, I wasn't.

The mocking words Asenah had said when I first had served here hit me like a bolt of lightning. She'd noted her cousins were interested in servants. Of course, they'd abused not only Thea or me, but others, too. Gods knew how many sixteen-year-old girls were their victims.

I felt sicker than ever. And more determined to make Lupin and Fillan pay.

"When did it happen?"

My blood was already boiling, and so was my bracelet. Could I strangle Lupin and Fillan in their sleep? I wished. They could only be killed by an enchanter's blood or weapon made of gold. And I didn't have either of those things. Besides, killing them would show mercy, and they needed to suffer for what they had done, not be killed. Their death would be nothing but a small price to pay for their unforgiving crimes.

Thea lowered her stare. "Not here," she muttered. "I can't speak about it here."

I understood her and got in front. She was behind me while I was striding towards the room, which I could call my bedroom from now on. When I reached it, I opened the door for her to step inside first. Once she did, I also got in and shut the door.

I hadn't expected to feel safer here, and I didn't. They lived in the same building. What if they came here and—

No, I couldn't fret over it. They were not coming back. At least not tonight.

"It happened three days after I woke up here."

I swivelled to Thea. Her arms were folded across her chest as she stared at her feet.

Three days... Only three days after she'd begun working here. She was just a child. *Sixteen.*

Involuntarily, I pictured Gen in Thea's place. She was Gen's age when they had done that to her, after all. Fortunately, the victim was me instead of my sister.

I contemplated how the fire would affect morphs. It could be one of the many torturing ways I would use for those sick brothers.

"Were other girls abused as well?"

She nodded.

“How many?”

“Too many.”

My hands clenched into fists, teeth gritted. The bracelet on my wrist burned my skin, but the pain meant nothing after what I’d experienced tonight.

As I took a step towards Thea, my rage ebbed. I placed my hands on her shoulders, making her look up at me.

“I’ll make them pay,” I said resolutely, but quietly in case the wrong ears listened.

“How?”

“I’ll make them pay,” I repeated assuredly.

She cracked a weak smile. A smile forced through the pain we’d experienced together, but at different times.

She embraced me, and I didn’t hesitate to do the same. We’d stayed in each other’s arms for a while in peaceful silence. I closed my eyes, and for a moment, I forgot about all the terrible things I’d experienced in the last year.

But that didn’t last for long. Those memories would always be as a reminder etched in my mind to arise at the most unexpected times.

“Can you stay with me tonight?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

My chest fell into ease.

Tonight, I wouldn’t be able to sleep alone. I needed someone to hold me if I had another nightmare. Most likely worse than the other ones.

At this moment in my life, I come to realise no decent men exist in this unfortunate world. I hadn’t met many of them, but as many as I had, they were all awful people in their own ways. But there was no point in wishing someone decent, as I would never experience romance in my life anyway.

I was destined to be a slave.

Thea’s breathing was soon to even. We had to squeeze up to fit on the single bed. I couldn’t fall asleep, but it wasn’t because of the person being pressed against me.

I slipped my hand under the mattress from where I pulled out the folded sketch. Once I unfolded it, I was met with the imaginary man I’d drawn a few years ago.

I traced my finger against his imaginary face. “You’re not real, are you, stranger?” I whispered, as if my own creation would answer.

I stared at the sketch for so long, I wished that alone would summon the man.

But, of course, he did not emerge.

Frustrated, I crumpled the sketch up into a ball and tossed it into the corner of the room. It ricocheted off the wall and dropped to the floor. And I stared at it, lying like trash, unable to shut my eyelids and drift into a slumber. Guilt pricked my conscience, which was ridiculous.

He was fiction.

I had invented him.

But here I was, quietly approaching the ball. As I lifted and unfurled it, I looked at it one more, but not the last time.

I drowsed off with the drawing pressed against my yet beating heart.

OceanofPDF.com

XVII

TODAY WAS *their* birthday.

Morphs had been invited from all over the empire to celebrate it. All guests were noble-blood, clad in the most elegant gowns and suits. On some of them, such attire looked comical. After all, they were animals walking on two limbs, wearing luxurious clothes. Only twins, Asenah, Fawne and a few others, nailed their looks.

Kayla, Lupin's fiancée, wasn't striking as fashionable as her friend Fawne standing by her. The poor eagle was too bird-looking to appear at least decent in any of the gowns, really.

Asenah was sitting on the elaborate throne, conversing with other noble, haughty "ladies". I was shocked that a throne was carved of wood and not of bones.

I was serving with other servants in the garden. Its decorations were all thanks to Thea, Clare and I. Thea and I had brought the tables and chairs to accommodate as many morphs as possible without making it look overcrowded, while Clare had done a splendid job cutting the bushes into lovely, diverse shapes. I couldn't argue. She was a gifted gardener.

But the garden was this beautifully decorated for *them*. Though it was not like we'd had a choice. If it were my will, I'd have destroyed it without a blink.

As I carried the drinks, I caught snatches of morphs' conversations with one ear and listened to a quartet of musicians performing mild tunes with another. I kept my distance from the twins, not even glancing once at their side. I was afraid that if I did, a malicious idea would pop into their sick minds.

Ever since that... that night, I'd been strained round the clock, wary of one of them approaching me and catching me off guard and...

A shudder ran through me, and glasses shook on the tray.

Drawing in a deep breath, I resumed my job.

As expected, nightmares had only become worse. I was scared to close my eyes and drift into a slumber where Lupin, Fillan and Chase would be

waiting for me, leering at me with their hungry eyes and drooling mouths. Instead of experiencing something like that in my own head, I'd chosen not to sleep at all.

I had dark circles under my eyes, but no morph looked at me to notice it. Even if they did, they wouldn't care. I was just a human. Their slave. Nothing. No one but dirt on their exposed feet.

Thea and Imogen were my rock. Mostly Thea. She understood me as she'd gone through the same thing I was coping with these days. Imogen wasn't abused, but she treated me as amiable as she could and had told me if I ever needed to talk, she'd be there. I'd never, however, taken her sweet offer.

As I descended into reality, someone glancing at me from time to time snagged my attention.

A panther.

She wasn't in any group, merely observing others, including me. I tried not to look at her. It was strange that a morph was interested in looking at some human at all.

I strode back to the kitchen to refill the drinks.

"How is it there?" Imogen asked, while preparing delicate and ridiculously tiny sandwiches for the beasts.

Despite morphs' attempts to masquerade as dignified and graceful creatures, they remained beasts that belonged in the wilderness rather than in mansions, sitting at the tables, devouring the most exquisite food while being served by the actual human beings.

I stepped closer to the full pitcher of alcohol and began filling the glasses one by one.

"Disgusting," was all I could say without spitting the word out. Imogen huffed out a laugh. "How old are these imbeciles turning? Five hundred, six?"

"They're not that old. If they were, they wouldn't be Asenah's lap dogs."

I poured the last glass and raised the tray.

"Well, then." I pivoted on my heel. "Hope they get eaten by the Bloodsucker then."

"Careful now," she drawled, a tint of tease in her voice, "ye don't want to summon a monster."

I glanced at her over my shoulder. "If it means the brothers get eaten, then a monster might as well be my guest."

Working like a bumblebee, I flitted from one circle to another. To my amazement, I didn't drop any of the drinks. I reckoned some of them would fall at some point, as I was holding one tray with ten full glasses on it. It was difficult to walk fast, not trip over some tiny rock, let alone be invisible, but I was actually doing a great job so far.

But then the wind intensified. Morphs voices rose an octave higher, and turmoil broke out through the garden.

I lurched to a halt, steadying the swinging tray in my hand.

Every single morph had their heads raised skyward, and I followed their stares. I wish I wouldn't have.

A silhouette of a dragon was hovering above. And it was landing straight upon me.

XVIII

I WAS ABOUT TO drop all the drinks and flee wherever my legs carried me, but I couldn't move. Legs refused to listen to me. As if frozen.

No, it wasn't landing on me. It'd seemed like it was, but it wasn't. It landed approximately ten steps away from me instead.

A dragon. A bloody dragon.

Everybody was holding their breaths as much as I was—paralyzed with fear and awe.

The dragon was bigger than I'd imagined it would be. When I listened to bedtime stories, I visualised dragons as the size of my cottage, just slightly bigger. But I was wrong. So, so wrong. It was almost as big as Asenah's mansion.

The flapping of his massive wings made all the girls' hair their handmaidens had worked so hard on to dishevel, and those who wore hats got blown off their heads. His scales were dipped in burgundy, eyes bigger than rocks: two golds sprinkled with red. And two bats, I noticed only now, were flanking him.

In a flash, the dragon was replaced by a claret-red cloud, but it dispersed bit by bit. First, there appeared a shape of horns, then wings, and at last, a whole figure standing on its two legs instead of four and dressed up.

His hands were buried in the black trousers he wore as he slightly tipped his chin up.

It was absolute silence in the garden.

Drayard was here.

The Bloodsucker.

Could it be? Could it be that I had summoned the monster? The main character from *A Tale of the Bloodsucker*? Drayard Emyur, the King of kings and queens?

Impossible.

I blinked, but he remained to stand there. *Real.*

Again, my imagination had deceived me. Despite a dragon tail, wings, ears, horns, needless to say, face, he still didn't look like the monstrous

beast I'd imagined him to be. With no self-control, thirsty for blood and eager to feast on the organs that he would rip off bodies. He turned out to be yet another morph clad in finery that even suited him more than the most. I caught myself admiring his style. Apart from a white undershirt and a black tailcoat embroidered with gold, his clothing like a waistcoat, tie and trousers were all black. I could only speculate on how he could bear such blistering heat while wearing this.

However, there was something ineffable about him that made him stand out. Something like a peacock's tail drawing attention, and I didn't think it could be only because of his striking sense of style or that he'd interrupted the celebration by landing in the middle of the garden.

I was brought out of my audacious observation when one morph after another dropped to their knees and pressed their foreheads against the ground, as if he was a holy statue of one of the Gods in a temple. My legs agreed to listen to me this time, and I followed suit, carefully kneeling before him, making sure I didn't spill any of the drinks as I did.

A miracle was that my heart stayed within the rib cage ever since his landing.

"Rise," he said in a baritone after a while. A cold demand with extreme confidence. It was impossible to mistake him for someone other than a king, *the King* with immeasurable power in his hands.

One after another, they rose. I got to my feet as well with the quivering tray.

All right, he wasn't *just* another accursed morph. There was no doubting his ubiquitous power radiating through him I'd never seen anyone to possess. He was not a God, but as close to a God as one could ascend.

"Drayard Emyur," Asenah addressed him with a hint of wariness.

Drayard acknowledged her and the twins, who took a step back, hiding behind their cousin like two frightened children.

Cowards.

"Asenah Louvel." The Bloodsucker dipped his chin in a greeting.

"W-what..." She rolled back her shoulders, evidently trying to get a grip of herself despite the fear. "What are you doing here?"

I was sure Drayard could sense her fright. Not positive why. Although he didn't show he was enjoying it, I knew he was. In his place, feared like he was, not only would I be delighting in their fear, but taking advantage of it.

“Ah, well.” He drew his one gloved hand from his pocket. “The rumour of your beloved cousins’ celebration spread throughout my land. I was exceedingly pained to learn I wasn’t invited.”

“But you never attend birthday celebrations, Drayard,” Asenah noted in a cautious and reasonable tone, playing safe. “Needless to say, lords’ birthdays.”

“Correct, Asenah. You are acquainted with me quite well.” As he stepped forward, a wave of tension rippled through an already strained crowd. The corner of his mouth barely twitched, attesting to his awareness of the effect he caused. “However, won’t be invited whether I come or not, is quite a stab in the heart,” he said dramatically, but with a masked threat nonetheless.

Asenah joined her hands together and there appeared the queen I’d seen many times in the dining room. “Is it the real reason why you’re here? To show that you’re upset for not being invited, or is it a bigger, more rational reason? We all know you don’t waste your precious time on insignificant celebrations like this, Drayard.”

His mouth quirked up. “Is it truly impossible to believe I came here to celebrate?”

“Yes,” Asenah replied carefully, “it is.”

There was silence. A tense silence that stretched out between them, affecting everyone else. His expression didn’t alter, neither did Asenah’s.

He put his hand back in his pocket. “You do not need to worry, Asenah. I’m harmless.”

But it didn’t take a genius to understand that his tone meant the opposite.

Asenah was right. There was a reason why he was here, and it wasn’t the one he claimed to be. Was he going to burn this mansion with other morphs? But no, that would—

Oh, who was I kidding? This man was dangerous. A red zone. He might spit fire if he wished to. He might suck every guest’s blood if he desired. He might feast on everybody, and nobody would be able to stop him because *he* was the frigging Bloodsucker. He could do whatever he wanted without getting punished since he was also the *King*.

Drayard’s eyes moved to the twins, who were still hiding behind their cousin’s skirt. “Turning seventy, right?”

All the twins could do while being petrified was incline their heads to almost imperceptible nods.

Drayard's mouth curved into one devilish smile. It didn't reach his eyes, but no one expected the Bloodsucker to be a warm-hearted bastard.

He must retaliate. The Bloodsucker hadn't been invited. He was going to —

"I've brought some presents for you," he said.

I winced.

Is this some kind of joke?

"Sweethearts," he addressed no one.

Or so I'd thought.

The bats, which were fluttering around him as his pets, transformed into female bats, landing two steps behind their master.

Of course, those bats were morphs. Why hadn't I realised it sooner?

Right. The Bloodsucker's entrance had me transfixed.

Both of the girls struck as walking threats with cunning looks lurking in their eyes, their faces that... were not much to look at. They were dressed in crimson dresses that opened more of their fur skin than the rest of the beasts' females in the garden. They smiled, grins crooked and rich with menace.

"Come here, Your Lordships," Drayard said.

Twins lingered. Asenah was the one who forced them to approach him by grasping the collars of their jackets and flinging them to the creature who screamed danger. Most likely their worst nightmare.

"Closer," Drayard urged.

Twins obeyed.

As they stood right before the Bloodsucker and his two bat girls, Drayard towered over them both. But it wasn't because of their apparent height difference why twins looked like little puppies in front of the powerful fire-spitting, bloodsucking dragon. It was because of the latter's vast and palpable power.

"Kneel," Drayard demanded.

In no time, twins dropped to their knees, lowering their heads. Two wolves who had acted so tough and dominating a few days ago now were shivering with fear of the half-breed.

I hadn't realised I was smiling. And when I did, I promptly dropped the smile, hoping that no morph had noticed it. But no one had. Drayard had

their full attention, not some worthless human.

“Would you like me to burn your home?” Drayard inquired.

Twins shook their heads vigorously while avoiding the Bloodsucker’s stare.

“I don’t hear you.”

“No, Your Highness,” they both uttered.

“You will accept my present, then?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Watching their precious ego getting lowered was a joy to my thirst for revenge.

“Sweethearts.” Drayard waved his black-gloved hand. “You have my permission.”

Lupin and Fillan looked uncertain. As if doubting whether it was a trick or not. I hoped it was, because if Drayard was giving those bats as entertainment for them when they had had enough fun with my body, it would make my blood boil.

“You two can arise now,” the Bloodsucker said.

The twins leapt to their unstable feet, and the bats approached them. Batting their absurdly long eyelashes, they caressed their faces with their talons.

I glanced at Fawne and Kayla, who didn’t seem jealous of the bats touching their fiancés. Both of them were as much aghast as anyone else.

I spotted Thea by the quartet. Her fair skin was blanched, and I worried she might faint, but I couldn’t rush to her when the Bloodsucker was the centre of attention, and nobody else was moving. I expected to see Clare nearby, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“You have an hour with them,” Drayard informed, but the twins didn’t budge. “What? You have an hour to have the most pleasant tumbling in the hay with my two best girls. I’m certain you all have heard of how professional the bats are in that field.”

I certainly hadn’t. I was hearing it for the first time ever. Wasn’t his mother a bat?

Still, the twins balked.

Drayard did not appreciate it. “If you don’t want my birthday present, I am willing to take it back and turn your birthday celebration into hell.”

“No,” both said simultaneously, not hesitating anymore.

A pleased smile appeared on the Bloodsucker's face. "Wise choice, Your Lordships."

In a heartbeat, twins disappeared with two bat harlots within the mansion.

Drayard shoved his hands into his pockets and scanned all guests, causing them to strain more than they were already. To my relief, his eyes passed over me. The last individual his eyes landed on was Asenah.

"May I take a seat on the throne?"

Did he really have to ask that?

Asenah wasn't thrilled, but without saying anything, stepped aside from the throne, allowing the Bloodsucker to take over it. While everybody was goggling, he approached the throne, turned around and took a seat without harming his wings.

"Don't mind me for interrupting," Drayard said nonchalantly. "You can now resume your festivities."

As simple as it sounded, morphs couldn't do that. They were all aware of Drayard's presence, cautious that he might strike and burn them at any moment. But he didn't give an impression as if he was about to do that. Or it was all just a perfect act.

Even if people slid into conversations and the music resumed to ooze, it hadn't been the same as before. Unease was like a cloud hanging over the garden.

Meanwhile, I couldn't tear my gaze off the Bloodsucker, who was observing the guests instead of joining any activity. I shouldn't do what would attract his attention, but I couldn't cease following every movement of his like a feline before it pounced on its prey.

He propped his elbow on the throne's arm. "Where's my drink?" he voiced loud enough for everyone to hear.

I searched with my eyes for the rest of the maids who carried their trays with drinks, but they were gone. I was the sole remaining servant.

Swallowing my fright of him, I took a step towards the throne.

I'd heard and read his tale countless times. I had it all memorised in my head. I knew what he could do. *How* he could—

But when I was somewhere three steps away from him, I toppled over something. I landed on my knees, dropping a whole tray on the ground. The drinks spilled, some glasses shattered but that was the least of my worries when everyone was *laughing*.

I did not dare to lift my gaze, continuing to stare at the grass with a wish to dig a hole underground and not appear on the surface ever again.

I clenched the grass along with my teeth.

Pull yourself together.

Be strong.

And be brave.

I threw a glimpse at the girl who had been staring at me before Drayard emerged. She was sneering at me, malevolence glowing in her greenish eyes.

A panther. A sneaky panther who had made me stumble and fall and humiliate myself before the audience of beasts, turning me into a mockery.

My blood flamed, bracelet heated, but I didn't do anything else apart from blowing strands of my honey-blonde hair from my eye and maintaining an intense staring contest with her.

"Stupid human," some morphs barked through their laughs.

I grabbed a tray and began gathering all the unharmed glasses along with the broken ones.

Some of the morphs continued laughing; others returned to their conversation, interested in them more than in some fallen servant.

I repressed the tears and sensed a new pair of eyes watching me, but when I looked up, I caught no gaze.

As I brought filled glasses back to the garden, I approached the Bloodsucker and extended a tray of drinks to him. He didn't look in my direction as he took one glass without ceasing to observe the guests.

Asenah had her blazing eyes on him ever since he'd sat on her throne. I was confident he was aware of her glare, which he didn't care about. She wouldn't dare to raise a hand against the bloody dragon king.

The sunset had already dyed the sky in orange and yellow hues, prompting guests it was time to disperse. But the celebration continued, although not as high-spirited as before the Bloodsucker's entrance.

I was so over this birthday. I wanted it to end now, but I couldn't tell when I should expect it to be over as I had no clue how long morphs' celebrations typically last.

But then the high-pitched scream arrived from within the mansion.

Guests fell silent; musicians stopped playing. Everybody exchanged confused glances with morphs nearby, bewildered to whom that piercing shriek could have belonged. But then Fillan came running as though he'd seen the ghost. His shirt was half unbuttoned, and so were his trousers.

It didn't take long for another disarranged brother to show up, running just behind Fillan.

They both were terrified, eyes frantic as they halted and slightly bent over, propping hands on their knees and trying to catch their uneven breaths. Panting.

As the twins looked at Drayard in unison, they stepped back fearfully in the same step, as if they'd rehearsed it.

The bat girls also came back from the mansion, mincing towards their master in grace. Then they turned around and sat down in front of the throne. Coy smiles were dancing on their appalling faces.

Asenah arose from her seat. "What happened?"

Twins' legs were wobbling as they stared at their cousin.

"T-they..." Lupin raised his quivering forefinger, pointing it at the bats.

Asenah turned to Drayard. "Drayard?" she addressed him politely.

He lifted his head to look at Asenah. "Yes?"

What a guiltless voice he'd released! It vividly signalled whatever had happened, he'd played a big part in it.

"What have your bat whores done to my cousins?"

Drayard looked down at the bats. "What did you do, sweethearts?"

The bats craned their heads back to look at him and fluttered their eyelids innocently.

"We played with their prized possessions and by accident sent them into a deep, deep slumber," the bat to Drayard's right crooned. "Unfortunately, they don't work anymore." She issued a theatrical sigh and pouted.

"It was a complete accident," the other bat reassured, and a smile seemed to strive to creep on her lips, but it never did. "Our apologies, Your Highness." She lowered her head remorsefully.

I frowned, confused at first, but gradually a realisation began to unravel to me. *Did they—*

"I lost my manhood!" Lupin cried.

My gaze shot to the wolf.

"Our manhood!" Fillan whined.

I had the urge to laugh. *Maniacally*. However, I battled that need with a little effort, saving it for later.

“You did this,” Fillan growled at Drayard.

I was sure he’d made a huge mistake by showing off his wolf-like instincts to the Bloodsucker. And I was entirely correct once Drayard cast him a bone-chilling look. Fillan instantly shrank and recoiled, aware that he shouldn’t have spoken to the infamous Bloodsucker the way he had.

“To your knowledge, my bats can do whatever they please once they’re out of my sight.” Drayard pressed one of his talons to his mouth. “In this matter, if they don’t want your dicks to work, they do as they desire.”

“Well, then, tell them to undo whatever they did,” Asenah commanded, lightning sparking in her eyes.

But her silent fury didn’t seem to touch Drayard, not even one bit. “Ah, but it’s impossible. How long does it take for the sting to go away?” he addressed the bat girls.

“Usually a month,” the right one said.

“Or two,” the other added.

“Sometimes half a year,” both of them chirped in harmony.

Asenah continued glaring at him, but shortly, she diverted her ire to her cousins, who looked like kicked dogs. “It’s your problem that you accepted Drayard’s present,” she snarled at them. “Now you deal with it.”

Wolves lowered their eyes, avoiding Asenah’s glare like two misbehaved kids, while Drayard and the bats were relishing the whole scene.

The celebration resumed, and I continued to serve.

I knew the Bloodsucker was lying. He was the one who had ordered his bat girls to incapacitate brothers’ parts. It hadn’t been an accident, as his bats had claimed. Drayard wasn’t even trying to hide it. There was no purpose, as nobody would dare to blame him, only to be sent straight to hell for trying.

But I didn’t understand why he had done such a thing. To entertain himself? Or was it to pay Asenah back for not inviting him to the twins’ birthday celebration?

However, whatever his reasons were, they didn’t matter. I wasn’t going to find them out anyway.

As the celebration ceased, servants were left in the garden to clean up morphs’ mess.

Most of the guests left, but the most privileged morphs stayed here, and Drayard was one of them.

Obviously, we humans were afraid to go back to the mansion where the most dangerous male was lurking. It wasn't surprising that everyone took their time to tidy the garden.

"He has shown up here before, right?" I asked Thea.

I needn't mention his name for her to understand who I was talking about.

She shook her head. "Not as I've been serving here."

I placed another empty glass I'd found shoved in the bush on the tray. Those morphs, even with blue blood streaming through their veins, were slobs. There were tables they could have put empty glasses on, but they must have thrashed the garden instead. Perhaps they had done it on purpose so that humans would have more work after the celebration, which wouldn't shock me.

"Why do you think he's here?"

"I believe for a far more important reason than to sting Asenah's cousins' sensitive parts," she said through a faint smile.

I chuckled. "At least we are safe for a month."

"Or two," she added.

"Or half a year," we both said at once and looked at each other with crooked grins.

We cracked up, giggling like two madwomen for quite a while. Some servants smiled at the look of us because seldom somebody produced an honest laugh. I'd learnt to cherish those moments as they helped me not lose myself and my sanity.

That very same night, I couldn't fall asleep because of the growling stomach. No wonder it was playing a march. I'd only breakfasted as I'd been too preoccupied with decorating the garden and later serving morphs.

Since it was pointless to fight the hunger, hoping I'd fall asleep sooner or later, I lit the candle and started making my way to the pantry upstairs.

I still couldn't believe I'd met the Bloodsucker a few hours ago. The same one I'd heard stories about ever since I'd been three. First, sweeter versions, and only when I'd grown older, my mother had introduced me to a whole tale.

As I opened the doors of the pantry, I caught someone giggling. Frowning, I moved the candle to see who was there and stilled.

Franz was whispering something to Thea, whose back was against the wall. I blinked in confusion, and then they noticed me, the whispers and giggles dissolving into silence. They were staring at me wide-eyed, as if caught doing something they shouldn't.

But I'd indeed caught them doing something they should or not, I didn't know.

Franz opened his mouth to say something, but I beat him to it. "I wasn't here. I saw nothing." I moved back, but before I closed the door, I winked at Thea. I could swear she blushed, even if I wasn't there to see that as I closed the door.

Unable to contain a smile, I sneaked into the kitchen. Franz and Thea? Who would have thought? Although, when I thought deeper about it, it wasn't that surprising.

Rummaging through the counters, I looked for something that wouldn't need to be prepared but satiate my hunger.

But I halted in the middle of my search, feeling that I wasn't alone.

Someone was in the kitchen with me, swallowed by the shadows, *watching* me.

I snatched the first thing my eyes spotted—which was just an apple—and scurried out of the kitchen, praying whoever was there wasn't following me.

As I glanced over my shoulder, nobody was at my heels. I sighed in relief and returned to the bedroom.

The rest of the night, I was chewing an apple while sketching a suit for a man.

But I drifted off before I could finish the sketch.

XIX

THE NEXT DAY, the grand dining room was occupied with more individuals than usual. And it was eerily silent. Everyone was afraid to make a single sound as the Bloodsucker was also here, but without his bats. With or without them, his presence unsettled them regardless.

I recognised all the faces and was acquainted with their names except one. Among them was the same female who had made me stumble over her leg and fall in front of all the morphs' eyes.

Panther dominated the centre of the table. No one dared to sit next to her as her mischievous gaze insinuated one could expect anything from her. By now, I was sure she was the one lurking in the shadows when I'd gone for a snack in the kitchen at midnight. Panthers were sneaky animals, after all.

Asenah and Drayard had claimed seats on the opposite ends of the table. And the other four, Asenah's cousins with their fiancées, were sitting in their usual places on either side of Asenah. "How long do you plan to stay here, Drayard?" Asenah inquired after a long, unwelcoming silence.

The Bloodsucker took a sip of wine. "Not long."

To avoid showing any sign of interest in the conversation, I concentrated on his wings, which were several steps away from where I was standing. As I studied them, I realised they weren't perfect. They had small cuts. Only little claws atop his wings were unharmed. Both wings had a shade of black at their ends, blending with the wine-red colour smoothly.

Magnificent. Even if his wings were scarred, they were still magnificent.

"Why are you here at all?" Asenah continued questioning, staring at him keenly.

"Are you allowed to question your King's motives, Asenah?"

Displeasure entered Asenah's face, but no other word left her mouth as she resumed eating while still keeping a wary eye on Drayard.

"How are things in Casidiarn, Dara?" Drayard addressed the panther female while taking a bite of roast mutton.

"Nayden with the council is still trying to solve the curse," Dara said blandly.

“Isn’t it strange how forty years have passed since the curse, and nobody has figured out how to solve it yet?”

Kayla, Fawne and the twins nodded in agreement, not daring to look at Drayard, staring at their plates instead while Dara with Asenah remained motionless.

“They don’t understand what *lost and found* might be,” Dara admitted while cutting roast mutton with a knife.

“I believe their sorceresses aren’t a great help either?”

Dara winced. “Witches can’t be trusted.”

“They can’t be, indeed,” the dragon agreed. “But the curse is four decades old. It’s the main problem of our lands, and the emperor isn’t determined to vanquish it, nor is his council, nor is the empress.”

Even if his words blamed his rulers, his tone was impassive.

The confusion was written all over Dara’s face. “They want to get rid of the curse as much as any morph. Why wouldn’t they make it a priority?”

“Let’s see...” he said. “They did nothing when enchanters massacred a part of my kind, leaving it as my problem to deal with. They are throwing parties for no specific reason once in a month instead of cracking the curse. Then they are punishing sorceresses for their ancestors’ crimes instead of communicating with them to extract valuable information.” He slightly tilted his head to the side. “Should I continue?”

“Are you accusing my family of being bad monarchs?” Dara asked.

“The Haroun family has been ruling ever since the beginning of morphs. Some ruled better than others. Some almost made morphs fall.” He stated the facts I didn’t know about and certainly didn’t care to learn, despite my ears listening attentively to this conversation. “I have nothing against lion morphs and your family, Dara. But Nayden has to rethink his reign’s purpose or pass it on to someone else who would be better at their duty.”

“Is that someone else you, Drayard?” Asenah asked with a shade of bite in her voice.

I heard his faint smile in the words as he said, “I’m a warrior, not a ruler, Asenah.”

“If being the emperor of the Empire of Beasts is too extreme for you, then you have someone else in mind. Someone you picture as a great monarch,” Dara surmised. “Who is he?”

Drayard toyed with silence while he sipped his wine. Tasting, savouring it. Although neither of the twins with their betrothed showed it, I could

wager they were as intrigued by what words were exchanged in this room as I was.

Eventually, the Bloodsucker swallowed, ending this tormenting silence. “Who was talking about him, Daraine?”

He caught her off guard, for she seemed a bit bemused. I could have sworn her emotions changed because of the way he’d called her. *Daraine*. But her bemusement was replaced by gravity in a matter of a heartbeat. “A woman can never rule the empire on her own. You should know that, *Drayard*.”

“Why, yes, but you see, it’s been like that over millennia in our world. Only males have been allowed to rule the Empire of Beasts and its realms.”

Asenah harrumphed.

“Yes, Asenah, I am well acquainted you’re a queen,” Drayard remarked. “But I’m sure you are also aware most rulers don’t take you seriously.”

Her jaw clenched, and she took a hefty gulp of wine, voicing nothing.

“As I was saying,” he continued, “we are underestimating the female kind, creating obligations for them before their birth, such as forcing into arranged marriages, children bearing. For lower families, there goes whoring, entertainment for men. Merely a few are regarded as higher, but with exceptions nonetheless. But what about ruling the nation? Perhaps they could do better than a man? How could we claim a woman can’t rule if not one of them has been given a chance to try? Haroun males have been ruling for over millennia, and not much has improved since Macegan claimed the throne. We are one of the few nations falling behind the world, and we will not improve without trying new things, which means stepping out of our system’s established boundaries.”

Everyone was silent.

Lupin was the one chewing that it could be heard even by human ears. As soon as he caught on to that he was the only one producing a sound, he ceased eating and quickly gulped the wine.

Asenah then spoke. “You’re a man. How can you say that?”

“I keep an open mind,” he said half-heartedly. “I’m not saying all men are terrible rulers. I, myself, can tell from experience my ruling in my realm is splendid.” Dara slightly shook her head. “But we haven’t given women a chance to prove they could also reign, perhaps be even better at it. They do have a nature to manipulate to get what they need.”

Dara arched her brow. “Are you saying manipulating is a required trait for a ruler?”

I was on her side with this one. Being manipulative was a negative trait, and no ruler should be one, let alone use it unless they had no other choice.

“How else are you going to trick your enemies?” Drayard asked.

Silence.

As no one spoke, Drayard went on. “Men can also master the skill of manipulating, but they could never manipulate the way a woman can. They’re the gender that not only has power with their minds or voices but also their bodies.”

I gritted my teeth, my nails digging into the tray I was holding in my right hand instead of smashing it against Drayard’s skull for what he’d said.

“However, it’s not what gender rules the nation that matters,” he said. “It’s what the people need to appreciate the empire they live in, instead of cursing it every day. And not much is focused on them, is it?”

Nobody answered, but I didn’t think it was needed when he was speaking undeniable facts. Instead, they exchanged wary looks with one another except for Drayard, Dara and Asenah. Asenah and Dara were observing him with suspicion while the Bloodsucker was savouring his meal. He didn’t voice another assertion during the rest of the dinner, despite dissimilar looks towards his side.

The next morning, I was collecting vegetables. Since it was already torrid outside, it was roasting in the greenhouse.

The loose strands of my hair clung to my clammy forehead and nape. The uniform had gained an uncomfortable feeling against my sweating body. I endeavoured to pick every vegetable I needed to get to the kitchen into the basket as fast as possible so I could hurry out of here, open the freezer and duck my head there to cool down.

“Your gardener is doing a great job.”

My muscles stiffened as soon as I heard that masculine voice.

“Don’t you have gardens back in your realm?” Asenah asked.

I could make out their blurred bodies through the greenhouse’s glassed walls. I searched for a cover place around the area, but the glasshouse was all exposed, nothing designed for hiding.

Hence, I dropped to the ground and hid my head behind the basket. Only this way they wouldn't see me. Even if they did, perhaps they would ignore the randomly lying basket amid the glasshouse.

"I do, but different ones." Drayard's voice seemed distant, as if he was somewhere else, not with Asenah.

They continued their amble. I prayed to Gods they wouldn't step in here. They would be idiots if they did, for it was impossible to breathe in here. I must get out of here, or I might faint from the heat and lack of oxygen. But I couldn't. Not when morphs were around.

"Have you found a woman to adore, Dray?"

I wouldn't mind beholding Drayard's reaction, but all I could discern was their blurred bodies through the glass.

"I'm not in a rush," he murmured, voice dismissive.

Asenah didn't take his tone of voice as a hint not to touch that topic. "Shouldn't you be? You should have had an heir by now."

I was certain Asenah was playing with fire. Literally.

"The same applies to you, Asenah," he noted.

Asenah giggled.

She *giggled*.

I hadn't realised she could be capable of such an innocent, girly sound that did not suit her one bit.

"I haven't found anyone worthy of me yet," she said.

"You haven't, or they just don't like you?"

A deathlike silence descended between them. Asenah, however, took his rhetorical question as a joke, and her strained titter echoed throughout the garden a moment too late. She took a step closer to him. "Perhaps together we could... fix our little problem?"

What was Asenah playing? I lived here long enough to know she loathed Drayard, arranged weddings with other realms to have an alliance against him if one day he snapped. But now she was trying to seduce him into sleeping with her and marrying her? It didn't make any sense. What was she striving to achieve now?

"Perhaps," he answered coolly.

Even if Drayard was the most feared morph in the world, he wasn't the wisest one.

"Our offspring could be the rulers not only of two different realms, but the entire empire. Our son, the King of kings and queens as you are, and our

daughter... an empress.” Her voice was just as poisonous as the snake’s venom, but somehow alluring at the same time. “Just as you covet.”

I did not want to hear this conversation. It made me want to barf, acknowledging such odd circumstances.

“Perhaps.” Another bland response came from his mouth.

He wasn’t moving but standing still while Asenah was tracing lines on his chest covered by a dark shirt.

“They would be so powerful,” she continued. “With the dragon’s, bat’s and wolf’s abilities... if we get lucky.”

It must be the most disgusting way to lure someone to bed I’d ever heard.

“Perhaps,” he said impassively again.

Was he enjoying this, or was he bored, or was he waiting for something more from Asenah to break the ice?

I begged the Gods that if they were about to tear their clothes off each other and commit the Sinner’s Tango, they wouldn’t do it in the garden while I was here dying from the torturing heat.

“You’d be my King, I’m your Queen...”

“I’m your King already, Asenah.”

“I know, but you know what I mean.” She leaned closer to his face. He didn’t move. “Imagine what wild sex together we would have...”

Disgusting. Disgusting. Disgusting.

A laugh left Drayard’s mouth. Humourless and hollow.

I could have sworn with my life that Asenah frowned.

“Your acting skills need to be rechecked, Asenah.” He pulled back, getting rid of her touch, and turned to the bushes. “What happened to your love for the princess of beasts? Would you have truly gone for a man rather than a woman?”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“But you do,” he assured. “You seem to have forgotten how old I am and how much I’ve gone throughout my life. I’m not a gullible boy anymore. The world fears me not only for my powers but my wisdom, Asenah. Do you think I’m not aware you make your cousins wed princesses of the other realms to have a stronger alliance in case I declare war against the Empire of Skies? Do you think I don’t know about your unrequited love for Tatyana Haroun?”

Oh, how I would love to see her reaction!

“H-how did you... know?” Asenah inquired unbelievably.

“You’re going to need to try harder to hide something from me. I’m not the King of kings and queens because that title was given to my ancestors so they wouldn’t take over Haroun’s dynasty. I didn’t only inherit the title but deserved it.” His wings spread behind him in one swift, spellbinding motion. “I am the King of yours, and there’s nothing you can do to change it.”

With a flick of his striking wings, he sprang into the sky, leaving not only Asenah speechless and unmoving, but me.

OceanofPDF.com

XX

THE NEXT DINNER, the Bloodsucker was nowhere to be seen. I was relieved. Being in the same residence as the fire-breathing dragon, who could also suck blood at any moment, wasn't tremendously relaxing.

Nobody talked about him. As he'd disappeared in the sky this morning, he'd never come back. He'd left for good.

Once I served the last meal, I returned to the kitchen, where Imogen was waiting for me with a tray.

I placed mine on the cabinet before looking at her.

Her face was pallid.

"Imogen, are you all right?" I asked worriedly.

"I'm fine, but..." With a deep inhale, she issued a breath. "Drayard returned and asked for dinner to his temporary chamber, making a request for it to be *you* who serves it."

I couldn't follow the emotions that struck me right away after she'd said those fatal words, which meant what I didn't want to even think about. My heart, I reckoned, was going to leap out of my chest from its wild throb.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

Sudden panic constricted my throat. I swallowed it with effort. "No." I was shaking my head as tears began to burn my eyes.

Not this again. First the twins, now...

"You have to go there," she said. "You have no choice."

"No." I stepped back. My knees felt nothing but jelly.

"I'm so sorry, lassie."

It wasn't her fault. Nobody's fault was that but morphs' and they didn't care.

I took the tray and glanced at Imogen one more time, searching for strength, which I hardly found. Then I left the kitchen without another word.

My first maid's outfit had been torn in the library. Thea had given me a new one. Would this one be ripped in the room where the Bloodsucker was staying?

My legs trembled, but I did not stop mounting the stairs. I had no choice, and I abhorred that. I wanted to scream again, plead for some non-existent help. But then again, if I screamed, my cries for help would change nothing.

As I reached his closed temporary bedroom doors, I drew in a calming breath and exhaled through my mouth to ease my jittery nerves, but it was no help. At last, I plucked up the courage to knock.

“It’s open,” a deep voice came from within the room.

My hand was strained and sweaty as I placed it on the door handle to open the door. And once I stepped inside, I discovered *him* standing before the arched window with his back to me. His breathtaking wings tucked and gloved hands clasped behind his back.

“Close the door, please.”

I swallowed.

He did not tell me to leave the food. He did not dismiss me, either. I had no other choice but to deal with my fright and obey. As he had ordered, I shut the door behind me with a quivering hand.

I turned my head to him, only to discover him fully turned to me. A tray almost slipped from my damp hands, but I grasped it tighter before it did. His curious golden with the dust of red eyes never left me, watching me like a hawk. It horrified me more than any ravenous stare. Although I was sure I was standing with my clothes on, I felt more naked than the time when twins—

Drayard’s expression altered for a fleeting moment, but it swept back to its prior state incredibly fast, confusing me.

Then he walked towards me with confidence and that unbending power, halting only a step away. I had to crane my neck to see his face, since he was a head taller than me. His height and apparent dominance should have alarmed me, but it didn’t. He took a tray from my hands without grazing my skin and headed to the bed, where he placed it first before sitting on the edge.

And as his eyes returned to me, I retreated a cautious step back.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said, noting my fear, but then added with a smirk, “Not now at least.”

I didn’t expect otherwise.

“They can’t hear us as they don’t know I’m here,” he went on, and nausea twisted my insides. “Well? I’m sure you have questions unless you intend to continue watching me as though I’m about to assail you?”

I tried to swallow the knot of fright, feigning strength. “What do you want?” To my surprise, my voice came out steady and even polite.

He leaned back on his gloved hand, seeming thoughtful. “Oh, I don’t want a lot, Honeylove.” He looked down, furrowing his brows, but then his expression softened, and he raised the cover, uncovering a hot roast chicken. “That’s nice.”

“What do you want from *me*?” I clarified my question. “If you want my body, then go on with it already.”

His head flicked to my side, his eyebrows furrowed again. “I don’t fool around with humans.”

A relief blessed my body. Just a bit, but not even nearly enough. Even if I wasn’t here for *that*, he had requested *me* to bring him food for another unknown reason. Perhaps much worse than being assaulted again.

“Then what do you want from me?” I pressed.

Drayard took his precious time to answer, playing with my nerves as if I was yet another puppet in his spectacle. At least his devouring gaze was on the chicken and not me.

He pulled off his gloves, baring his scaled red hands. He peeled the leg from the chicken and once he tasted it, his eyes closed as he... moaned.

It was muffled, but it was still a moan. I didn’t want to be a part of this, but here I was... the witness of the Bloodsucker being turned on by the mere bite of roast chicken.

Drayard snorted as his eyelids smacked open, eyes on me. I didn’t budge.

He was *mad*. Laughing out of the blue as he had was the mad-like thing to do.

“What’s your name?” he inquired.

What’s your name? the other voice with predatory aftertaste echoed, and the snippets of the revolting memory flashed before me.

The library. The wall. Lupin’s wolf-like face. Fillan—

“Are you all right?”

I came back, meeting the Bloodsucker’s concerned stare. Wait... concerned? No, that couldn’t be right. Folding my arms about myself, I released a calming breath, and the vestiges of the memory diffused until it belonged in the past again.

“Yes,” I lied. Not like he cared anyway.

He stared for a little longer until he resumed savouring his chicken. Without any sounds of pleasure this time, thank heavens.

“You didn’t answer my former question,” he reminded me between bites.

Silly me for thinking I could get away without telling him my name. For a minute, I debated challenging him. Since he’d ignored my question, I should repay him the same, but who was I compared to him? Right... *No one.*

“Genette,” I said, and immediately regretted telling him my sister’s name, even if telling him my name was out of the question.

“I was asking for your *real* name,” he said. “Not your sister’s you’re so pretending to be.”

My eyes bulged.

How does he know about my sister? How—

But on the other hand, how had he found out about Asenah’s plans? Could it be only because of his wisdom or superiority to others?

“Are you going to tell me your real name or not?”

With that, he brought me back from my musings, and utter shock and puzzlement evaporated to anger. My bracelet started to sting my skin, and his gaze lowered to it. I covered my hand behind my back.

“If I tell you my name, you tell me why I’m here.” I tried to negotiate.

He looked up and half-smiled, but other than that, he said nothing.

I issued another annoyed sigh. “If there’s no use of me, then dismiss me.”

“No, you’re staying.”

I scowled, crossing my arms. “I’ve heard stories about you.”

“Ah, my heroic deeds?”

“No.”

Did he even have those, or was he fooling me?

He sighed. “What a pity.”

Yes, he was indeed fooling me. “I know *A Tale of the Bloodsucker*. I have it all memorised.”

A teasing smile pulled the corner of his mouth. “Are you fond of me, Honeylove?”

“The point is...” I said steely, “I’m not a clueless or foolish girl. There’s something you need from me. On account of your appalling past, I believe the roast chicken is only an appetiser when the whole meal is me.”

He showed no reaction. Not even the slightest clue whether I was right. All he did was say in wonder, “The Mortal Region has stories written about me?”

“Not only about you.”

His eyebrows smacked up. “Am I painted as a villain?”

“More like a monster.”

“Such flattery.”

Silence sank between us. I needed to leave this room and keep my distance from him, but I couldn’t do it without his dismissal. I must remain here.

What an insufferable scoundrel.

Now, now, you’re not a saint either. His voice emerged in my head like thunder in a clear sky, causing the hair of my arms to rise. *Didn’t your parents teach you eavesdropping might get you decapitated?*

“You can read thoughts.”

Now everything made sense. *Why* his snort had been out of the blue earlier. *How* he was aware of Asenah’s plans just as much as he knew I’d been in the greenhouse earlier this morning. He knew those things because he was a telepath. But it was strange. Morphs couldn’t read anyone’s thoughts. They didn’t possess such ability, unlike enchanters. The only way to explain his mysterious power would be that he wasn’t who he claimed himself to be.

“But how can you read thoughts?”

“I’m still trying to figure it out,” he mumbled and sank his teeth into a chicken’s leg.

I frowned at his silly answer and did the algebra in no time. “Aren’t you, like, one hundred years old?”

“One hundred eighty-one years old, Honeylove,” he corrected.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Tell me your name, then.”

I let out another sigh. “My name’s Elynn,” I said, giving in. “Happy now, *Your Highness?*” I raised my eyebrows mockingly.

He cracked a smile. “Delighted.” Although it was an obvious sarcasm, his tone carried a faint amusement. “I’m Drayard, in case you didn’t know.”

I dared to roll my eyes. “So, are you going to tell Asenah I was eavesdropping? Get me beheaded?”

“No, but you should be more prudent next time.”

“Oh, how considerate of you!” I exclaimed. He didn’t react. “Does it mean she isn’t aware of it?”

“I can assure you that she’s not.”

Why I believed him, I couldn’t tell. He seemed genuine, even if from what I’d seen, he was fond of wearing invisible masks. But why would he lie about it?

“So, is this a dismissal?”

“No.”

I curled my lip in annoyance as I watched Drayard continuing to eat with a smile, frustrating me even more. However, despite its wicked purpose, his smile was not like the ones I’d seen him plastering on in front of others. What differed was that this smile was also visible in his eyes.

“Are you going to kill me?” I asked.

“Not if you answer me one question.”

“Can’t you just get your desired answers from reading my thoughts?”

“Answer my question and you’re free to go.” He dodged my question. Just. Like. That.

“Am I your prisoner now?” I asked scornfully. “The last time I checked, I was Asenah’s slave, not yours, *Your Highness*.”

“You have a sharp tongue, I see.”

“Yes, my only weapon.”

He tilted his head to the side. “A weapon if you know how to use it; otherwise, it can put you in extreme danger.”

I gritted my teeth. “Eat your bloody chicken.”

He huffed out a laugh, placing a bone on the plate. “I see you’ve forgotten who I am, Elynn.” He arose, his wings extending behind his back in a sharp motion.

I flinched, not expecting that, but he must have misinterpreted my reaction because he said with a sinful smirk, “You’re back to being afraid of me.” He locked his shoulders, presenting himself more menacing when he was standing at his full height with his wings conquering most of the room’s space. “Good.”

But I was not afraid. I was disgusted, in awe and curious. But not afraid, regardless of my palpitating heart. He was like his tale. Its purpose was to give the creeps, but it intrigued me instead. He was scary, yes, but his frightening demeanour carried a piece of charm that stirred up interest, making me forget all about the menace he was.

Instead of correcting him, I sneered. "What sick game are you playing?"
"I'm playing not only one sick game," he said, and the candlelight dampened, the entire room switching darker, colder, "but many of them."

Just kill me already, you psycho.

I've been called worse, he said, unaffected.

Get out of my head.

It's not my fault you're sending your thoughts to me.

What?

What?

"Answer my question, and you can go," he said in earnest.

"Promise?"

He inclined his head. "Promise."

I inspected him suspiciously.

Right then, I was confident of one thing. No matter what, I couldn't trust him. As clear as it was. But there was one problem. Did I have another choice? And the answer was one and only. I. Did. Not.

I jerked my chin up. "Go on, then."

He gathered his hands behind his back, pausing a moment before voicing, "If your human mother couldn't bear children, how were your siblings born?"

My jaw dropped.

What the...

"H-how... How do you—"

"Answer my question, Elynn."

I stared at him in disbelief and absolute shock.

How did he even know I also had a brother? Or that my mother couldn't have children for a while? He couldn't have read my mind *that* far. But then again, I had no clue how his telepathy worked precisely. Perhaps from a single glimpse, he could read every detail about me, *see* my every memory.

But then why would he ask me if he had the power to tell everything about a person from a mere glimpse at it?

I must get out of here as fast as possible. Away from him and his overpotent abilities, but the only way to do it was to answer his inquiry.

"The same as I was," I replied gravely. "By Gods' miracle."

"No, but how—"

"You promised if I answered your *one* question, you'd let me go."

Perhaps it was a bad idea to counter the most lethal creature alive, but I couldn't help myself. I didn't understand what had got into me, from where I'd received such boldness which could likely turn me into ashes.

Drayard stared at me with such intensity that I believed he was about to open his mouth and spit fire on me for opposing him, but that didn't happen. He put back on an expressionless mask instead. "Then, you shall go." He turned away, finally dismissing me.

I didn't hesitate to leave his room. And when I was out, I realised I'd been holding my breath this whole time.

But as I thought I was free from him, his voice echoed in my head.

Never remove your bracelet, Elynn.

That remaining night, I tried to understand the meaning of the Bloodsucker's words while staring at the bracelet as if it could give me answers. It always burned for some mysterious reason, but I never understood what it was.

Undoubtedly, the bracelet had saved me in some magical way from Fillan's fatal maws. But I had never thought about how or why.

Drayard might know. But as I asked him in my head, naively hoping he would answer what he'd meant, no response came.

Because he wasn't in the mansion anymore, he was gone for real this time.

And I didn't know whether I should be worried about his possible return someday or not.

XXI

“GEN,” SOMEONE SAID while shaking my shoulder.

As I cracked my one eye open, Thea’s face, lit by the candle in her hand, appeared in sight.

“Wake up,” she said. “We must go.”

I sat up and stared at her drowsily. “Go where?”

“Upstairs. Everyone is going.”

Being awakened—I could only assume in the middle of the night—made it harder for me to process information, but I didn’t need much time to understand that something was far from being all right.

“Thea... what’s going on?”

“I don’t know.” I stood up and took her hand. “But I’m scared... I’m really scared.”

I couldn’t help but feel the same.

We went across the corridor, up the stairs and into the room we seldom visited—the antechamber. I’d cleaned it a few times. On the opposite wall, there were two double doors and between them—cream chairs with brown edges, matching the cream wallpaper trimmed with wood. Dozens of servants were already here, including guards and Clare. The girl I hadn’t seen in a while. She didn’t seem to notice me, or she didn’t look at me on purpose.

There were no whispers, no sounds except feet padding against the floor. I looked at Imogen standing by the double doors. She shrugged as if to say she didn’t know why we were here, either.

Then the other doors opened, and Asenah entered like a storm. She stood in the middle and regarded us with a bone-chilling gaze.

“I won’t waste my time by starting with a preamble,” she said; her voice had never been this cold and strict. “There is a snitch among you.”

A snitch? Involuntarily, I stole a glance at Clare. Her face betrayed nothing. I shouldn’t throw accusations, but that girl was the only one suspicious and mysterious of all of us. I wouldn’t be surprised if she turned out to be a snitch.

“This *snitch*,” Asenah said with disgust as she began going from the first person of the line, looking directly at our eyes to spot a lie in one of us, “told all my plans with other realms to the Bloodsucker. I’m giving them a chance to take a step forward and give themselves away or else you will all regret being born as humans.”

I clenched my teeth. My bracelet began stinging my flesh again, but I couldn’t cover it as I’d given my right hand to Thea. Drayard had noticed something was off with it. There was a chance Asenah might see that too once she got near me.

“Well?” She was getting closer. “Which one of you did it?”

It might as well be me. Drayard had known I was hiding in the greenhouse while he and Asenah were in the garden. He might have read my mind. Even if it technically wasn’t my fault, it had to be me, this supposed snitch, because who else could it be?

She reached me at last. As most people avoided her cutting stare, I held it strong. She observed me way longer than the rest. I wished to spit on her, at her ugly wolf’s face, for taking the lives of innocent people, but of course, I didn’t. She opened her mouth as though about to say something, to accuse me because she could tell it was me, but then the voice sounded, “It was me.”

Everyone looked at the girl. Asenah turned her head. It was the staff manager, Jill, whose job was to make sure Asenah looked flawless day and night, manage other servant’s work and help to carry dishes at dinner time.

She took a step further, avoiding the stares. “I’m sorry, I... I had no choice. He cornered me, and I got scared and... and he asked me if there is something he needs to know. At first, I denied it, but he didn’t believe me. I didn’t have a choice. I knew what he could—”

“Enough.” Asenah crossed to her and gripped her neck. Thea gasped, and I held her hand stronger while Asenah lifted Jill, her toes barely touching the floor. She was struggling against her grasp, trying to pry Asenah’s fingers off her neck in vain while gasping for some air, tears streaming down her face. “You know what happens to traitors.” She squeezed her neck harder. I had to watch myself so that I wouldn’t do anything stupid. “You all must see what happens to those who disobey.”

She choked her harder, her claws dug into her flesh, and the blood oozed out, sliding down her pale neck. Jill never stopped to wriggle and beg, “M-mercy.”

We did nothing. There was nothing we could do, only watch, even though not all of us did. Thea refused to look, whereas I did not, watching with undisguised hatred and mute ire. I didn't let myself blink until Jill stopped stirring and Asenah let go of her. Her lifeless body crumpled to the floor, and her long brown hair covered all the mess, but eventually, the puddle of blood seeped through it.

Asenah turned to us. Her fingers dripped with blood and droplets of it landed on the shiny floor, but she wasn't bothered. I could discern no sign of guilt in her features, but what else was I expecting? Jill was yet another inconsequential life for her. "Well, I need a new personal maid now, and the one who would look after your work," she said, her voice devoid of emotion.

She didn't take her time to pick a replacement for Jill. She made her choice pretty fast, as if she had known who her next victim would be before killing Jill.

Her chilly eyes were staring right at me. "You will do."

That was all she said before she strode off, disregarding Jill's body as if it was nothing more than trash.

As soon as she was gone, Thea and some others broke into tears. I pulled her into a hug, letting her cry in my chest.

"She needs to be burned," Imogen announced to everyone, her voice on the verge of tears, but she controlled herself well. "We all should say our goodbyes, but those who can't bear to see her body burn should stay here and wipe the blood off the floor."

Most chose to go.

Imogen was in the lead while guards carried the body behind her, and I was comforting Thea.

"It's the full moon," Thea murmured. I could hardly hear her. "Morphs become more brutal at the first full moon of the month. It rattles the looming beast inside them."

Although her words explained Fillan's aggressiveness the night he'd bitten me, they didn't justify Asenah's actions. "Thea, what Asenah did is unforgiving. Whether it's a full moon or not, it doesn't excuse them from what they do. They all have no humanity, and we shouldn't search for reasons to explain why they are the way they are."

They found a spot to burn her body not far away from the mansion. It was all done to honour the tradition in the Mortal Region, which came from

an archaic belief that if a body was burned, there was a higher chance Gods above would open their hearts to welcome a soul to their world.

I didn't mourn Jill, unlike Thea. I hadn't known her well. We had hardly exchanged any words ever since the day I'd awakened in the mansion. Instead, I was Thea's emotional crutch while the skin under my bracelet itched as I watched Jill's body envelop in flames in the forest's depths. I never looked away. Not until the chilly wind blew away her ashes.

My who-make-to-pay-first list altered. Instead of Fillan and Lupin being at the very top, Asenah conquered the leading position.

Ever since that night, I spent quite a torturing amount of time with her. At least she wasn't a telepath. I could invent various plans for her coming retribution while my hands were on her scalp, pinning her healthy long onyx hair into whatever hairstyle she desired instead of sliding them around her throat and squeezing tighter and tighter and...

To my relief, Asenah never tried to talk to me. Otherwise, if she'd attempted to make the conversation flow between us, I doubted I'd have kept my voice polite and unbothered.

When it came to my responsibilities as a staff manager, I didn't hate it as I would have assumed. I didn't mind organising the work and ordering people around. I even felt some kind of pleasure in telling Clare what she must do for the garden once a week. At least I didn't have to do any kitchen work anymore. I still carried dishes to the dining room when there were guests, but Jill also used to do that.

My twentieth birthday came and I almost missed it. Nobody was conscious of it, but I didn't expect them to be. They all still took me as my little sister. Still sixteen.

Autumn arrived, and with it, the Autumn Equinox was drawing nearer. The time when day and night were not only equal in length but the time when morphs could turn into their real form. It was one of the two days in a year when they looked like us, humans, but were far more powerful and brutal creatures. And when that day came, I would be in the Empire of Beasts for three months. Time had passed by quicker than I'd expected.

On the same day, Fillan was marrying Fawne. Apparently, Asenah didn't call off the wedding after learning Drayard had known about her plans all along. By now, I assumed, her goal to have allies against the Bloodsucker

wasn't the sole reason she was forcing her cousins into undesirable matrimony. But I couldn't care less about her actual intentions.

The only good that had come out of all this crazy month was that Fillan and Lupin weren't functioning enough to assault other servants. At least I hadn't heard of it. Those bat girls the Bloodsucker had sent upon them had done a noble job. The only pity was that it wasn't permanent.

Currently, Thea was brewing tea for us while I was gazing at the forest beyond the window, trying to spot any hint of autumn. But there was none. Pines didn't have that magical ability to dye into multiple colours and shake off the leaves, unlike deciduous trees during this season, as they had no leaves to begin with. At times like this, I was reminded of how much I was missing home, and it stung my heart, for I'd never see it again.

At this hour, all staff were taking a break from the kitchen, including Imogen. I could only imagine how sick they must feel after spending most of their day in the same environment.

"How could Imogen and her brother be offered together?" I asked Thea as she was pouring boiling water into the cup with herbs.

Thea was looking better after the incident with Jill. Considering that Jill used to be Thea's friend, she was coping with her murder pretty well.

"She told you about Finn?" she said, amazed, while filling her cup with water. I nodded. "Well, they both were sixteen and had to be offered together." She rested a kettle on the cooker and slid into a chair across from me.

"But only one could be offered," I noted. "The youngest child of the family, not two."

"I don't know, Gen," she mumbled, her eyes nailed to the cup.

"Liar."

Thea wasn't difficult to read. She was like an open book of emotions. I could easily tell when she was lying. Thea betrayed not only her eyes, which were focused on anything but me but her tone of voice. It always sank a tone lower when she lied.

Apart from reading Thea, I'd also learnt to understand others over these past three months. I could discern who was telling falsehoods or didn't like someone from their feigned expressions. That mainly applied to morphs as they were creatures who always wore invisible masks on their faces.

"I truly don't know."

"You *do* know, Thea. Don't lie to me."

“It’s not my story to tell.” At last, she raised her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“She won’t tell me.” I stared at her with a plea.

“I can’t tell you, Gen. I’m sorry.”

“Thea, please.” But she had her lips pursed reluctantly. “Please? Please. Please. Please—”

“Fine,” she relented, and a satisfied smile pulled my mouth. “But don’t tell her I told you.”

I nodded, my smile kicking up a notch. “Never.”

“Do you promise?” she asked unsurely.

“Promises don’t do any good. They could be broken very easily.”

A faint smile welcomed her face. “*They* do take promises here very seriously. Sometimes they use magic to guarantee one of them will keep it.”

“For real?” My eyebrows raised incredulously.

Thea nodded.

“How do you know?”

“I saw it once.”

Now it was clear why, before Drayard left, he’d promised to let me go if I answered his question. He could have made me answer another one if he’d pleased, but he hadn’t because he was a morph and took promises seriously.

A promise could be morphs’ weak spot.

I scribbled another mental note that might come useful sometime.

“All right.” I set a hand on the left side of my chest. “I promise not to tell her or anybody else.”

She chuckled and tucked the loose strand behind her ear before she began, “About fifteen years ago, back in the Mortal Region, Imogen and Finn were creating a plan which would protect their youngest brother from the annual offering.”

“Hold on,” I interrupted before she continued. “They weren’t the youngest?”

She shook her head. “No. Imogen and Finn were about twenty years old. They’d been at the start of creating their own lives, but a threat of their little brother being offered to this world made them rethink the purpose of their life.” She took a sip of still hot tea and winced a little. The heat must have singed her tongue. “When they came up with a solution, they went to pledgers. They made a bargain. Instead of their brother getting offered, they offered themselves at the same time. They thought having more wisdom would be better than throwing an inexperienced sixteen-year-old into this

world. Besides, Imogen and Finn had been trained to hunt ever since their childhood. They come from a family of hunters.” She spoke the last two sentences in a pitched voice so they wouldn’t reach morphs’ ears.

Imogen’s situation reminded me of mine. With the boy’s spirit and the certain book’s help, I’d received an idea to offer myself instead of my sister. But I hadn’t gone to pledgers to ask for their permission. I’d tricked them into believing I was Gen with the help of the potion.

“But how did morphs not realise they weren’t sixteen?”

“Morphs don’t recognise the age difference. Whatever pledgers write in the sent lists, they believe. After all, they don’t age as fast as we do. Most of them look like they are in their early twenties in their human form. How are they going to tell a human’s age if they don’t know what sixteen-year-olds are supposed to look like?”

I’d indeed noticed that not only morphs but also humans didn’t grasp that I was older. Or it was because I looked younger than nineteen, now twenty.

“Flaws of a long life.” I took a sip. Hot liquid skidded down my throat, warming me even if it wasn’t cold here. As if it warmed more of my soul than my body.

“I wish I could live longer,” Thea admitted.

I stared at her unbelievably. “Really? You’d better live this accursed life?”

“Not this life,” she muttered. “If I were a morph or enchantress, I’d run away from here, find someone to love and create a family with them. I’d spend my thousand years with people I love.”

“That’s... adorable.”

And naïve. But I did not share my negativity with Thea.

Her giggle got me smiling, which reminded me... “What’s up with you and Franz? Are you two lovers?”

She sipped her tea, but not even the rim of the cup could hide her rosy cheeks.

“Thea...” I teased.

She pursed her lips, looking down at the cup.

“Even if I said I saw nothing, I didn’t say anything about the hearing part,” I whispered.

The colour in her cheeks enhanced. I couldn’t help but think it was adorable. A young love was one remarkable thing. Besides... Thea

deserved it, despite the circumstances encompassing Franz and her.

“Maybe,” she said, acting all secretive, but her behaviour was giving her away. She didn’t have to pretend.

“Well, be careful,” I warned, but then I realised it was something Imogen would say, so I was quick to amend myself. “I mean... other maids can spread a rumour, and you know, jealous people are capable of all kinds of mischief.”

She nodded, resting her cup down. “What would *you* do if you were one of *them*?”

I frowned. “I wouldn’t like to be any of them at all.” I slid my palms around the cup. “But if I was...” Thea was staring at me like a little girl who was about to hear a night-time story. “If I was one of them, I’d make them all pay for their crimes.”

Disappointment washed over her face. “That could be a long list.”

“I promised I’d make them pay, Thea. I intend to keep my promise.”

I’d meant my words the night I’d come downstairs with no fabric on my body and learnt twins had also abused her. I would make them pay for what they’d done to us, to other human girls, despite the cost.

“I know.” She sighed. “But I asked what you would do if you were one of *them*.”

“I don’t know,” I said gravely.

“Come on.” Her lips turned up in a soft smile. “Dream about it.”

“I don’t dream, Thea.”

I have nightmares.

Her smile wavered. “Imagine, then?”

I mustered a feeble smile. “I don’t allow myself to imagine either.”

“Why?”

My smile vanished, and my palms stiffened on the cup as if it was holding me away from the breaking point.

“There’s no point in imagining. Nothing we could ever imagine would come true, and we should make peace with the reality ahead of us.” I fought the tears through the shadows of what my life had become, passing through my mind. “Imogen would never leave further than this mansion’s kitchen. Finn and Jill would never be resurrected. They are *dead*. You would never have your desired loving family, and I...”

I’d never allowed myself to imagine or dream about anything my heart craved for. I would *never* let myself do it. If it had been a point of dreaming

earlier, now it was absolutely pointless.

I feel you too, stranger.

All right, I might have been a hypocrite by saying I never imagined anything, for I forced myself to picture the stranger from my trance when I was in the hands of other men. At those moments, the vision of him dispatched me to a better place, protecting me from all the horrors. But he could also be a mirage my mind had created to shield itself from awful things encompassing me, despite how my heart was against that belief.

“And you...?”

As Thea’s voice pulled me back to earth, I dropped my eyes to the cup. My mouth had gone dry, and tears stung my eyes. I didn’t raise a cup to dampen my throat or hands to rub the tears off. I didn’t, as then Thea would know I was on the edge of crying and start raising questions.

“And I...” I swallowed the lump in my throat, endeavouring to sound steady. “And I would never learn what true love feels like.”

OceanofPDF.com

XXII

I WAS SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE dressed fancier than I'd ever seen. Men wore suits with bow ties or vests that matched their ladies' autumn-inspired gowns. Music played by various instruments blessed my ears and warmed my heart while a dozen couples were participating in a gallop amid what appeared to be a ballroom.

But why would I be in a ballroom?

The mix of perfumes irritated my nostrils. Regardless of the cloying scents, they didn't make my nose wrinkle for some mysterious reason.

Sighing, I looked down at my hands. Unusually broad and black leather-gloved hands.

Perplexity crossed me.

These hands weren't mine.

These hands belonged to a *man*.

I wasn't actually dreaming, was I?

I tucked my hands into my pockets. No. *He* tucked *his* hands, not me. Or was it me dreaming from a man's perspective? I'd heard dreams could be uncanny. But if I was dreaming, I wouldn't be conscious of it, would I? However, whether I was dreaming or not, I, in the body of a man, turned around and slid into the deserted hallway through the double wide-open doors.

The interior swept my breath away. Everything seemed to be built of marble and gold. Impressive crystal chandeliers dangled from the arched ceilings, providing the corridors with cosy light—perfect for wandering inside when the outside was swallowed by the dark. My—his—barely audible footsteps bounced off the walls, dying away in the distance. And the smell had its peculiar quality, quite refreshing, but heady at the same time.

“Isn't that the king of embers I spy exploring the forbidden area without permission?”

I started.

The king of embers? Wasn't that the Bloodsucker himself? But how?

Halting, he glanced over his shoulder, and I caught a glimpse of wings I'd seen before.

Indeed it was the same ill-famed Drayard. But why would I be having a dream in his body?

The short and petite woman was leaning against the wall. She was garbed in yet another shade of autumn ball gown, almost drowning in it. Grey-green embroidered with bronze complemented her brown complexion, bringing out the olive in her eyes. Her dark-brown hair was done in two knots, while the rest was left to flow down her shoulders in smooth curls.

Her looks were lovely, but I had a strange feeling about her.

“What is it you want now, Dara?” he asked.

Of course... Of course, it's that sneaky panther!

“It's been a while since I saw you here.” There was that familiar mischief in her words, but I couldn't disregard the suggestiveness in them.

Drayard whipped his head away, continuing to stroll through the corridor, but Dara didn't let him go that easily.

“I know you're not here to party, Drayard.”

He quickened his pace.

“Should I tell Nayden about you wandering around his castle without his knowledge?”

Drayard came to an abrupt halt and hesitated a moment before turning to the panther.

A satisfied smile tugged at the side of her violet-painted lips.

“Is there something you want, Dara?”

“I do want something, yes.” She pushed herself off the wall. “I want to know the real reason you attended the Autumn Equinox's celebration.”

“The same as any other guest. To have a good time.”

“No, that's not it.” She pouted while looking slightly up at the ceiling before her naughty eyes returned to him. “You don't know what a good time means, Drayard. So don't waste our time and tell me exactly why you're here, and I'll leave you to it.”

Drayard stared at her with unyielding intensity, as if trying to read her, to reach her thoughts, which were unexpectedly hard to get to.

How was I aware of—

It clicked then. This was not a dream. This was *real*.

But how was it possible?

Dara huffed. “You know I was trained to keep my thoughts to myself, right?” she said. “Try as much as you like, but your endeavours will remain

pointless.”

I could feel how annoyed Drayard was. The panther had detained him from whatever his mission was. But he couldn't confide in her with his plans. He didn't trust a single soul apart from himself.

It was insane how I could hear his every thought as well as I could hear mine.

“I'm not in the mood for games, Dara.” He took a formidable step towards her. “If you say even a word about my doings to Nayden, I will have something to say to whoever you might be betrothed to someday. Something that would strip you of your title, princess of the Realm of Wilds, daughter of Ariel Fahedos, who is the most revered advisor of the emperor.”

Dara's eyes narrowed. A gleam of anger sparked in them. “No one's going to believe you.”

“Do you intend to risk it?”

She was silent.

Whatever Drayard was holding over her, it was working. Whatever her secret was, she wouldn't risk her future betrothed to learn about it. I could see it in her face and long-lasting quietness.

With undisguised dissatisfaction, she turned on her heel, and after several steps, disappeared behind the corner.

He tarried for a bit longer after Dara left. But eventually, he continued venturing through this enormous and complex castle, passing different hallways, mounting stairwells, entering various grand and regal rooms, clearly searching for something.

But what was he so eager to find?

He halted once his sensitive ears caught sounds emanating from somewhere behind the wall. Sounds that his ears conveyed to my head.

Moans.

He grimaced and was made to go, but froze as if he realised something.

As he tilted his head to the right, the gap between double doors snagged his attention. One door was opened just a crack.

No...

It's Nayden's chamber. His voice, full of acknowledgement, echoed in his mind as if he was talking to me, but I wasn't sure about that.

He crept towards the doors and leaned his back against a shut one, peering into the room through a small opening.

What he beheld was improper for anyone to see. A blonde man had his lips on a woman with the same hair colour. His hands were on her hips as their kissing intensified, and he pushed her to the bed behind her. It was placed at the perfect angle for Drayard to get his eyes on almost everything.

Drayard smirked.

He *smirked*.

How perverted was the Bloodsucker?

But he turned his head away from the sight and propped it against the door, smiling as if he had discovered gold at the end of the rainbow.

That's disgusting.

Hello, Honeylove. That deep voice rang in my head, as caressing as the cloud must be, but it spooked me regardless. *What are you doing in my head?*

I couldn't care less that he sniffed me here when dissimilar, rich with pleasure voices wafted their way to Drayard's ears, then mine.

Get away from the door, you pervert! I snapped at him.

Why should I? I could feel his smile growing bigger. *Two siblings having sex might be my quirk.*

Two siblings?

Yes. Their names are Nadira and Nayden. You must know them as emperor and empress of the Empire of Beasts.

Ew ew ew ew.

Ew, indeed.

Then why are you listening to... that? I asked, beyond confused.

Get out of my head if you're not fond of it.

And you're telling me you are fond of it?

Listen, you've been in my head long enough. It's time for you to leave.

So he'd been aware of me all along.

If I knew how to get out of your head, I'd have long since gone, pervert!

If you don't know how, then how the hell did you get into my head in the first place? His voice wasn't as mellow as it'd been before, but rather vexed.

Oh, he didn't like it when somebody *else* was in his head, but he felt free to roam in other minds. How the tables had turned!

I don't know. I'm currently sleeping, Drayard.

At least I supposed I was while my consciousness was with him.

Naked?

His question took me by surprise, even though it shouldn't have.

I thought you don't fool around with humans?

Sleeping with and seeing a naked woman are two different things, Honeylove, he drawled, his voice again coming back to the sweet state, which made me want to gag and feel an unsettling thrill at the same time.

Once again, another one of Nadira's moans arrived, which Drayard's ears caught and directed to mine.

Seal your sensitive senses, at least! I exclaimed.

Get out of my head first! he insisted.

I don't know how to!

Then try!

He was growing tremendously annoyed with me this time. And so was I with him. I hesitated, but not to endeavour to get out of his head. I lingered to understand what his mind—which was mostly an impenetrable void—was made of. I wanted to learn how he knew I was an impostor and about my mother's unlucky attempts to have a baby... I wanted to learn all of his secrets.

The atmosphere altered all of a sudden. It'd become cold, and for some inexplicable reason, dread began seeping through me. There was a distant noise. A voice like—

Panting and moaning snapped me out of those senses. I forgot about them as soon as I faced a wall again.

I wished to seal my ears under as many locks as possible, but his senses were open, and I couldn't do anything to get those siblings muted!

I can't get out of your head, you monster! Step away from the door and stop tormenting us both, please!

The last time I checked, I was in a position to give demands, not you, Honeylove.

Oh, bloody hells!

Well, if he was going to play like that, I might as well join the game instead of being kicked off the chessboard.

You have a mind of a devil, I see.

My most prized weapon, he said, his voice a bit unsteady, as if he was trying to conceal another emotion urging to peek through his tone.

I stifled a laugh. At least I tried when it escaped anyway. I could sense his smile as much as I could feel mine. But then I pulled myself together, quelling that ridiculous imaginative smile.

Drayard?

Yes, Elynn?

Get away from the door!

He sighed. *Elynn, you may have forgotten with whom you're talking. Again.*

Oh, I'm aware, Bloodsucker. It's just impossible for you to kill me when you're so far away.

Are you willing to try me?

My heart stuttered, escalating into an insane rhythm. I'd gone too far.

No...

Good. Now get out of my head. My virgin ears are suffering.

Virgin ears? Seriously?

Get out of my—

"Oh, yes!" the woman's satisfactory voice echoed behind the door. "Just like that!"

The man's panting intermingled with her moans, engulfing me with abomination. And Drayard wasn't moving an inch from the door, making us go through this torturing tryst between *siblings*. What a brute!

Elynn, he warned me.

I'll try, was all I said.

And so, I attempted to distance myself from him, to remember where my body was: lying underground of Asenah's mansion on the uncomfortable bed—

Faster, he urged. My ears are bleeding.

It's your fault you made such a ridiculous ultimatum to torment us both.

He was silent.

I focused back on trying to shift back to my body.

My body is feminine. I'm Elynn Startel. A twenty-year-old woman sleeping in one of the servants' rooms in the Realm of Bones mansion.

Get out of Drayard's head. Get out, I ordered myself.

My body—yes, my body—aroused on the bed. My chest was heaving as if I'd been pulled out of the ocean, and now I was recovering from it.

I looked around me to make sure I was where I'd expected to be. Indeed, I was in the room where I'd fallen asleep in the first place. Not leaning against the door and listening to two related people participating in the Sinner's Tango. A sigh of relief left my steadying lungs.

I didn't want to experience what it was like to be in the Bloodsucker's head ever again. I had no clue how it had happened in the first place, but I prayed to Gods, should it not repeat ever again.

OceanofPDF.com

XXIII

ASENAH LOOKED GORGEOUS in her real form. With raven hair braided into an updo. With freckles dotting her light cheeks and the bridge of her long but elegant nose. With a mole just above her lip, which would have painted her coquettish if not the stern look overshadowing all the alluring, stark features on her face.

I had a task to help the Queen of Bones get ready for her cousin's wedding. She'd picked the gown herself. One with the colour of cream, long-sleeved, nothing too intricate, except for the chocolate-brown fur wrap that must have belonged to an animal before. It suited her well as a queen.

I *loathed* her.

I spent three hours with her. Her hair and face had taken the most time. She'd already been beautiful before cosmetics, but now she was breathtaking. Any man's mouth would fall open at the sight of her. Although, according to the Bloodsucker, Asenah wasn't interested in them. She wouldn't pay attention to any male morph who gave her heart eyes anyway.

The thought about the Bloodsucker didn't spark positive emotions. I was still not getting over the fact I'd been in his head about twelve hours ago. I'd prayed this morning he wouldn't make an appearance at the wedding. It had seemed like he might have important business to do with the new sickening information he'd learnt yesterday. Hopefully, whatever it was, it would preoccupy him.

When I was out of Asenah's chambers, I strode to the kitchen, where I felt the safest in the entire mansion. Imogen was a tough woman. Anyone could feel safe around her.

"When Fillan weds Fawne, is he going to move out?" I asked her while picking glasses out of the cabinet and sorting them on the empty silver tray.

"I'm not sure." She placed a pitcher of red wine before me. "Fawne might move in 'ere."

"Why?" After I set down as many glasses as I could fit on the tray, I closed the cabinet doors and began pouring wine into one glass after

another.

“As far as I’m aware, when morphs get married, a woman is th’ one who moves in tae live with her husband, not th’ other way around.”

“Even if Fawne’s title is higher than Fillan’s?”

After all, Fawne was a king’s daughter, whereas Fillan was only a cousin of a queen. She was a princess; he was just a lord. Lesser than her.

“Even if Fawne’s rank is higher than Fillan’s,” Imogen echoed.

“Does the King of Woods have an heir if he’s giving up his daughter to the Realm of Bones?”

“He’ll be here today. Why don’t ye ask him yersel’, lassie?” Imogen gave me a crooked smile.

I cast her a pointed look. “Hilarious.”

As I put the pitcher back on the countertop and raised the tray, I strode out of the kitchen.

The wedding hadn’t started yet. Guests had only begun to gather in the garden.

It was strange to be around human-like morphs after getting accustomed to their animal-like exterior. Morphs more beautiful than the others cracked jokes, and their refined laughs rumbled through the garden. They extended not-furry hands to take a glass of wine as I flitted from one cluster of them to another. Overall, their manners were flawless. But I didn’t let the outside of them trick me. They were monsters. Every single one of them.

The whole mingling-in-small-groups theme reminded me of the twins’ birthday. Only Drayard’s grand entrance and people kneeling before him were missing. Besides, the wedding arch in the back of the garden was new.

It wasn’t white and bedecked with flowers and leaves, as the tradition suggested, but brown and decorated with pine spikes. The aisle itself had wooden benches on either side of the brown carpet leading to the wedding arch.

I hadn’t decorated the garden this time, but whoever had designed the wedding aisle had done a splendid job.

“Don’t you just *love* morphs’ weddings?”

I glanced at Clare sidelong. “Long time no see, Clare,” I said with plain bitterness I didn’t even try to disguise in my tone.

I had been avoiding her like the plague. If I’d seen her somewhere, I’d taken another route to avoid running into her. I didn’t like her and had a bad

hunch about this girl ever since the day we'd been offered to the empire. And I was sure she wasn't very fond of me, either.

"But still alive," she noted. "Both of us."

I offered her a false smile.

"Where were you when the Bloodsucker emerged at the birthday celebration?" I whispered after a while, looking around to make sure nobody missed a servant who was supposed to carry drinks.

No, they were all absorbed in conversations.

"Further away, where the fire couldn't reach me."

My eyes travelled back to her. "He didn't attack."

"But it doesn't mean he isn't going to today."

I frowned. "He won't show up here."

"Who says he's not already here? In his original form?"

Before I could collect a response, she walked off, leaving me with traces of her last words hanging in the air.

They unsettled me. Clare might be right. If Drayard was already here, he'd kill me without a blink. I'd been in his mind, after all. He'd make sure anything like it wouldn't happen ever again and the only way to ensure it was to end me.

As I served the wine to morphs, every muscle of my body was beyond strained. I kept glancing at each one of them, searching for the pair of golden-red eyes. Morphs' eyes were the sole feature that didn't change when they shapeshifted. But he was a half-breed who could read others' thoughts. Perhaps he had the power to alter eye colour as well.

But even if he was already here, he wouldn't pass unseen. Drayard wasn't that type of morph who preferred shadows. No. He relished the spotlight.

The symphony shifted into another tune, and guests took a music change as a cue to take their seats on benches before the arch. I found Thea with my eyes. She beckoned me to come closer, which I did.

The wedding was far more different from the ones I was used to seeing in the Mortal Region. Not only did the colouring of the wedding aisle differ, but also the ceremony.

Such music was played in the Mortal Region when the bridesmaids were making their way to the altar, and flower kids in front of them were strewing the path with petals, not as a sign for guests to gather around.

When Asenah appeared, I thought she'd be the bridesmaid as she walked towards the altar and people arose, bowing their heads out of respect for their queen, but that wasn't it. As she halted below the arch, I understood she'd play the role of a priest to unite the couple.

Once she turned to the gathered, a solemn smile was engraved on her face. She inclined her head to the quartet, indicating them to play something else.

As the first notes of cellos sounded, it reminded me of a good old wedding march played in human weddings, but a few notes of the melody differed. It sounded more dramatic than the version I was used to hearing.

The "lovebirds" emerged. Fillan was going first. He looked dashing in his human form, and that rendered me sick. He had good genes. I couldn't deny that. A suit he was clad in was fawn-brown, which stood for his realm, no doubt. His fiancée Fawne was dressed in a ridiculous cake-like white wedding gown, which didn't reveal a single plot of her skin apart from her ivory face. Her brown hair was braided into a coronet and adorned with... pine needles. But most importantly, she was walking *behind* her fiancé.

"What is this?" I said under my breath, as if I didn't know the answer already.

It was simple—women could *not* be equal to their husbands. They could *not* stand higher than their men. The wedding must have been one of the ways to convey the message. And it would have been me in Fawne's place if I'd stayed in the Mortal Region and married Chase.

The epiphany had shaken me more than I'd have expected.

I'd been prepared for it—to be lesser than him. I used to think that allowing him to use me however he liked was how it should be, that I deserved it, but I'd been wrong. So, so wrong. Only seeing an example of what my future would have looked like made me realise how mistaken and blinded I'd been by forcing myself to believe I was lucky Chase had chosen me instead of another girl who was jealous of my "success".

Fillan halted before Asenah first. He didn't even glimpse at Fawne once she stood beside him.

"That's morphs' wedding." Thea sighed, telling me what I'd already taken as given.

Dancing, drinking, mingling and even dallying with each other were the activities morphs were doing after Fawne and Fillan had become wife and husband.

I studied Fawne's family she was standing next to, away from her husband, who was chucking one glass content after another.

Fawne's mother was an older version of her. Both of them had brown hair, russet eyes, and the same diamond face shape. Her father had such broad shoulders that every time I got near him, a ripple of tremors ran down my body. He was one of the cruel rulers. Mightiness was streaming off his posture and stoic expression, but his power was nothing compared to the one I'd seen someone else hold.

Fawne's hands were dangling under a small girl's neck as she was hugging her from behind. I guessed her to be Fawne's little sister. Although Fawne's lips were pulled into a faint smile, she seemed more like exploding into tears than smiling.

I caught myself feeling a smidgen of condolence towards her, but quickly reminded myself she was just another morph who had killed innocents, and any of the sympathy I'd felt, vanished.

At least Drayard didn't make his appearance. Clare had got me anxious for no reason at all.

So far, everything went smoothly. I found myself lacking some drama. Serving drinks, catching bits of gossip and politics was like watching paint dry. I was starting to miss Drayard's outstanding entrance. And here, I'd never thought I could be so fond of drama.

As I returned to the kitchen to refill empty glasses, I glanced at the clock. Four hours were left until midnight. Then morphs would turn back into beasts, and as I figured, the celebration would cease.

I refilled the glasses. I was hurrying back to the garden when the hand clamped over my mouth. I froze.

Then a deep voice whispered into my ear, "Hello, Honeylove."

XXIV

THE TRAY SLIPPED out of my hands and clattered to the floor. All drinks smashed, the spilled liquid touched my shoes, but I didn't look to note what damage I'd done as my blood ran cold, legs became light, and my heart began pumping blood more rapidly than normal as the terror settled in me.

His covered in leather hand was still pressed against my mouth, but it was pointless. Did he think I'd scream? Nobody would help me.

Or he kept it there as a precaution. He didn't want me to alarm others of his presence.

"Did you miss me?" he breathed in my ear.

I was tempted to turn my head to take a look at him. To see his real form. But the fear stopped me.

"P-please," I managed to get out against his palm, "don't hurt me. I won't slide into your head ever again. I promise."

I felt his smile as he whispered, "You can't be sure of it."

He was right. I couldn't. I was simply not aware when I'd got into his head, had no comprehension of how it'd happened.

I was so dead.

"Are you going to kill me?"

I dreaded the answer, even if I already knew it.

A dramatic sigh sounded above me. At least his mouth wasn't near my ear anymore. "You think so low of me, Elynn."

I didn't buy it.

"Then what is it that you want?"

There was silence, and it felt like hours had passed instead of seconds until the answer sounded above me. Emotionless, yet hair-raising.

"On the count of three, I want you to run and never look back," he said. "One... Two..."

His hand left my mouth, and I needn't think twice to consider this. I had no other choice but one.

I bolted through the doorway, straight into the garden. Nobody paid heed to some maid as I ran into the forest, as far as away from the Bloodsucker as I could.

And I didn't dare to look back.

I was, without a doubt, lost.

Only when I couldn't run any longer, I halted and planted my hands above my knees to take some time to catch a breath.

My heart was beating fast not only because of such a sudden, unprepared run, but because of the dread I felt with every fibre of my being. But I had no luxury to rest. I had to continue running.

I cast around the area for Drayard, but he wasn't here or just not where my eyes could see. Then it dawned on me. Perhaps it wasn't his plan at all—to chase me into the forest and murder me. Maybe he'd *tricked* me into thinking he was going to kill me. Or he'd already doomed me by making me go to this disreputable forest so he wouldn't have to do a dirty job as another creature would take care of me for him. The King of kings and queens would never smear his hands with human blood. The Bloodsucker or not.

Just in case, I waited to test my speculation. I might be risking my life by tarrying in one place longer than I should, but I couldn't run anymore. Not for now, at least.

I sat before the trunk of the tree and propped my head against it, waiting for my heartbeat to return to its normal rhythm along with my heavy breathing. I waited and waited and waited, but there was no sign of a dragon or another man in the soundless forest.

By now, I was sure I was right. He'd made me get lost, acutely aware that a human wouldn't survive long in the forest located in the morphs' domain.

I had to go back. I had to find my way back to the mansion. It was safer there than here. But then, if Asenah didn't find me in her chambers to prepare her for sleep on time, she'd kill me. And if I stayed here, I'd not survive the night.

I stood after I felt energetic enough to continue my journey, but I didn't run without any limits this time. I wandered in slow, aimless steps. I had no

purpose to rush them as, for now, I couldn't detect any danger lurking close by.

There was one big problem with coniferous forests. The similarity of pines didn't help to set the tree I'd already passed apart from the brand new one. Seldom there was a deciduous tree, which I hadn't spotted during my run or now. I must have gotten lucky to discover one when I was fleeing from the wolf.

Oh, dear Gods above, I had no clue which way to go at all! I couldn't even guess which direction could lead to the mansion.

I stopped.

My hands curled into fists.

My teeth clenched.

And my bracelet heated.

The sudden outburst took control over me. With a sharp spin, I hurled my right fist straight into the trunk, but as the pain lanced through my knuckles, I jerked it back with a quiet yelp, giving it a shake.

As I surveyed my bruised knuckles, the flame of anger eased in me, smothered by the pain. The bracelet too ceased to burn my skin.

My attention drifted to it.

Never remove your bracelet, Elynn.

But what would happen if I did remove it? Only for a mere minute...

I reached for the clasp, ready to face the consequences of removing it. I was about to perish here. Might as well sate my curiosity before someone hiding in the forest's depths slaughtered me.

"Elynn?"

I stiffened, raising my eyes.

I'd heard her voice. I was sure I'd heard *her*.

Gen.

But I didn't whip my head back to make sure whether I was right. I couldn't. This forest could have Gods knew what kind of creatures. There could exist one which fooled people into thinking there was someone they loved. And when one would look at it—they'd be damned. It was definitely a trap, as there was no way my sister was here. It was just impossible.

"Lynn, is that you?"

Again, that soft voice which belonged to *her* but couldn't be *hers*.

I pursed my lips, demanding myself not to look.

A trap. A trap. A trap.

But then I felt her hand on my shoulder, that familiar touch. There was no way it was false. It felt too real.

I risked a glance over my shoulder and met my sister's grey-blue eyes that appeared darker in dim light. Grey-blue eyes, which were nothing like the ones I'd been used to seeing in the last three months. Grey-blue eyes, which I was familiar with for over sixteen years.

"Gen?" I said unbelievably, turning to her fully.

She nodded slowly and brought me into her warm arms, whispering, "I've found you. I've found you."

XXV

I SLIPPED MY HANDS around her, and a tear escaped my eye, trickling down my cheek, right to my dry lips.

She was real.

Gen was *real*.

As we pulled away from each other, only then I noted her looks. I wasn't sure how I was supposed to react, let alone what to think.

Gen was armed. Heavily *armed*. A quiver of arrows was sticking from behind her shoulder, and she was wearing a belt with golden knives around her hips; needless to say, she had a bow in her right hand. My sister looked like a huntress who had left her house for a serious hunting spree.

"What... What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I came to find you and bring you home, Lynn."

I frowned. "How did you know where to go?"

"It's been three months since you were gone. I had plenty of time to figure out where you might be."

I scrutinised her face. I didn't have to be the smartest woman in the world to know my sister was hiding something from me.

"Is Kris with you?"

She hesitated before shaking her head.

"Did you come here alone or with someone?"

She pursed her lips into one hell of a guilty smile.

"Oh, no, Gen, what did you do this—"

"Netty, I thought I—"

My eyes flew to the one who had interrupted me. And once I beheld who stood about five steps away from Gen, bile climbed up to my throat. I thought I was going to puke right here, right now, just at the sight of him, but, shockingly, I didn't.

My former fiancé was holding a golden sword by its hilt—his beloved Goldy—ready to fight whoever crossed his path. His hair had gotten longer, but not only that. A thick and bushy beard hung down his chin. Someone must have missed their appointments with the local barber...

His mouth pulled into a sick smile that evoked unpleasant memories. "Hello, Ely."

I grasped Gen's wrist and tugged her behind me, unconcerned whether it was gentle or not. She yelped, letting me know it was harsher than I'd intended. But it didn't matter as long as I was standing before her, covering her from him with my body like a shield because there was no way... not *ever* I would let him near her.

"What are you doing here?"

My skin beneath the bracelet was burning, but it scarcely stung. The pain was nothing compared to what emotions were boiling inside me for the man standing before me.

Chase took a step forward.

"Stay away," I growled, matching with a wolf's growl.

He stopped. "Three months with morphs turned you into a beast as well?" He smiled even more widely. "I like it," he whispered and licked his lips.

"Burn in hell."

He looked genuinely taken aback by my words. "You've changed," he said thoughtfully and risked another step forward. I glared at him, daring him to advance more. I might not kill him, but I was sure I'd put up a fight. "What have they done to you, Ely?"

My sister stayed behind me. Silent.

The wind whistled, and the words touched my ear. *Do you need help?*

The voice of the boy. A dryad. *Juniper.*

"Not yet."

The breeze disappeared, and Chase stared weirdly at me. Gen stepped out of my shadow and looked at me as oddly as Chase did. As if I was a stranger in the wild.

"What have they done to you?" Gen asked cautiously. Dismayed by *me*.

I hadn't lost my marbles yet, but from their perspective, I could tell I looked just like a twitching madwoman who talked with herself.

The unsettling look in my sister's eyes made me rethink my behaviour. Although she'd come here with him, the man who'd tortured me without one iota of conscience, Gen was my sister, and despite my hatred towards this... monster, I had to compose myself.

I had weapons with which I could hurt him severely. The dryads were in debt, after all. But for the sake of my sister and now myself, I tried not to

think like a murderess. I wasn't a morph, but a human. I would *never* sink to their level.

I managed to push all those vicious feelings towards Chase aside. At least for now.

"I don't want to talk about it," I muttered to Gen, not looking away from emerald eyes which had been troubling my sleep ever since Clare had—

Clare had warned me he'd come. But how she'd predicted it was the least of my concerns now.

Gen's concerned look melted to sympathy. She stepped closer to hug me. I accepted her gesture but kept throwing darts at Chase with my eyes over Gen, regardless.

He would pay for treating me wrong, but it was not the right time or a place for it now.

"I want to go home," I mumbled.

I didn't let myself falter, even if the thought of coming back home to my family made me want to dissolve into tears.

"And you will," she assured me.

Once we began our journey home, I was keeping at least five feet away from Chase. When the night arrived and they went to sleep, I didn't close my eyes for longer than a minute. I was afraid that Chase might come into my tent and force himself on me. And my apprehensions weren't for nought.

As he was about to slip into my tent at midnight, I threatened to gut him with the golden dagger Gen had given me to protect myself with. As much as I didn't like carrying it with myself, I must admit, it could save my life if some morph leapt out of the shadows. It still paid off as Chase turned scared of me and fled. He never dared to come back or step more than five feet closer to me anymore.

Gen was also tense being near me. Once I'd thought how good the Bloodsucker must feel when everybody was so frightened of him and how if I had a power like his, I'd take advantage of it. I took it all back. My sister was alarmed by me, and that didn't satisfy me. It made me disgusted with myself instead.

It was a long walk. The forest was bigger than I'd have estimated, and yet still the same. The caressing breeze was always travelling with me.

Every now and then, Juniper let me know he was close, in case I needed help.

I had many things to tell Gen. Things I'd learnt back in the realm that could transform all humans' lives drastically, but my mouth didn't part to speak. *Later*. I promised myself to tell her everything I knew later.

The following night, when Chase went hunting for non-existent food, Gen and I sat by the bonfire. She hugged herself as lately, the nights had turned colder. Although my maid's dress wasn't thick with layers to protect me from the cold, it didn't bother me when I was all tense and troubled about the more important matters than the weather change.

"Why did you ask for his help?" I finally spoke.

"I didn't," she said flatly.

I looked at her, confused. "Then how did it happen that he's here?"

She sighed heavily. "Chase came into our cottage searching for you about three months ago. At first, Mum didn't tell him where you were because he might have ratted us out to pledgers, but then he saw me, not offered.

"Mum had no other choice but to tell him the truth. He didn't know you'd broken off the engagement when you'd given your ring to Mum. He still isn't aware of it." She stuck her palms towards the bonfire, rubbing them once in a while. "When he found out, he was ready to find you, no matter what. I asked why because I didn't consider Chase as a person who'd fall in love that profoundly to risk his life for a woman. He blurted out something that you two belong to each other, and without you, he wouldn't survive." I rolled my eyes, and Gen's lip curved into a faint smile. "But before he went straight to the empire, I volunteered to help find you. After all, you locked me to the bed against my will," she grumbled, clearly stating it more like a joke than a matter of fact. I forced myself to react with a smile. "So, we planned this together. Chase trained me to fight in case we ran into a morph. In my spare time, I examined Chase's given map of the Empire of Beasts. Apparently, he had one. It took me a month to plan out our journey. Thank Gods, no morph crossed our way."

"How long were you travelling until you found me?"

"A week or so."

"And no morph had emerged?"

She shook her head.

“That’s impossible, Gen. I lived with morphs, got to know them, and let me tell you that two humans in their lands would have caught their attention. Their senses are far more sensitive than ours. They could smell food from miles away.”

Either Chase and Gen were blessed by Gods, or something was off. There was a reason they’d been so lucky by having no encounter with the beasts.

“Miracles happen, Lynn. Can’t you just believe that?” she said it so optimistically that it was unlike her.

“No, Gen. Reality is different.”

“We found you. You’ll be back home soon. That’s what matters. And it shows that miracles are real.”

I looked at her weirdly. Yes, that was indeed my sister, but she acted out of character.

“What cult have you joined? A beaming sunshine one?” I asked with a tease.

Gen rolled her eyes. “No. It’s just I’ve learnt that looking at the bright side of life simplifies it more than seeing it darker than it is.”

Now it was my turn to roll my eyes.

“What about Kris?” I inquired, remembering how he’d acted after our mother had told him about what Chase was doing to me. “Did he allow you to train with Chase?”

She looked at the starlit sky, releasing a sigh. “Well...” She trailed off, not finishing her sentence.

“You didn’t tell him.”

She didn’t say anything.

“Does he know you’re even here?”

Silence.

“Seriously, Gen?”

She sighed heavily, like an annoyed teenager she still was. “He thinks I’m in the city. If I’d told him where I was actually heading, he’d have followed.”

I shook my head slightly. Yes, only Gen could do such a thing. She had a tendency to act as one soldier on the battlefield, which was also my thing.

My eyes fell on the sparkling fire in front of me. By gazing at it made my shoulders relax a bit. Since Chase was nowhere to be seen—secretly, I was hoping he would remain this way—I could allow myself to loosen up

my always vigilant senses and accept the thought that I was truly going home.

No human had ever returned from the Empire of Beasts before. I might be the first one if the rest of our journey went smoothly, just like in the beginning.

“The Bloodsucker exists,” I said out of the blue after a long but comfortable silence, listening only to the crackling flames.

Gen’s eyes opened wide, jaw dropped. Just as I’d expected her to react. “No way.”

“He does, and he’s far from a monster. At least he doesn’t look like one from the outside,” I mumbled the last words. “He’s also a half-dragon.”

She didn’t blink. Stunned. “Dragons still exist?”

“No, only one does. He’s a half-breed of a dragon and a bat. Drayard, Arragon’s bastard son.”

Gen had heard about Arragon before. Most people in the Mortal Region had since stories were created about him. But they weren’t as popular as stories about his son.

“Have you met him? This Bloodsucker?”

Certain memories struck my mind. When he’d requested my service to his temporary chamber. When I was in his head. Then the latest one when he’d ordered me to run and never look back.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Is he as terrifying as in the tale?”

I hesitated, eyes on my dirty nails, while my arms were resting on my knees. “I don’t know,” I said. “He’s... strange. He didn’t show his Bloodsucker’s side. But indeed, every morph was intimidated by him. One more than another. He’s not only someone who can tear your insides and feast on them but superior to the rest of *them*, the King with a capital K. Quite an important person in this world.”

She said nothing, looking staggered by the information I’d just dropped on her like a bomb.

“But before you found me in the forest, I was running,” I went on. “Running from him because he came back to kill me.”

“What did you do to bring his disgrace upon yourself, Lynn?”

I hesitated. I didn’t know how to explain I’d been in his head once.

Clenching my hands to hide my dirty nails, I released a heavy sigh and looked at her. “A good question, which I—”

As Gen noticed where my eyes were at, she attempted to cover her hand, but I grasped it before she could and looked closer. I looked closer at the little accessory shining like a star on her ring finger.

An emerald ring.

Different from the one I'd been used to seeing.

But it was still a *ring*.

An *engagement* ring.

How didn't I notice it sooner?

My eyes shot up at her. "What the hells, Gen?"

"Don't overreact," she muttered. "It's not what you might think—"

"Don't you even dare to convince me it's not what I might think it is."

As I raised my voice, only then I realised I shouldn't have as we were still in the morphs' domains. I spoke quieter. "I can see it's—"

"It's not!" She jerked her hand off mine. "Besides, why should I explain my motives if you stayed silent about the real reason you were going to the empire instead of me?"

I frowned. "Don't change the—"

She scoffed. "Seriously, Lynn? Big sister acting like a hero, but *are* you one? Or are you just convincing yourself you're doing good for others by sacrificing yourself when in reality, you're running from the mistakes you made?" I must have been too slow to mask the incredulous look, for she said, "Yeah. Mum told me the ulterior motive behind your sacrifice. You did it to run away from your marriage."

"It's not—"

But I didn't finish, for Chase emerged from the woods with a dead bunny in his hand.

I didn't ask how he'd found an actual animal in the forest that wouldn't be a morph. The bunny might as well have been a morph, but the claws of guilt were threatening to suffocate me, and I couldn't focus on anything else but that, wishing I could explain everything to Gen.

But that would have to wait.

XXVI

ANOTHER SLEEPLESS NIGHT, my thoughts drifted to the first friends I'd made and left in the mansion. Imogen and Thea. And so, guilt struck me once again.

I was free from morphs' slavery, and they weren't. Even if it wasn't my fault, I still felt terrible. But perhaps the least I had to worry about was the Bloodsucker's wrath, for he might assume me dead. He'd never find out I was very much alive anyway.

At last, we reached the Blue River that separated the Mortal Region from the Empire of Beasts. Right across it must be the beginning of the invisible Spell Ascended Sorceresses had created to keep any magic away, including its creatures.

On the right, I could see the remnants of what once used to be a bridge. It'd been destroyed after the war to segregate morphs from humans. Now there was a day called *No Bridge Day*, which the Mortal Region celebrated to remember the time when our lands had become officially independent. The bridge's ruins were humans' independence symbol after its brutal destruction committed by hammers, axes, and other weapons humans could put their hands on at that time.

Chase and Gen were already floundering through the water. Neither of them offered me help. I didn't care about Chase. He knew better than to utter a word to me. But Gen... I was worried that our relationship had irrevocably changed, and whether or not I explained myself, it wouldn't be the same anymore.

Today was a warm, sunny day. But as I dipped my feet into the water, its chilliness nipped my skin.

Drawing in a breath, I pushed myself to move further.

As it was getting deeper with each step, the more my heart rate grew. Water was already above my waist. I'd never learnt to swim, as there'd been no purpose for me to have such skill back then. Now I thought differently.

But I was in the middle of the river. Surely it wouldn't get any deeper than it was now?

As I took another step, I must have hit a deep hole as water submerged my whole body, including my face.

Everything within me stopped functioning. I couldn't think properly, I couldn't move. All I was conscious of was that I was about to die.

No, no, no, no. I need to see my mum. This isn't how I'm going to die. Not by drowning. This is not—

My muscles began to relax, and I could feel my consciousness slipping away. But it was all gone once a pair of blood-red eyes flashed before me.

I needn't be a fish expert to know what was staring at me with sharp exposed teeth, prepared to devour me.

Piranha.

Once my father had described to me what they looked like. Since then, I'd have recognised the fish anywhere as red eyes and sharp teeth were their outstanding features. And what they liked to eat included human meat in their menu.

I let out a scream, releasing bubbles into the water. Somehow, I regained my ability to move and tried to reach the surface, confident it was just right there, but that wasn't it. It seemed like more and more water was swelling above me as the light I'd seen a moment ago was nothing but gloom now.

But I wouldn't die from drowning. Piranha would eat me first.

Help. Me.

Piranha charged at me. It bit my wrist and shook it with its razor-sharp teeth. I was sure it was about to rip my hand off my body when someone grasped my arm and hauled me out of the water before it could.

Strong arms wrapped around my waist as I coughed. I was pressed against the masculine body. Must be Chase.

He placed me on the sand. I got on my fours and coughed the water from my lungs. Then I rested my forehead on the ground, trying to breathe, to quell the insane heart rate and gather every single oxygen I could to provide my lungs with.

I was alive. I was actually *alive*.

I looked down at my wrist, the one which the piranha had bitten. It was untouched. I frowned and got a closer look, examining my wrist from all sides but there was not a single mark of piranha's teeth. Perhaps it was

another wrist. But as I inspected it, moving my bracelet, I found no marks either.

Unbelievable.

Thank heavens, I hadn't lost my consciousness or else Chase would have

—
I lifted my gaze at the one who'd saved me from death. And what I beheld wasn't Chase.

My mouth opened to scream, but nothing came out of it.

Drayard was back into his dragon-human form, dressed in one of his famous black suits on yet another warm day. Hands casually stuffed in his pockets. Unearthly golden-red eyes on me.

"At least for once, I've made you speechless, Honeylove."

I dropped on my bottom and crawled back to make as much distance from him as possible.

He sighed as if he was... disappointed. He appeared before me in a blink, crouching down. He was so close that I could smell the slight sweat coming from him. His gloved finger touched my jaw and pushed it up, snapping my teeth together.

He smiled, content now. "I advise you to reconsider your return to the Mortal Region."

Despite his disarming smile, his voice was a warning. Although I should have asked him why, the opposite strangled words left my vocal cords, "P-please, don't hurt me."

His smile dropped, his eyes lowering. He drew back, stood erect and began fixing the wet sleeve of his splendid jacket.

I wasn't sure if I trembled more from fear or from cold. Both probably. I felt powerless, and—

A knife!

I had a golden knife. Gold hurt morphs. He was a half-breed. I was sure I could—

But as I delved my hand into the pocket, there was nothing in it. I'd had it before I went into the water. Positive. I must have lost it in the river then.

"Looking for something?" he inquired, watching me with one eye.

I pulled my hand out of the pocket and brought my knees to my chest. "Why did you save me?"

He sighed. "Your death isn't in my plans, Elynn."

I stared at him, puzzled. "Why did you tell me to run, then? For fun?"

“No.”

“Then why?”

He remained silent, smoothing zero creases on his jacket.

He was surely hiding something major from me, and I didn’t want to consider it, but I did anyway. I might be somehow involved in whatever his schemes were. The Bloodsucker wouldn’t ask about my mother’s pregnancy, let alone bother to save a worthless human from the river for no reason. But I had no idea why he’d do such things, and I wouldn’t figure out anything on my own unless he answered me, which he wouldn’t.

“Piranha attacked me, and there are no marks on my wrist,” I noted, hoping at least this inquiry he’d condescend to answer. “How’s that so?”

“Piranha you saw wasn’t real,” he said. “It was an illusion to ward off morphs.”

“But I’m not a—”

“Your lover is looking for you.”

I shot him a murderous look, forgetting that he could kindle me like a tinder. “He’s not my lover.”

“My apologies, Elynn. Your fiancé.”

As I carefully arose, my hands formed into fists, the bracelet slightly burning my skin. I didn’t bother asking how he knew that. “*Ex-fiancé.*”

“Ah.” He looked down. “That explains why you’re not wearing the undergarment.”

Confused, I followed his gaze, which led to my chest. I was all drenched, and it was no surprise that thin material almost exposed what was hidden beneath the dress. I promptly covered my chest with my hands and jerked my head up, locking my eyes with his. He *smirked*.

“Bastard,” I gritted out.

“Elynn?!”

Drayard glanced over his shoulder at the sound of my sister’s voice, his wings spreading wide behind his back, ready for a flight. But before he flew away, he looked at me. “Convey my regards to your mother. She did a great job raising you, Elynn.”

Then he sprang into the sky and disappeared somewhere above the clouds, leaving me beyond perplexed.

Gen emerged with Chase behind her a moment later. Many unanswered questions I had for Drayard were already spinning in my tired head. Questions he’d refuse to answer if I ever met him again, which I hoped I

wouldn't. But the curious part of me wanted to see him again, just to suck the information out of that mysterious creature.

"What happened?" Gen asked.

"I got scared of the water."

Gen, of course, didn't believe me, but she didn't question me either. Thank heavens, as I wouldn't have been able to explain how I'd been saved by the same creature who'd scared me into running to the forest, where I'd got lost in the first place.

XXVII

WITH GEN'S HELP, I crossed the river with no obstacles this time. As I walked deeper into the depths of the forest I knew by heart, my head began to feel heavier.

I needed some sleep. Perhaps I'd hallucinated, and Drayard hadn't been there to save me. I hadn't seen a piranha; I hadn't been drowning. I opt to believe it all had been a horrible hallucination from recent sleepless nights, regardless of my instincts rejecting the notion.

As we were getting closer to the cottage, I began stirring with excitement despite the headache. When it was only half a mile left from the place I called home, Gen caught my wrist.

I met her weary eyes.

"Before we go further, there's something you must know."

The grave note in her voice and the sad look in her eyes got me worried. "What is it?"

"Two weeks after your offering, Mum got sick. At first, we thought it was a common cold until she started coughing blood."

My heart sank. "Is she... dying?"

Gen nodded, and I jerked my hand from her hold.

No, I refused to believe her. Mum couldn't be dying. She was a strong woman who could do multiple jobs at once. The death of my father hadn't broken her. Some stupid illness wouldn't break her either.

I spun on my heel and sprinted home, ignoring Gen's warning calls to put on safety equipment. I didn't care. Besides, where would I get it? This safety equipment?

I paused once I reached the cottage. It was the same as I'd left it, but something about it made me feel like a foreigner, as if I didn't belong here anymore. Cold. Uninviting.

It was ridiculous. It was a place where I'd grown up. It was *my home*. And I was *back*. Perhaps it was hard to believe I was standing here when no thought had crossed my mind that I'd see this cottage in real life ever again.

Maybe it was all just a big lie... a dream.

But I didn't dream. It must be real, then. Or a nightmare.

As I stepped inside, I discerned the change in the atmosphere right away.

The corridor was unlikely gloomy, and the air wasn't fresh or spiced with the mouth-watering scent of Mum's made meals coming from the kitchen. No, it was rather heavy, tough to breathe.

I walked into the living room, where I opened the shutters and pushed up the windows to welcome autumn air inside.

"Lynn?"

I swivelled my head to the man standing at the threshold. His dark brown hair was uncharacteristically disarranged, as if he'd just woken up.

When Kris's bleary eyes parted wider, I shot towards him and threw my hands around him. Instead of protesting about the hug, he reciprocated it, keeping me close as well.

"I missed you," I murmured, trying not to surrender to tears.

"Likewise," he said before we pulled away from each other. "But how is it possible for you to be here?"

"I brought her back."

Kris whipped his head to Gen. Her weapons were removed. I supposed she had to give them back to Chase. The bow and arrows and knives were certainly not hers.

"How?" His tone of voice dropped lower.

"I went to the Empire of Beasts."

A tense silence settled between all of us.

Then Kris's chuckle broke it. "Right. You went where, again?"

"I went to the Empire of Beasts," she repeated in a calm voice.

Kris gave his head an unbelievable shake before he turned his head to me. "How are *you* alive?"

"I'll tell you both about everything later, but first, where's Mum?"

Kris dropped his gaze down at the mention of her while Gen was the one who answered, "In her room, obviously. But first, put on safety—"

But I wasn't listening to her, as I was already on my way to Mum's bedroom. I opened the door quietly and froze once I saw the figure resting under the sheets.

My mother.

Drawing a composing breath, I took a step inside the dim-lit room. Once I approached her sleeping body, I kneeled before her bed and caressed her

hollow cheek. Her skin had lost its colour, as pale as paper, but at least she was breathing.

“You should put on safety equipment,” Gen whispered behind me.

I ignored her as I stared at Mum, who looked like a corpse, but she was sleeping. *Just* sleeping. I had to repeat that to myself or I might forget.

The air had an unpleasant smell here, too. I stood up, made my way to the closed window and opened the shutters. I pushed up the window a bit to air out the suffocating odour. Then I turned to Gen.

As I reached her, I grasped her arm and dragged her out of the room, further away from its door.

“What are you—”

Letting go, I turned to her. “Did you really leave Kris to take care of our ill mother?” I whispered, crossing my arms over my chest.

Judging from one time when our father had brought Kris a goldfish for him to take care of and it’d almost died in a matter of days—our mother saved it—my brother could never be trusted in taking care of anything, let alone another human being. He was hardly taking care of himself.

“No, of course not,” she denied, matching my quiet tone. “Chase paid for the help she could get. The physician, people who would look after her while I was gone. She wasn’t left alone with him, Lynn.”

“You asked Chase for help?” I took a step towards her. “Are you insane?” I hissed in a whisper, as I didn’t want to wake Mum. “He doesn’t give things for free. What did—oh...”

Unwillingly, I looked at the ring. I looked at the ring, but it wasn’t there anymore. I raised my inquiring eyes at Gen, who was smiling with the smile I’d seen before—as if she’d stolen something valuable and got away with it.

“Bloody hells, Gen.” I glanced around, but Kris wasn’t nearby. I then looked at her. “Whatever you’re planning, be careful.”

“So, you believe I’m not planning to marry him?”

“Yes, just be... careful. Chase is—”

“I know,” she breathed. “I’m aware.”

“And if he does something—”

“Lynn, I know what I’m capable of, and that douchebag has no clue at all how he’s being played.”

I didn’t want to feel it, but I did anyway—pride enveloping my chest. Although for the wrong reasons and not being acquainted with the whole

situation, which I would catch up with later anyway, it didn't stop me from being proud of Gen.

"But I'm back now," I said. "I can take care of her. Together we can all take care of her. You don't have to involve that man in this."

"We need money to get the best physician, and if you haven't noticed yet, we don't have the money we need."

"What happened to the engagement ring I gave her? Didn't it help?"

"Mum sold it to pay bills you had no idea about. She hid that from us. We were in a huge debt after Dad died."

My eyes widened. "What?"

"This was my reaction, as well. She told me if you'd known, you'd have married Chase faster. She didn't tell Kris or me because we were too young. Until, of course, you offered yourself to the empire, and Kris and I were left to look after Mum." A note of indignation sharpened her last words.

"Are you implying that you'd have liked to go into that world, and now you're mad at me for taking that opportunity from you?"

"It was my fate, Elynn. *I am sixteen*, not you. Yet you took it away, pretending to be some heroic figure who saves the day when you'd have been more useful if you'd stayed and married Chase instead."

Her words were like a slap to my face but worse.

"I'm sorry, all right? I'm sorry for not telling you the other side of my motive. But at that time, I was already weak, and I wouldn't have been able to bear the look in your eyes when I told you I was also doing this to escape Chase. When I read about the Conversion Potion, I realised that not only would it save you from the offering, but me from the unhappy life. I had to take the chance, even if I didn't know what was waiting for me out there, but I'm glad I did it. I would do it again because you wouldn't have survived what I survived there, Gen."

"Then you don't know me at all if you believe that. Also, you seem fine, so how can I be sure you aren't pretending to have faced something terrible to make me feel better that *you* offered yourself? How can I know you're not overdramatising the situation?"

I almost laughed. Almost. "Let me tell you something, Gen. *Never* get tricked by the exterior of the person. Most of the time, it turns out to be false. My outside might seem fine, but you can't look within me to see how shattered into pieces I actually am."

Her look softened, but it was momentary as it came back to that relentless state. “As long as you’re not telling me what happened to you there, I can’t believe you.”

“If I was ready to talk about it, I would have told you already. But I’m not, and I don’t think I will be ready any time soon, so believe what you want to believe until I’m ready to share.”

I spun on my heel and headed towards the kitchen, done arguing with her. Gen waited a bit before she followed suit.

The kitchen wasn’t empty. To my amazement, Kris was standing before the oven, heating a kettle. I halted at such an unexpected sight.

Kris looked at us over his shoulder, and Gen snickered. He was wearing an apron. Mum’s white apron with ruffles.

“What?” He grimaced. “Haven’t you seen a man in the kitchen before?”

“Not just any man, but *you*,” I noted in disbelief.

Once Gen and I exchanged glances, we both exploded into laughter, regardless of what had happened in the corridor seconds ago. Kris scowled, resting his hand on his hip like an irritated housewife, making us roar louder. I propped my hand on the wall, tears spurting. Gen slid into the chair and banged a table with a flat palm. It didn’t take long for Kris to lose his amusing expression and roll his eyes.

Although I was drained of energy and it was becoming harder to ignore the mounting headache, I couldn’t stop laughing. Not until the pain struck my belly, and the laugh was gone as I clutched my aching zone.

“Lynn, are you all right?” Gen inquired, concerned.

“Never been better.” I straightened my back and went over to the table. As I took a seat, I watched Kris, who resumed making us tea. “So, darling *housewife*,”—he shot me a pointed look—“I thought you’d be in the city by now, charging for a spot in the government.”

“And I was.” He poured boiling water into the mugs. “But then Mum got ill, and I was forced to pause my plans.”

“Why forced? Chase’s hired physician was taking care of Mum.” I gave Gen a knowing look.

“Yes, which Kris was very against,” Gen pointed out.

Kris remained silent as he served us tea in a delicate, careful and slow manner, reminding me of me. I smiled as he placed a mug before me. He then backed away and bowed to us with a flourish.

“Bon Appétit, annoying sisters.”

“It’s tea, you dork,” Gen muttered, pulling her mug closer.

“The least you could do is thank me, dwarf,” Kris retorted.

Gen smiled scornfully and showed him a finger.

Kris responded with a matching smile and well-mannered gesture.

And as I smiled, watching them, I couldn’t help but wonder, how the hells I’d survived this long without them?

“So,” I said, drawing their attention to me. “I might have found a way to pay for Mum’s care without including Chase into this.”

“Here we go,” Gen began as Kris took a seat with his own mug of tea. “You haven’t even been here for an hour, and you’re starting with your solutions, Lynn.”

Memories entered my mind, but I shooed them away and straightened my shoulders. “Come on. Our family can do better than depending on noblemen. We are Startels, for Gods’ sake. We’re going to save our mother. We’re going to work so hard the whole Mortal Region would know our names.”

Gen scoffed. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

I smiled. “I knew the positivity in you was temporary.”

She rolled her eyes, resuming to blow on her tea.

“What did you find that could help us, Lynn?” Kris inquired.

And I told them everything they ought to know, which didn’t include me. All about the Spell protecting our lands from superior kinds invading them, ensuring Kris and Gen that the whole offering was nothing but a trick. I told them the story about how it’d been created in the first place, highlighting the fact that for four decades, no magic had been existing here. I didn’t forget to share all about the curse and mention that not only were golden weapons fatal to morphs but the blood of Ascended Witches and Sorceresses and dryads poisoned them.

After listening to me, they needed time to process everything. I downed all my tea as my mouth was pretty parched after incessant talking. Then I rubbed my eyes. My body was urging me to sleep.

“How we didn’t know about the sorceresses’ sacrifice?” Kris said into the silence. “How is it possible for every human not to be aware of it?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Any more questions before I go to sleep?”

“Yes,” Gen said. “What happened to you there?”

I leapt off the chair. “Good night!”

As I pivoted on my heel, I heard a sigh. I was about to depart when Gen asked, “Don’t you want to take a bath first?”

“Too tired for that.” I threw her a glance back. “Wake me up once our mother awakes, all right?”

“All right. Good night, good day sleep, then,” Gen said.

Kris waved his hand. With a faint smile, I reciprocated it before I dragged myself into our bedroom, fell on the bed and drifted off shortly.

OceanofPDF.com

XXVIII

I WOKE UP WITH A stomach ache when it was dark outside. The bile rising up my throat got me springing out of bed and pushing the bottom window up where I leaned over and threw up.

The redness in the leftovers from another bunny Chase had caught in the morning stared up at me. Worry rushed through me. I didn't know what to do. I leaned back and closed the window, choosing to ignore it.

In the kitchen, I rinsed out my mouth with water for the taste of vomit and blood to disappear, but that was no help. The coppery taste and puke tarried in my mouth. And my headache hadn't eased after a nap, only got worse.

"Lynn?!" Gen called from within the corridor.

I came out of the kitchen and met with Gen straight away. I plastered a false smile on my face to not give her an impression I'd vomited outside our bedroom a minute ago. "What's up?"

"Mum's awake."

Promptly, I bolted towards her bedroom, which door was already opened. Kris was lounging on the chair in the corner, reading one of his already read books, while my mother, my wretched mother, was smiling weakly at me as she tried to sit up. I rushed to her and detained her by placing my hands on her arms.

"You're here..." She trailed off, voice hoarse and faltering.

"I'm here."

She raised her bony hand to my face, but her fingers didn't reach it.

"I had a dream about you, honeybee." I knelt before her bed, holding her raised hand from falling by her wrist. "Do you want to hear it?" she asked with a faint excitement that cracked my heart.

Gen was behind her, adjusting her pillows so she'd be more comfortable as I nodded, stifling my tears.

Whatever illness she had, it was eating her alive. There was no denying it. Her time was limited.

“You were here, wearing the most beautiful dress ever to exist, looking like you’d fallen from the painting.” She smiled nostalgically. I pursed my lips to cover their shakiness. “And you weren’t alone. You were gazing at somebody in your hands, cooing at it. It was a babe.” Her eyes sparkled. “You were happy. The entire aura around you was filled with happiness. It felt so, so real.”

She took a deep breath. “I took a step closer to look at the babe and... it was the most beautiful baby I’ve ever seen, I swear. Your daughter... she was something else, honeybee.”

Although it was her dream or more like a hallucination, and it would never come true, I kept my mouth shut about it because of the joy in her eyes. I didn’t want to ruin her happiness, even if it was a false one.

“Meira,” she breathed, and for a split second, I thought she was mistaking me for herself, but then she added, “You called her Meira. I might sound narcissistic by telling you your daughter’s name to be my name, but you chose that name yourself. It surprised me. That you named her after me.”

I wanted to ask why, but I knew if any sound escaped my throat, I wouldn’t be able to keep my voice steady or hold back the tears anymore.

“There’s something I need to tell you before Gods take me, Elynn.”

“D-don’t say that.” I stammered, and with a long blink, several tears trickled down my cheeks.

“I’m dying, sweetheart.” She caressed my cheek with her feverish hand. I leaned into her touch, savouring it all as it might be the last one.

“N-no, you’re not.”

“Hey, listen to me,” she said, her voice as weak as before. “I’ll always be in all my children’s hearts. I’m not leaving you. My soul will forever stay with you.”

“But you can’t die. You’re strong, Mum. You have to fight.” I took her hands in mine to hold her as if I could protect her from the grim reaper’s claws. “You must fight.”

Gen’s eyes met mine. Tears were flowing down her face, too.

Mum merely smiled. “There’s something you ought to know.”

I inhaled shakily and pursed my lips, repressing the first sob.

“Twenty years ago, I visited a shaman in town for another once-a-week visit. She tried to help me have a baby. I had to try everything I could. I couldn’t just give up that easily. And that day, when I was coming from the

town, Gerard ran to me like some madman. I can still remember that crazy look on his face.” She chuckled, and it made the corner of my lip rise, but the smile soon faded, and I looked down. “He threw his hands around me and kept bubbling that a miracle had happened. At first, I didn’t understand. I thought he’d gone nuts, but then he beckoned me to come inside, and as I stepped into our living room, I saw a basket. When I looked inside it...” Mum paused, “...It was you, Elynn.”

I looked up. Mum was still smiling, eyes as if her soul was within hand’s reach. My heartbeat had already increased after the revelation hit me like thunder in a clear sky.

“You beamed at me with that adorable baby’s smile without any clue of what on earth was going on. Gerard and I fell in love with you immediately. It was impossible not to.

“Gerard said he’d found you on our porch in a basket. It also had money, which would have lasted us for eighteen years, but we donated most of it to the poor, a bracelet you’re wearing now and a letter.” She began stirring in bed, trying to sit again, but Gen and I held her from doing so. “Please, I need to show you the letter, Elynn.”

“Lie down, Mum. I’ll find it. Just tell me where it is.”

Mum was reluctant, but she relented anyway. “It’s on top of the wardrobe.”

I stood up, and as I approached it, I reached for the top. I didn’t need to stand on my tip-toes, as the wardrobe was quite short. My hand searched for something letter-like on the dusty top, and once my fingers grazed it, my heart sank. Steeling myself for anything I was about to find, I drew the letter, which turned out to be an envelope with no signature.

It must be a lie. Mum might have hallucinated—

“Go on,” Mum encouraged. “Open it.”

Because Mum wanted me to do so, and her time was counted, I pulled the letter out, although I didn’t want to see if it was real. My fingers were shaking while unfolding the letter, and once graceful handwriting appeared before me, I dampened my lips before reading it aloud.

“*Dear Meira and Gerard Startel,*

“I’ve been watching you for over a week to make sure you are the best family my daughter could have. You gave an impression like you both were kind people, and my daughter would have a safe and loving life with you.

“Please, do not regard me as a monster mother who left her child behind. I had no other choice. If she had stayed with me, evil people would have found out about her and made her suffer, which I couldn’t let happen. I ought to leave her here in good and safe hands.

“You might notice she’s not like the other baby you might be used to seeing. Please try to ignore that and never remove a bracelet from her wrist. Never. Raise her as you would raise your own child if you could have one. I beg you.

“I leave you money, enough to last you until she’d grow old enough to provide for herself.

“I know I am asking a lot from you already, but I have another request.

“When I held the babe in my hands after the birth, I beheld the light in her. I hope you will also be able to see it. One day she might do wonderful things, but evil people out there, people with powers, would want her dead. She should not enter mine or her father’s birthplace.

“My last request would be to name her Elynn. You probably have a name already picked out, but please, let her be Elynn. It means light and most beautiful woman. The name would suit her well.

“Thank you.

“P.S. she was born on August 20th, 1:25 a.m.”

XXIX

WE WERE ALL in the same bed, huddled together like bunnies in a burrow. I was staring blankly at the ceiling while my dying mother was trying to say something to Gen.

Not my mother.

I closed my eyes, trying to let everything I'd learnt sink in without the idle outburst. Even if my entire life had been nothing but a lie.

The letter was lying in the pocket of the apron I was still wearing. Although it was just a paper, it felt heavy, tempting me to unfold it one more time and look at the delicate handwriting to make sure I'd understood it right. To make sure I wasn't imagining. To make sure I wasn't a girl whose birth mother had left her on the strangers' doorstep.

But I remained numb.

I shouldn't feel this shocked, though. Some tiny part of me had known all along that I couldn't be related to them by blood. My siblings and I were different, like the moon from the sun, and I didn't mean our personalities.

I'd questioned it before, why we looked nothing alike, and Mum had reassured me by saying I'd got most of my genes from the grandmother Lucida I'd never met. I would be lying if I said I'd believed her right away, but—

"Finally, I can die in peace," Mum said.

My eyelids shot open, and I turned my head to her. "You're not dying, Mum."

Gen was on the opposite side of the bed, holding our mother's hand while Kris was on the edge of it. It was a miracle he hadn't left the room yet.

"But I'm not your mother, honeybee," she said. "You read the letter."

Frowning, I sat up. "You *are* my mother, and you will always be my mother. Gerard will always be my father. Gen will always be my sister, and Kris will always be my brother. I love you, and you're not going to die, Mum. I won't let you."

"Whoever you are, Elynn, it's not in your power to fight against death."

“You. Are. Not. Dying.”

I wouldn't let her. I couldn't.

The corners of her lips twitched in an attempt to smile, but she failed. I didn't think she could smile anymore. She was slowly drifting into an eternal slumber. I could feel it in my bones, the time ticking against our favour.

“I couldn't be more grateful for my life,” she said. “Some woman gave me Elynn. A child Gerard and I had been begging for five years. Then she gave me Gen and Kris.”

“What?” The question left not only my mouth. Kris and Gen were as confused as I was.

“When—” She coughed, and the crimson painted her lips. I let go of her hand to pick a cloth from the bowl of water placed on the bedside table. Once I wrung it, I wiped the blood off her lips gently. “Thank you, my honeybee.”

I couldn't even summon a smile except for more tears.

“When Elynn was two years old...” she continued, regardless of the pain she must be feeling, “...she whispered something in a foreign language, and a faint light appeared around us. Two weeks later, I found out I was pregnant.”

She coughed again with the heavier saliva of blood that wetted the white bedding. She couldn't stop coughing for a while.

Gen and I exchanged wary glances.

The sentence was hovering between us, loud and clear.

The grim death was here, but Mum spoke regardless, her gaze on me. “Kristian. You gave me Kristian. And I... I cannot express how much I'm feeling grateful for you. For—”

Another bloody cough interrupted her.

Gen's face reflected such heartache that I found her hand and gave it a supportive squeeze.

“For all of you.” Mum tried to reach for something. Kristian, understanding what it was, took her hand. A shadow of disturbance crossed his face, as if only now he realised she was leaving us. Tears welled up his eyes. “I—”

“Shh.” I tried not to choke on my own tears as I dropped the cloth because there was no use of it anymore. “You need to rest now, Mum.”

I extended my hand to Kris. He lowered his watery eyes at my proffered hand and took it. I joined my fingers with Mum's, and Gen laced hers through Kris's.

Mum opened her mouth as if to say something, but no sound came out. The soul was drifting away from her eyes. Swallowing the lump, I leaned closer to Mum's ear and whispered what I thought she must know. "Someone told me you'd done a great job raising me, but you did the best job raising all of us, Mum. You're the best mother any child would be lucky to have." I pressed my lips against her cheek. "We all love you. Always and forever."

Gradually, her chest ceased rising. Her fingers stayed clammy and warm. A trace of a smile I hadn't spotted before lingered on her blood-stained lips, and her eyes stared into nothing.

"Mum?"

Gen gently shook her shoulder. She didn't react.

She drew in an unsteady breath. "Mum?"

I covered her hand with mine, and she faced my gaze. As she read the sentence in my eyes, she dropped her head into our mother's still chest and let out a plaintive cry.

Kris's hand slid from mine as he stood off the bed and left the room without saying a word.

And I merely stared out of the window into the night, wondering if stars could also mourn fallen angels as our hearts did.

At the back of the cottage, I was puking blood.

It didn't glisten in the moonlight. It didn't change colour. It didn't flame up. But it was blood coming from the inside of me.

On top of that—which was a minor issue compared to puking blood—the headache had grown stronger, and now every inch of my skull was throbbing with pain. But this was not my mother's illness. She hadn't vomited with blood as I did. Whatever it was, I wasn't going to last a day longer. I didn't think I had even twelve hours left.

If I died, I didn't want my siblings to witness my death. They might have thought I'd gone outside to mourn the loss of Mum, and that was why neither of them was looking for me, or it was because they were lost in their own grief to note my absence. Either way, it was for the better. Mum's

death was already horrible to endure. They shouldn't deal with my passing on the same day, too.

Elynn? A distant voice echoed in my mind. It didn't belong to me. *Elynn?*

I released a shaky breath.

Elynn, can you hear me?

My stomach twisted, and I felt the torrent of blood rising up in my throat.

Elynn.

The same voice of the same owner, but I couldn't recognise it when it was an echo, as if coming from the end of the void tunnel.

Elynn, please answer me.

I opened my mouth and emptied another bottle of blood into the grass. My eyesight darkened, shapes of things around me made no sense anymore.

Hells, no. This is not how you're going to die. You need to get out of there. Now!

I can't...

I zoomed out for a mere second, nearly losing my consciousness, the side of my head dropping against the wall. But it felt as if somebody was keeping me from succumbing to grim death. As if my life was hanging on the invisible thin thread that I could sense within me because of that someone.

Call your siblings, Elynn, it ordered, voice strict and unbending. *Now.*

Who are you?

Call. Your. Siblings.

It might be one of the three devils' voices who refused to welcome me into one of the hells. Maybe outsmarting the rules wasn't a ticket to hell, after all.

I opened my mouth, ready to yell.

"Gen."

But all that came out was a whisper.

Louder. Another severe and insensitive demand. Yes, the voice definitely belonged to Satan himself.

"Gen," I murmured.

Come on. I'm sure you can do better than that.

Swallowing, although there was nothing to swallow, therefore it was just a useless attempt, I tried to stand up on my limb legs. I drew in a long deep

breath, hopelessly searching for lack of air to yell, but I coughed instead, and a piece that looked like a lump of meat shot out of my throat, landing a foot away from me. I stared at it, terrified to even think of what it could be.

Elynn, for the Gods' below sake!

Then I screamed, but not for help. I screamed because of the excruciating pain twisting my insides as I sunk back to my knees. The tears gushed down my face, and I curled up into the ball. I wrapped my hands around my abdomen to ease the pain. But it was only getting worse.

I could barely see anything. The vision was becoming darker, darker and

—

“Elynn?”

I felt a gentle touch.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

But I could not answer her.

“KRIS!”

Gen helped me get to my feet, which I didn’t feel anymore. I assumed I moaned, but wasn’t sure.

“Come on,” she sounded surprisingly calm, and her voice eased me, but scarcely.

“What’s—” a masculine voice spoke. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Oh heavens, lift her. We need to carry her out of here. Be a man for once, Kris. Not a child.”

I felt other arms around me. I believed I was hefted off the ground, but I couldn’t comprehend what was happening when I was blind and suffering from this tormenting pain.

“She’s a morph.”

“I don’t know *who* she is, but she doesn’t belong here. The Spell is going to kill her if we don’t hurry up!”

“She’s so light.”

I coughed. Unstoppable.

“This is so not good,” Gen observed.

“She won’t survive,” Kris concluded. “She’s coughing pieces of her organs. If we get her further away from the Spell, she won’t be...”

Their voices became impossible to decipher. I didn’t understand who was talking anymore. They blended into one before dissolving into total silence.

At this point, I could only guess what was going on. Based on the earlier conversation between Gen and Kris, I figured I was being carried out of the cottage's property.

I didn't feel the pain anymore. I didn't feel anything apart from the delightful music waltzing in the fringes of my mind, slowly drawing closer, growing louder. I was familiar with it, but at the moment, I couldn't recall the name of the piece.

I began thinking about stuff I wouldn't be able to do.

My fingers wouldn't touch piano keys anymore. I wouldn't hold a pencil and draw clothes anymore. I would never have a chance to learn how to dance. I would never have a child to name Meira. I would never tell my siblings how much I loved and appreciated them.

I didn't even have time to mourn my mother.

But perhaps if I died, I'd meet her—both of my parents.

The cloud of obscurity was taking over me. I didn't have much time left. I knew my siblings were close by. I wanted to tell them how much I loved them, but nothing came out. I couldn't control my mouth.

My whole body, including my brain, refused to work.

Hold on. A whisper in my head. Just hold on a little longer.

It was easy to say.

Firm hands grasped me. I assumed they did when I was sinking into pitch-blackness.

Drink, the voice demanded.

Drink? Drink what?

"Drink, Elynn," the gentle voice said. "Open your mouth. Please?" the same lovely voice asked. "Yes, just like that."

I tasted something thick and bitter on my tongue. I didn't like the flavour, but my body begged for more, and I couldn't stop slurping whatever it was.

"Just don't stop." A relaxing stroke on my scalp, my hair. "Keep drinking."

I couldn't yet recognise the voice, which might not belong to a devil, after all.

Am I in heaven?

A chuckle of that same someone caressed my ears.

My mouth never ceased sucking the liquid thirstily that shifted from disgusting to refreshing—like a life source I desperately needed right now.

A stranger kept stroking my hair until I received my vision back, and I could finally see who'd saved me, *who* was holding me.

And it was the most entrancing eyes I beheld before I fell into nothingness.

OceanofPDF.com

XXX

SOMETHING OILY AND COLD touched my earlobe. I shrank, rubbing my ear against my left shoulder to get rid of the nasty sensation. When that was gone, I stretched my hands upward, yawning. I tried to crack my eye open, but the dazzling sun made me squint. As I sat up and shaded my eyes, I faced fish's eyes looking at me.

I screamed.

A snort sounded above me as I crawled away from the creature.

It was an alive fish staring at me while wriggling in a hand that—

I slowly raised my eyes.

Once I saw *who* was holding the fish, another scream came out of me.

“Two screams in a row, would it be three?” the Bloodsucker speculated with a tilt of his head.

At those words, my palm grazed something. Immediately, I yanked it away, glancing at the object I touched. It was the fish's bones. And it wasn't just one's. More and more fish bones followed. Dozens of them were splattered around me, surrounding me in a circle as if I was a sacrifice of some unholy ritual. My eyes fixed upon the bones which belonged to the piranha. Its blank red pupils bored into mine.

I screamed.

“Three,” he whispered, and I whipped my head at him. He was smiling impishly. “A win-win.”

In a flash, I summoned all the curses I'd learnt throughout my lifetime. Every one of them was dedicated to him, and he could hear them in his head acutely well. His reaction differed with each curse that passed through my mind. Some made him frown. Others made him laugh. And the rest—raise his eyebrows as he uttered *true*.

When a storm of awful curses ended, he glanced at the fish thrashing in his right hand. “Eat?” He gave me an inquiring glance.

I didn't respond in any way, apart from glaring at him.

“I won't give it to you raw. I can warm it.”

Again, I treated him with silence.

“Well, your loss.” With that, he threw a fish into the water, into the endless ocean. It plumped, and at least it was now out of the Bloodsucker’s reach, unlike me.

I locked my shoulders, looking up at him with distaste and likely a hint of fright. “Explain,” I demanded, and his golden eyes flicked to me. “Everything.”

He took a step closer to me and extended his hand. The chill crossed my skin at the thought of touching him.

His hands were smeared with blood. Although he wore gloves and presumably his palms beneath them were spotless, I knew better.

I stood up without his help and stumbled a bit when my vision darkened. His hand closed around my arm, keeping me steady while shapes and colours shifted back to their places. Then as I looked at him, he pulled his hand away, and I glanced at my arm that his hand had been on seconds ago. I was about to thank him when he said, “Explaining everything won’t do with me. You’ll have to be more specific.”

I closed my mouth, pressing my lips into a thin line, annoyed. After stretching my hands upward, I bent down, reaching my bare toes with my fingertips to awaken my body from profound but uncomfortable slumber.

From the corner of my eye, I saw him picking up a jacket that had been lying on the same spot I’d awoken before I faced a fish, forcing me to leave my sleeping ground. Our eyes met. We both looked away at the same time. His eyes dropped to his jacket, whereas mine travelled to the calm ocean ahead.

I watched the waves lapping the shore. So calming, so peaceful. It almost made me forget where I was, with *who* I was. I slid my hands into my pockets, and my fingers grazed a paper that had entirely slipped from my mind.

Swallowing, I pulled my hands out of my pockets. “I’m no human, right?”

He nodded, confirming what perhaps was obvious while slinging his jacket over his arm.

“How long have you known that?”

“For twenty years.”

I stood stunned for a moment. I’d expected his answer to be ever since Fillan and Lupin’s birthday celebration, but twenty years?

“How did you learn about it?”

Of all creatures, why the Bloodsucker? Why the monster?

"I'll explain everything to you later," he said, but he must have seen the doubt on my face, for he added, "I promise. Now it's time to head home."

I frowned. "My home is in the Mortal Region."

"I meant my home, Elynn."

Immediately, I backed a step away, sensing an alarming signal.

He sighed deeply. "I'm not asking you to go with me or forcing you, either. You're allowed to weigh your options. You can stay here until some unfriendly morph finds you and feasts on you, or you can return to your home, where you'll die, or accept my help and go with me."

The more I stared at him, the harder it was to take him for a monster when he was dressed in formal attire and talked as an intelligent and solemn man.

He'd saved my life, after all. Perhaps he wasn't as evil as tales had described him?

Now, did I actually believe that?

"Why are you helping me again?"

"If you go with me, I'll give you all the answers you need to know."

I stared at him, sceptical.

Although he'd told me I could choose, there was nothing much to choose from. The least I wanted was to become morph's dinner. I wasn't a fool to head back to the Mortal Region, which was a lethal place for me from now on. But going with the Bloodsucker into the unknown was also not the best choice.

A terrible one, actually. It was, however, the most reasonable one out of the three. And I couldn't think of another better option. The fourth one, unfortunately, didn't exist. Still, I didn't know what his true intentions were. I couldn't trust him.

"How did I survive the Spell's effects?"

He issued a sigh, exasperated by my crystal clear stalling. "I made you drink my blood."

An abrupt repulsion struck me. "Your what?!"

"Dragons' blood heals, didn't you know that?" From my puzzled look, he could tell that indeed, I didn't. "Are you humans being taught anything in the Mortal Region, apart from reading tales about the world's most cruel monsters?"

I gritted my teeth, but released them hastily. “For your information, we are taught many things, but humans usually avoid speaking about morphs, afraid that only by mentioning them they’d be summoned.”

He snorted. “We aren’t Gods, but I’m sure many morphs would be flattered to hear how intimidating they are that humans are afraid to speak of them.”

“Are *you* flattered?”

“How can I not when tales are told about me in there?”

I rolled my eyes. “How long have I been here?”

“Five days,” he said, but once he noted my astounded countenance, he added, “Your body needed time to restore itself after my blood. I reckon it took you so long because your bracelet kept you from healing faster.”

“Couldn’t you just remove it?”

“No. It would have made it worse for your healing. It’s been suppressing your abilities for two decades, and once everything gets out, it won’t be a delight. It’s a potent magic the sorceress put into a bracelet, and it should be treated with great care.”

I looked at the bronze bracelet on my wrist. Such a small and yet powerful thing. “But how come I could live in the Mortal Region unaffected by the Spell all this time, and now I can’t?”

“Because you were wearing your bracelet in the magical world for too long, and it doesn’t work against the Spell anymore.”

I didn’t want to think about it, about what his words meant, but I would only run from the truth, and it wouldn’t do any good for me. And the truth was, from now on, I would never be able to return home. Not only for a brief visit.

I stifled the tears trying to come through. “My abilities... What are they like?”

He shrugged. “I’m not positive about them.”

“Am I a morph?”

Please say no. Please say no.

“You could be.”

He baffled me. “What do you mean I could be?”

“You’re an interesting kind, Elynn. A love child of two kinds,” he said. “I’ll explain it to you later if you go with me, will you?”

“Do I have another choice?”

He cast me an apologetic smile and disappeared into a puff of crimson cloud, dropping his jacket on the sand. In a heartbeat, instead of a half-looking dragon, there materialised another whose mind-blowing size got me recoiling and toppling back on my bottom.

When he was this close, he seemed larger than in the twins' birthday celebration. With that, I was reminded of how menacing this creature could be, as if I'd forgotten. And perhaps I had. Drayard could breathe fire. He could *burn* me. However, I was still alive for some reason that I might learn if I travelled with him.

Climb onto my back, he ordered, those ethereal eyes buried in mine.

Reluctantly, I rose to my feet and wiped the sand off my skirt. Then I raised my head at the dragon standing on its four legs before me. "I don't think I should."

All right, I can grab you with my talons and carry you all the way, and the trip is quite long, Elynn.

"Drayard, I'm not riding you," I answered fiercely, but only after I said it, I realised how it'd sounded.

I prayed that my brown skin covered a blush.

What a shame, he sighed theatrically.

"That's not what I meant," I said, as if that would retract the words.

Again... What. A. Shame!

Pressing my lips together, I endeavoured not to avert my eyes, no matter how heavily I must be flushing. "No, but seriously, I'm not climbing on your back, Drayard."

All right then, goodbye to you.

He shifted backwards, and before I knew it, I blurted out hurriedly, "No!" His eyes landed on me. "Please. Wait. I... I-I'll climb on you."

Although his dragon face was devoid of emotion, I had a hunch he was thrilled, perhaps even smirking in that calculating head of his for leaving me with no choice but to relent.

I took a sharp breath, steeling myself for the climb, and stepped closer to the dragon.

Put on my jacket first. It's going to be cold up there, he informed me, and I reached for his fallen jacket. *Go behind me and climb my tail until you reach my back. It'll be easier.*

I slid my hands into the sleeves of his warm jacket while approaching his tail at a slow pace, wary of any abrupt movement he might make to scare

me. His giant height got all my body's muscles straining like the violin's strings would be if a violinist wanted to break them while tuning the instrument.

I surveyed the length of his tail. Quite long, bedecked with black spikes he was lacking when he was in his half-form. It would be a long journey until I'd reach his back and find a place where I'd be comfortable to fly Gods knew for how long. If flying on a dragon was even possible to be comfortable.

I touched one of the spikes on the tail. He didn't react. I didn't know why I'd expected him to say something.

Once I planted my foot on one and found the balance, I began mounting him.

How's it possible to shapeshift in such an enormous animal? I asked.

Ask the Gods if you meet them, he answered. *They created all creatures.*

But you're not as big as you turn into a human shape, right?

It was a silly question. I didn't know why I'd even asked that.

When I reached his spine, I paused to examine where I was heading. I noted a flat, narrow space between his wings, which had three horns on their ends. Positively, they could do significant damage to anyone. With that thought, I resumed my journey as a hiker climbing up the sloping mountain. But in this case, a bloody dragon.

I'm two metres tall. Is that a tremendous height for a human to be?

Do your horns add up to the sum?

How do you know I have horns in my human form?

I paused, losing my words. *I...* I tried to collect an answer, but there wasn't one. *I... uh, do they?*

I hadn't even considered whether his horns disappeared when he was in his real form or not. Such things like horns, animal-like ears, and more animal features hadn't remained on any morph I'd seen at the Autumn Equinox. Then why had I assumed Drayard's horns were a part of his appearance once he transformed into a human-like shape?

No, Elynn, he said, and with that, I landed to the present, *horns don't add up to the whole.*

Then yes, I thought, *it's tall for a human, so it doesn't apply to you.*

He huffed out a laugh. *You never let go of your sharp tongue, do you?*

As I felt myself smiling, I quickly dropped it. *Not when you're around, certainly.*

Eventually, I reached the space between his wings and fit myself there as comfortably as I could manage. I tried not to peek down, as it might be my greatest mistake.

Hold on to my spikes tight and don't let go during the flight.

I gripped his spikes, holding onto them as he'd advised me.

Ready? he asked.

No.

He snorted and shot into the sky without giving me a chance to brace myself for it.

Autumn's chilly breeze carried my scream away.

Part III: Notes of Fire & Friendship

OceanofPDF.com

XXXI

I COULDN'T LIFT MY HEAD and enjoy the sight, afraid that if I shifted just a bit, I'd fall off him. So I kept my body pressed against his hard scaled back and my eyelids clamped shut for most of the flight above the Indigo Ocean.

If someone had told me I'd be flying on the dragon this same year three months ago, I'd have called them delirious. Ever since Mum had been reading stories about Arragon, I had never dreamt of meeting a single dragon, let alone riding one someday. But here I was, on the most dangerous one alive, above the clouds, flying.

This was *all* real.

Not a dream. Not a nightmare. But reality.

Mum would—

No, Mum would do nothing. She wasn't among the living now. She was *dead*. But before the feeling of desolation took hold of me, I chased it away, opting not to dwell on my mother's death. Not now, at least.

Hold tight, Elynn, Drayard warned me.

I opened my eyelids, gripping his spikes firmer than before. I didn't think he could feel them, despite my uncut nails sinking in them. Perhaps if I dared to cut one someday, he wouldn't feel any pain. The spikes were merely a decoration. But that was only my assumption.

Drayard dived downwards, and I pursed my lips to hold the yelp from escaping again. When Drayard first had sprung into the sky, and I'd yelped, he'd made quite a dirty pun in my head. Not wanting to hear one of his unseemly jokes ever again, I forbade myself to let out a single shriek.

But then he returned to his normal flying state. We weren't landing anymore.

I peered down to see where we were. And what I beheld below us enthralled me.

Many colourful buildings varied between yellow, orange and red hues with brown roofs. If I peered closer, I could make out something moving between them—morphs strolling the streets.

I recognised what it was in no time.

The City of Fire. Yet another remarkable feature from tales.

But Drayard flew past it, and a much darker scenery grew miles away from the city. In front of the smoky chasm, seemingly half-filled with lava, two menacing dragon sculptures were sitting atop the columns, guarding engraved iron gates, which led to the bridge. But it wasn't the most striking part of this ominous picture. It was the colossal black castle surmounting the dark mountain that took my breath away.

The castle was built by my ancestors eight centuries ago, Drayard informed me, without needing to ask. They burned the stone with their fire, turning it into hellrock. That's why it's black.

The hellrock. One of the books Mum had read told that their palace was burned until it turned as black as a skillet. But there was another outstanding detail about it which piqued my interest more than its stone. It seemed like lava was streaming through the fissures in the walls.

Those lava lines... Are they real? I inquired.

Yes.

But how does it flow like that?

It's called magic, Honeylove.

Magic... Such beautiful, breath-taking magic.

We flew above the bridge, and I sighted a disruption amid it, opening a big, impassable hole.

What happened to the bridge?

He didn't answer for a long moment, and as I thought he was going to ignore it as most of my inquiries, the grave reply rang, *I destroyed it.*

But why?

This time there stood silence that he didn't break. I took it as a sign that he wasn't going to elaborate further.

We landed in the castle's courtyard. The landing was neat. It didn't make me scream this time. I didn't even feel it, for I was too immersed in admiring the ornate pillars.

Before I tried to climb off him, he disappeared into another crimson smoke, and I began falling, but was caught before I had a chance to react. I looked up and saw his eyes already on me.

"How was your flight?" he inquired sweetly.

I continued staring at him, unable to muster any reply. His closeness and unearthly heat seeping through his clothes distracted me.

I didn't want him to touch me.

Promptly, as if he'd heard my thoughts, which perhaps he had, he planted me on the solid ground and stepped back. I hugged myself, feeling covert gratitude towards him for giving me his jacket, as I'd have turned to ice in the middle of our flight over the clouds without it.

"Can I ask you a question?" I tried.

"If it doesn't involve me, be my guest."

I paused a bit before I inquired, "Where do your clothes go every time you shapeshift?"

"Ah," he said, tucking his hands into his pockets, "that's... a secret."

"And why is that?"

"Because it is a mystery. I don't know where our clothes go every time morphs shapeshift, Elynn."

I looked around the area. The yard was dark, paved with stone, plain and empty. The lines of pillars were covering it from the citizens. No guards stood behind the massive gates, nor entrance doors shadowed by the high gothic arch Drayard was already making his way to.

I caught up with him. "Why are there no guards?"

He halted before the door. "Guards would be unnecessary. Nobody can enter anyway."

"Morphs with flying ability can."

A hint of a smile appeared on his mouth. "Yes, but there aren't many of them around."

He opened the door, letting me in first. I hesitated. "But isn't it strange for a castle not to have anyone to guard it?"

"Might seem strange to those who are used to them, but not to me. Hellrock Castle has different rules."

Once I walked inside, I cast around the foyer, unsurprised to detect no guards or another living creature within this time. The door closed behind, and for a second, darkness swallowed the room, but in no time, the lights sprang to life, undoubtedly touched by Drayard's ability.

It was still mostly dark, as not every candlelight could reach every nook and cranny of the foyer. The place didn't have any windows either. Apart from two arched twin staircases joining in the landing and an impressive chandelier hanging above our heads, it was pretty vacant and dreary and silent. As if there was not even a single living thing other than Drayard and me.

I couldn't ignore a feeling of dread growing in my stomach ever since the doors had closed, making me more and more tense. But I couldn't wrap my head around why, with each heartbeat, I was getting more and more influenced by some rotten wickedness permeating the air, or it was Drayard himself who radiated it. With that hypothesis, I swiped my attention back to him. Again, I found him already staring at me.

"What powers are you using?"

His eyebrows lowered, pretending to act clueless. "I beg your pardon?"

I backed away from him. He continued watching me with curiosity, unmoving.

"This whole aura..." I gestured with my hands to help me define what words couldn't. "It's awful. What are you doing?"

"I can assure you that I'm doing nothing. I'm just a half-breed."

"*Just.*" The word slid off my tongue like a tart candy. "You know what? I've changed my mind. I... I want to leave."

"Don't you want to hear the reason you're feeling dreadful sensations?"

"Oh, I know," I declared boldly. "It's your power. Your evil nature."

A corner of his mouth quirked. The bastard was getting entertained by this. "No, that's not me."

"Then what is it?"

"Look at the walls, Honeylove."

I didn't hesitate for a fleeting moment to do just that. At first, they looked like an ivory stone, but then... when I really *looked*, everything inside me surged up into my throat.

"Oh, my heavens..."

I backed away. Away from the wall, away from the monstrosity I'd just discovered, away from the *bones*.

The walls began spinning. Surprisingly, I didn't puke yet, even if I felt like doing it. He touched my arm, and I instantly shot back as if struck by thunder.

"You're a monster," I spat straight into his face, hiding no bit of revulsion I'd felt for him with every ounce of my blood.

"Well," he said, shoving his hands into his pockets in his casual manner, "you agreed to come here."

"I'm getting out of here."

I turned and stomped towards the exit, but his calm, albeit irritating to the bone voice, rang behind me, bringing me to a halt. "Don't get me

wrong, Elynn. You're always allowed to leave, but I ought to remind you you're in a world where morphs look like half-beasts, and your appearance is humanlike. As you may have figured it out, morphs aren't fond of humans. If you, hells forbid, catch someone's eye, I can assure you they won't hesitate to hurt you. But if you somehow, by some miracle, get away without them noticing you, are you sure you'll survive alone in the wild?"

I had never felt such loathe towards someone, nor this foolish for agreeing to take me here, even though I'd had no choice. Not a single one was worth consideration, and again, I was stuck in the same maze with a sole option, which was to stay and perhaps... become one of the poor souls decorating these walls.

I was trapped. He'd trapped me without putting in much effort, and although I had no clue what his real motives were, all I felt was like a marionette controlled by a mastermind. I'd known I shouldn't trust him, and yet I had at some level anyway.

I glanced at him over my shoulder. "Did you enjoy tearing the skin of people, then pasting the bones of them on the wall for your decor?"

He let out a weary sigh. "I guess you won't believe me if I try to deny that it wasn't my work, will you?"

"No," I almost hissed, "you're right. I won't."

"Are you leaving?" he asked, tired suddenly. "Or shall we proceed?"

Clenching my hands into fists, I endeavoured to keep the rage streaming through my blood at bay. Releasing my fists, I turned to him wholly.

"Let's carry on, then," he said.

As he turned to the stairs, I pushed myself to follow his steps, attempting to dismiss the picture of people's bones in vain.

But I couldn't take it much longer. I had to ask. I had to or else that unanswered question would haunt me and not leave me for peace of mind.

"Are they..." My mouth turned dry, steps heavy as I mounted the stairs, but I made myself walk and not pause for a second. I needed to get as far as I could from here. "Are they humans' remnants?"

"Yes."

I halted, clutching the banister. He hadn't even hesitated to reply.

Drayard paused, too, but a few steps higher and looked down at me. "Elynn?"

He must have been delighting in this. Seeing me this... terrified. He fed on it. On people's frights, shrieks as he—

The light became dim, and I swayed before the world slipped from under my feet.

When my eyelids parted one by one, and I beheld a crimson canopy above the comfortable bed I was lying on, I thought that what I'd seen was yet another nightmare. But it didn't take long for me to understand that I didn't dream, nor was I delirious when I sat up and sighted two of the most horrible looking creatures hovering at the foot of the bed, staring at me with their different coloured eyes.

I recognised them as the same bats from the twins' birthday celebration.

What kind of real-life nightmare I'd gotten myself into this time?

"Wakey, wakey, sleeping beauty!" the one with navy eyes crooned. "What a journey, am I right?"

"She's scared, Baby," the lilac-eyed one noted as she stared at me with much milder features on her face than her companion. Was it a concern?

She was right, but scared was not a word to how I'd define my current emotions. I was beyond terrified, not to mention revolted with this environment and myself.

"Of course, she is." Baby approached me. *What a strange name.* "Listen, love, I know it's a lot to take in, but listen carefully as we're going to leave. Blossom and I have already drawn you a bath—"

"With bubbles," Blossom added. "Everybody likes bubbles, right?"

"Doesn't matter," Baby responded dismissively. Blossom's face got slightly scrunched. "Your bath is ready, but don't take too long cleaning yourself as His Highness is expecting you at dinner tonight—"

"No."

How I'd managed to release a voice, let alone form an actual word, that was the question for the Universe to unfold.

For a moment, a great silence settled over the room.

"Oh, Gods are gracious! She has spoken!" Baby joined her hands together with a clap. "What an outstanding miracle that is! Her mutism has been cured!"

"No?" Blossom asked softly.

I shook my head.

"Why no?" Baby asked without sarcasm this time.

And I attempted to speak, to push away the fear, to get rid of the appalling feelings. “I...” I looked down. Then I inhaled and said those words to myself: *I would not be afraid.*

I held my chin up with all my remaining inner strength. “Tell him I won’t dine with him.”

Baby snorted. Blossom, however, remained concerned.

“Oh, that’s out of the question, love,” Baby said. “You see, he’s the King. Now you’re at his disposal. If you disobey, anything can happen. He can do whatever he wants with you, and he won’t get punished, so take my advice...” she paused, “...whatever your name is—”

“Elynn,” I murmured.

“Hmm?”

I swallowed before I clarified louder and clearer, “My name is Elynn.”

Perhaps I’d committed another mistake—which wouldn’t be the first or the last one—by telling her my name, I didn’t care. All I wanted was not to be anywhere near the Bloodsucker ever again.

“All right, take my advice, Elynn. Obey his orders, don’t deny him, and you’ll be just fine.”

“Just fine?” I raised my head at her, not believing my ears of what absurd words had reached them. “He wants me for something evil. He will hurt me whether I obey him or not. He’s *the Bloodsucker.*”

Blossom opened her mouth. “He’s actually not that—”

Only from one Baby’s unpleasant glance at Blossom, she shut her mouth. Then Baby looked at me, feigning peacefulness. “Take a bath not only to wash off the filth along with a reek but to calm down. The bath helps—”

“The bath won’t sort out any of my problems.”

Baby pinched her nose as she dragged in a deep breath. I could tell she was trying her best not to surrender to annoyance simmering inside her.

“Again,” she said with a sigh. “You take a bath. Then you find us here in an hour to prepare you for—”

“I’m not—”

“Oh, hush!” she snapped at last with a tap of her foot. “We leave now. No objections or else you know who would appear here earlier than he should.”

I clenched my jaw and watched them leave. But before the double ebony doors framed with gold closed, Blossom poked her head inside. She smiled

at me with the purest and amiable smile I had ever seen a morph wearing, but I wasn't bought by it. They were all false creatures.

"Take a bath, Elynn," she said in a voice that equated to a light touch of wind on a blistering summer day. "And don't forget to—"

But before she could finish the rest of the sentence, someone—Baby—tugged her back, and the door shut with a sound. Utter silence enveloped the room. I was officially left alone.

I surveyed the bedroom. It was enormous. I reckoned it was much bigger than Asenah's. Its walls were half wooden, half decorated with brocaded dark-red wallpaper, ceilings gilded. There were other double doors before me, flanked by two sweeping windows looking to the ashen sky.

I slid off the bed and approached the doors. I'd assumed they'd be locked, but I swung them open without any hindrance. The sullen view across the balcony welcomed me, but I didn't step further, leaving the doors ajar for the fresh air to float inside instead. I resumed studying more of the room until my eyes landed on the mirror, and I started at the sight.

A girl with a dress, which struck more like a rag than a piece of clothing, was staring at me. It was drenched with dirt and... red stains. I wasn't sure whether they belonged to Mum or me, and I didn't want to think about it. My hair from weeks of no treatment had become a giant mess of knots. It'd take a long time to comb out the nest and get rid of the dirt, along with dried blood. The gold in my hair was barely visible when it was this filthy.

Mum once had told me I'd inherited my looks from my grandmother I'd never met. She'd lied, but despite it, I didn't love her less.

But perhaps I'd misunderstood it? Perhaps it was all in my head because of the effects of the Spell? That my biological family wasn't the one I'd grown up with?

I slid my hand into my pocket and fished out the letter. Trembling, I unfolded it and read it with a pounding heart. I read it once, twice, but the text always remained the same as every word.

I scrunched up the letter and threw it in the lowly burning fireplace. Then I sank to my knees, embracing myself, and let the tears I'd been keeping locked up for a while leave.

I was sorry that I couldn't be at my mother's funeral to bid my final farewell.

I was sorry.

For everything I should feel sorry for, but didn't know what for yet.

OceanofPDF.com

XXXII

AFTER MOURNING MY MOTHER, I took a bath and washed the dirt and blood off my body and hair with soap and whatever was in the bottles. My body was as clean as new, and blonde hair had received its natural golden sheen. As for my physical well-being, I felt better. I couldn't, however, say the same about my heart, mind and soul. They were damaged and likely unrepairable.

I opened the gilded wardrobe, and once I saw its content, I had to repress my jaw from dropping. Those were some exquisite dresses in red, orange, yellow and black shades hanging inside. Clearly, they served the Realm of Embers aesthetic of fire.

I dragged my fingers over their sleeves, rubbed the material between my pinched fingertips, testing it. They were all of high quality, if not the highest. Had there been different circumstances, my heart would have cried out of joy.

I found a wine-red robe with gold embellishments and put it on, letting go of the towel. I reached for it but paused myself before picking it up. Two parts of me were warring. One demanded me to leave it lying as a mark of my defiance, but the other, the sensible one that had learnt something out of my serving days in the Realm of Bones, told me to pick it up. Sighing, I did and folded it. I deposited it neatly on the bed before lying on the settee nearby.

It didn't take long for Baby and Blossom to show up. They tried to make me obey King's orders, but I continued lying on the settee, impervious to their persistence.

I was playing with fire, and I didn't care. What I'd seen in the castle's entry rendered me to be this way. My life was already doomed. Why should I try to please the one who would kill me sooner or later anyway?

"Where did he get this girl?" Baby complained after giving up on trying to move me out of my place at last. "Is he into stubborn women?"

If this Baby wasn't a morph, I'd wither her with a look alone.

"Do you think he'll kill us if—"

But before Blossom could finish, the man's voice interrupted her.

"Leave the room, sweethearts."

I didn't look at him, continuing to stare at the ceiling. I wasn't terrified of him or convinced myself to believe that I wasn't, for I refused to behave like a timid doe in front of strangers.

Once his figure emerged in my periphery, I turned on my left side and faced the settee's backrest, which colour reminded me of Mum's blood. A knot formed in my chest.

"Aren't you thirsty or hungry?" he inquired in a gentle voice.

Again, I didn't buy his concern. He was false. A murderer who kept his achievements as bones of innocents he'd killed instead of proper walls. *Who does that?*

Right... The Bloodsucker.

I didn't reply, albeit I felt both hunger and thirst. But I didn't feel like providing my belly with anything when I was stuck here.

"Aren't you interested in hearing who you are by birthright, Elynn?"

I whipped my head around to look at him. "No one's stopping you from speaking now."

He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his trousers he'd changed. He'd changed his whole attire. "I give orders, not you."

"And I don't care." I sat up, adjusting the robe. "I'm not going into the room decorated with more humans' remnants."

"Only the entrance owns such a priceless decoration. The other parts of the castle don't have that finery."

"I don't—"

My stomach growled. Loud. I wouldn't be surprised if every living thing in the castle heard it.

He gave me a knowing look, which I ignored.

"Are you going to eat? The food will go cold if you stall longer."

"Wearing this?" I raised my eyebrows, gesturing at the robe.

He hastily eyed it before his gaze returned to mine. "Wearing this."

"Just like that?" I frowned, confused. "Aren't you going to demand that I change, as it's inappropriate to wear a robe at the dining table?"

He stared at me with his solemn expression that drove me nuts. "Wear whatever you like, Elynn. A robe, a towel, even nothing if you're comfortable with it."

Though the last sentence could be taken as an innuendo, it didn't sound like it, but more like a statement of fact. I'd thought nothing could ever amaze me anymore after what I'd seen in the castle's entrance, but Drayard must have been the most unpredictable creature ever to exist, for he proved me wrong yet again. I'd expected him to order me to dress up nicely, but he genuinely didn't care about my clothing. Or he just masked it well.

"I bet you'd be pleased if I wore nothing."

A smile, one of his seldom nice ones, made an appearance. "I'm sure I wouldn't be comfortable, but—"

"Don't you even dare to dream about it, you lecherous bastard." I rose to my feet. "I'm only going because I need answers, that's all."

Also, my stomach demanded food, and it'd become impossible to ignore it.

"Then hurry. I know how fast of a runner you are. Delaying isn't the strongest of your assets."

Sudden fury lit up my blood, and perhaps I would have exploded, but he turned away and moved towards the opened doors. I took a deep calming breath, bracing myself for spending the dinner with the Bloodsucker, and followed his footsteps into the corridor.

"Why did you even tell me to run if you weren't planning to kill me?"

He glanced over his shoulder, wrinkles marring his forehead. "You shouldn't be walking behind me."

A scoff almost left me, but I held it back, keeping my face straight. It was a smooth way to dodge my question. I could give it to him, but I wouldn't.

"You're right, I shouldn't, but that's how society is, isn't it? Rulers are superior to the rest. Women are lesser than men. Monsters are wearing crowns."

He looked away immediately, and I couldn't hide a sneer. He was silent for the rest of the walk. We passed dimmed corridors, which, to my relief, weren't decorated with more human remains, and descended a staircase where more corridors followed. I craned my neck at the windows we passed, but it was dark outside, and I couldn't see a thing. At last, he halted before the doors that were almost twice his height. He opened them into a dining room.

All the windows were closed with red velvet curtains. A lit chandelier was hanging over the banquet table arrayed with plenty of food to satisfy

one's stomach and even overfeed it, but all the seats were empty, and the food here was too much for two people. No matter how starved I was, I wouldn't be able to consume even half of it.

Drayard made it to the table and began picking his food.

"Won't Baby with Blossom be joining us?" I asked, trying not to expose curiosity.

"Why would they?" He put some chicken wings on the plate. "They work for me, you don't. So, don't be demure and pick whatever you like for your dinner instead of standing there like a pillar."

"Isn't that a bit too much for two mouths?"

He didn't answer. I stopped idling and focused on the table and its content. I could choose whatever I wanted, and I did exactly that. I picked what my belly was craving for, and, unsurprisingly, it asked for most of the food here.

As I was putting potatoes on my plate, I glanced at Drayard. He was already sitting and sipping something of dark red liquid. I froze.

Blood.

"No, not blood, Elynn," he assured while cutting a roast chicken with a knife nonchalantly.

"Drayard?"

He raised his eyes.

I forced a smile. "Stay away from my head."

With that, I pivoted on my heel and chose the furthest seat from him—at the end of the table. I eyed my plate with four slices of roasted pork, rice, part of the roast chicken and potatoes. I began cutting the pork first.

"How can I when you're so willing to share your thoughts with me?" He put a bite of roast chicken into his mouth and half-smiled.

"I'm not willing, and I don't share my thoughts or anything with you." I was cutting the pork so hard that it was a miracle I didn't cut through the plate. "You are the one who likes to get into my head without invitation, and when I get in your head by a complete *accident*, you turn into a beast to shoo me out of it." I placed a bite into my mouth, bottling up my annoyance.

"Your head isn't as half as noxious as mine. If you stayed in my head longer than you should, it would affect you more than me. I spared you from the nightmares."

I rolled my eyes. “What could be that bad inside your head? Nefarious plans on how to kill that and that?” I made gestures with a fork.

But I’d seen a glimpse of what was lurking in the deepest layers of his mind, heard something. Something I’d never like to hear ever again.

“I’m not answering questions which involve me, Elynn,” he reminded me politely.

“Perhaps you should. I don’t see any of your friends around unless you don’t have them because everyone’s so terrified of you. All I saw was your whores who warm your bed, and of course, the dead souls decorating your walls. So, tell me, Drayard.” I leaned in. “Are you happy?”

His eyes were empty—no hint of emotion. Despite my uneven heartbeat—I was positive he could hear—I held his spookier look than any emotions coming from him might be if they were welded together.

“As much as it concerns you, yes, I’m happy.”

For the first time, I recognised the lie in his tone, but I didn’t bother to expose it.

The next ten minutes or so, we ate in silence, which wasn’t as uncomfortable as I’d have envisioned it to be. Both of us needed some time to enjoy the meal before we waded into another conversation that would probably end up with me hissing at him again while he’d be speaking with that calm, mature tone of his, aggravating me even more.

I had time to consider the questions I needed to learn the answers to, making sure they didn’t involve Drayard’s past, since he despised every time I touched it. At last, I had my first question.

I inhaled, finding the courage to voice it. “Who are my biological parents?”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know that, but only this way, I’d have a better knowledge of who I was by learning about my origins.

“They are traitors of both empires. I’m sure you have heard of them since their love story and treason are well known.” He took a sip from the glass and swallowed. “Tatyana Haroun and Aytigin Cresenbar are your parents.”

I looked at the plate. Unknown people Imogen had refused to speak about were my birth givers.

Curiosity is what kills us humans. Her words drummed in my head. Little had we known I was not human. Curiosity couldn’t kill me. Gods knew what could.

At least Drayard didn't have to be pushed to continue. "Your mother was a princess of the Empire of Beasts. Your father—an heir of the Empire of Skies. Twenty-two years ago, when morphs and enchanters attempted to communicate to write conditions of the treaty amongst their empires, your parents met at your father's family's palace. As cliché as it was, they fell in love at first sight." He winced. I assumed he didn't believe in love at first sight. Well, there was something we had in common. "Aytigin and Tatyana were supposed to be enemies. Enchanter and a morph, two kinds that shouldn't breed together as it would cause pureblood ruin. However, they were soulmates, and no power of Gods could do anything to deter anyone from joining when they are meant to be by the power of the supreme Universe. Do you know what soulmates are, Elynn?"

"Yes," I assured without hesitation. "It's when two people are meant to be by the Universe. When separate souls, minds, bodies and hearts belong together. They are extremely rare as there's one person dedicated to someone. They either find it or not." I took a breath. "But this is a myth."

The corner of his mouth rose slightly. "It's not a myth."

I huffed, but he went on. "Your definition of a soulmate is debatable. In your biological parent's case, yes, that's almost exactly what you told, but there are exceptions. Soulmates aren't extremely rare, as you claim. They don't have to be someone's destined to be in an eternal romantic relationship. Soulmates are people that understand each other, someone with whom one feels right and comfortable..."

It clicked then.

My guardian parents were each other's soulmates.

I had never acknowledged it until Drayard started defining my parents' relationship. They were the quintessence of what love should be like. They had been equals. Dad hadn't made less of Mum. He always used to consult her before making important decisions that involved his family. But most importantly, when they were together in the same room as me, their love for each other was radiating from them, as if they were meant to be. Like soulmates lucky to find each other.

I'd lived with soulmates for more than half of my life and I had no clue. And not only my guardian parents, but my biological ones had found theirs.

Did it mean I'd find mine, too?

I let out a laugh at the thought.

"Are you done reflecting?" Drayard asked.

I nodded.

“As I was saying, not always soulmates must be involved romantically. They can be just friends while the other is in a relationship with another or their mate.”

“Mate?” I raised my eyebrows. “You mean like animals have mates and breed with them?”

“Something like that, yes. Morphs are the species that are the most related to animals since they are technically half animals, but we have more control in the sphere than them. Morphs can find their mates during the mating seasons, but not necessarily. Some types of morphs such as wolves and dragons can find a mate for a lifetime while the rest kinds can have boundless of them each mating season just like in the world of nature.”

I was speechless. I had never heard about mates or soulmates before. Moreover, it remained surreal to me I wasn’t who I’d thought I was my whole life. I needed some time to digest all the information, but also, there was more I had to learn.

“What happened after Aytigin and Tatyana learnt they were soulmates?”

“Since Aytigin and Tatyana couldn’t be together officially and legally, they ran away. They were selfish and unmindful of what it would cost for both empires because of their treason.

“As expected, their families became furious. The emperor of the skies, your grandfather Tanwyn, sent an assassin to poison the empress of beasts, your grandmother Nathalie. The assassination infuriated the emperor of beasts, your other grandfather Rayko, and he murdered Tanwyn with his own pair of hands by slipping into his bedchamber at night. Then Rayko was poisoned by the current emperor Kalani, your uncle.”

I frowned. My brain had a tough time tracking who killed who, as there were many new names he’d dropped on me in one go.

“It was quite a bloodshed between two families,” he commented. “Personally, I’m awed how Tatyana’s and Aytigin’s treason didn’t inspire another war.”

I grasped a glass filled with Gods knew what and took a hefty gulp. It was just wine. I drank it whole in no time and looked over the table in search of more.

“The pitcher is in the middle,” Drayard pointed out as soon as I noticed it.

I stood up with a glass in hand and went for the pitcher. I poured a glass that for once was meant to me and not a morph.

“I know it’s a lot to take in.”

I gave him a pointed look over the rim. “You don’t say.”

He favoured me with a half-smile, and I returned to my seat.

“But Tatyana and Aytigin were discovered eventually, right?”

He nodded. “Yes. They hid for almost a year. Aytigin was caught by enchanter twenty years ago, and Tatyana came back to the empire not long after, since it was pointless for her to continue hiding when her loved one had been captured. However, instead of facing the music, she went to my father.”

Drayard scratched his temple, breaking eye contact for the first time as he began speaking quieter, lower, as if the topic was unpleasant for him to enter. “Tatyana and Arragon were good friends since childhood. They loved each other. But Father loved Tatyana more than a friend while she loved him like a brother. She confided in him with revealing her pregnancy and asked for his help to protect her unborn child from being discovered.

“He was blinded by love. He could have said no as he was risking everything, but he didn’t.”

Drayard looked at his plate, pausing his narrative. As he drew in a breath, he lifted his eyes at me. “With a sorceress’ help, I assume, magic was drained from Tatyana so she could get in the Mortal Region unaffected. Leaving you in the protected land from magic was the best idea they could think of.”

“You *assume* with a sorceress’ help?”

“I can’t think of another reason how Tatyana got into the Mortal Region where it was deadly for her to be,” he explained. “Before she gave birth to you in the Mortal Region and left you with humans, Father had signed a magical oath with her to protect you despite anything. To guarantee his loyalty, his whole kind was put at stake. Fourteen years later, after Tatyana’s exile, enchanter marched into my realm and massacred the dragons, including my father. During that time, I was away, but I returned just in time to witness his death. He was alive for enough time for him to pass on his oath made for Tatyana to me. What a coincidence, huh?” His eyes twinkled with fire that wasn’t meant to me—no, it was meant, perhaps, to his father and Tatyana.

“I’m sorry.”

“You shouldn’t be. It’s not your fault my kind was decimated. I made up with the dragons’ unjust fate soon enough.”

“But why would enchanters do this?”

“Because they’re monsters.”

I frowned. “I’m sure there was a reason they did what they did.”

“People don’t need to have a reason to be monsters, Elynn.”

I took a sip. I was made to ask another question but it was only about him. I held my tongue until I came across another inquiry. “Because of the magical oath, you saved my life twice?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Why did you take that oath?”

“As I’ve said before, I don’t answer questions that include me.”

I let out an irritated sigh. “This oath then... is the reason I could hear your voice in the Mortal Region?”

He had another sip of wine. “Correct.”

“And why did you tell me to run at the wedding?”

“Because Nayden with Nadira was going to make an appearance. They might have recognised you. I couldn’t risk it as Nayden would have ended you.”

“I’m related to them?”

“You’re biologically their niece. Also, you have cousins.”

I grimaced. “Ew, did they...”

He smiled. “No. Nayden and Nadira don’t have their own kids. Your cousins are royals from the Realm of Wilds, such as Dara.”

Oh, that sneaky panther.

But the way she had stared at me at the twins’ birthday... What if she—

“She might know who I am,” I said. “She was watching me the night after the twins’ birthday. I was in the kitchen and felt her staring at me.”

“Dara knows a lot. She might know who you’ve been ever since she saw you.”

“Is she going to tell?”

“I wouldn’t worry about her if I were you.”

But I was thinking the opposite. “Why?”

“She’s not a threat.”

I watched him suspiciously. He was underestimating her, and I almost said if I were him, I wouldn’t brush off someone like her as harmless, but I stopped myself. There was no reason to tell him that.

“What kind do I belong to?”

“You might be a half-breed. Half-morph of a lion and half-enchantress.”

“And what powers do I have?”

“I cannot answer you, since I’m not sure. There’s a thing about half-breeds. They are rare. Enchanters and morphs can reproduce with each other, but it doesn’t mean that their offspring would be a half-breed in possession of both of their parents’ abilities. It’s a rare case when a baby is born with all the powers and not one of their parents’ that dominate the most during the conception.”

“You are that rare case,” I thought aloud.

“Yes, I am.”

“So, you don’t have any slightest idea what powers might hit me once I remove my bracelet?”

“Well, Aytigin was a prince of skies. He must have had great power, and Tatyana was a princess of beasts, a morph that could transform into a lioness with night vision, enhanced senses. Both of your parents’ genetics are powerful. It’s a high chance you inherited both of their abilities. However, that’s only my calculations, which have never failed me before.”

Somehow, I didn’t doubt him. He had a mind of a devil and a wise one. “What kills half-breeds?”

“The most dominating genetics during the conception could only determine that. In my case, I’m more of a dragon than a bat, which makes any platinum weapon lethal to me. Gold can’t kill me, only scar me. In your case, if Tatyana’s DNA dominates yours, it’s gold. If Aytigin’s, it’s iron. But it can’t be both. My guess is you have more morphs’ abilities since you were affected by the Spell.”

I frowned. “Aren’t enchanters affected by the Spell?”

“No. Only morphs can’t go there. Enchanters can.”

That was new.

“Is it as easy to kill half-breeds as any other species?”

“Yes.”

I had no further questions, or at least none I could think of now. I resumed eating, focusing on the aim to fill my empty stomach.

“Is there something you need?” he inquired after a while. “Because you can be provided with anything.”

I looked at him, earnest. “I want freedom.”

His face showed no reaction to it. "The safest environment you can be in right now is here, Elynn."

"Among the bones?"

"Among the bones."

The silence stretched out between us.

Then I sighed, leaving the subject about my freedom to be for now. I was too tired to fight him. "I want a sewing machine... and materials for it. I also want a sketchbook and colours to draw with."

He nodded. "Servants will be right—"

"Slaves," I corrected him, but didn't grit my teeth.

"No, not slaves. My realm doesn't do this whole sixteen-year-old slavery nonsense."

I blinked in utter surprise. Once again, he had managed to surprise me. How did he keep doing that?

"Morphs are working here, and they get paid for the job they do. You can wander wherever you like, and if someone sees you, it won't matter. Nobody working here can ask questions since the contract they signed forbids it. However, for your own safety, it's a high risk to leave the castle. My advice is that you stay here."

"I wouldn't be able to leave the castle anyway when the bridge is destroyed," I grumbled.

He didn't say anything to it, and for quite a while, I paused my inquiries, taking my time to finish the last bits of food.

I swallowed a bite with a sip of wine. "How long am I to stay here?"

"This I cannot answer you." He dabbed his mouth with the handkerchief. He dropped it then on the empty plate and arose. "Will you be able to find your way back?"

I rolled my eyes. "How concerning of you."

"Will you?" he repeated.

"Yes."

I wasn't sure if I would, but also, I didn't want him to stay here, watching me finish my meal.

He stared at me for a while until he said, "Have a nice evening, Honeylove."

"I have another question."

He stopped in front of the doors and turned to me. "Yes?"

"Why are you calling me Honeylove?"

A soft smile touched his mouth, and he lowered his gaze, tucking his hands into his pockets. With a slight bow of his head I had not expected, he left. I sighed and pressed my two fingers to my throbbing temple while swirling the glass of wine with my other hand, trying to absorb the mass of information he'd left me with.

OceanofPDF.com

XXXIII

I DIDN'T SLEEP LONG that night as I'd awoken from yet another nightmare, which unexpectedly wasn't about the humans' remains situated somewhere downstairs. And neither was it about Fillan and Lupin or Chase. It was, perhaps, worse than any nightmares I'd had before. I'd dreamt about my mother's death, her dying in the pit of her own blood.

As the day dawned, Blossom helped me pick today's clothes, and Baby did my hair. I had breakfast in the dining room, but this time alone.

Since the things I wished for hadn't made their way to me yet, I decided to investigate the castle. There was nothing else better left for me to do. Besides, Drayard had mentioned I could wander wherever I liked. Even if I'd seen the dining room, the abhorrent entrance and dark corridors with staircases, there was much more to the castle than that, for it was, after all, gigantic.

But as I went through the doors on my floor, not one of them opened. Locked. I wondered why, if there was any reason, a *bad* one, to consider locking them.

As I came across a narrow staircase—which I supposed was meant for servants' use—I had two options: go upstairs or downstairs. However, knowing what the first floor offered, afraid of meeting those bones again by accident, I didn't test my luck and opted for upstairs.

When I reached the upper floor, I once again tried opening one door after another in vain, for they, too, were locked. Mentally, I scoffed at Drayard's words that I could wander wherever I liked. Of course, I could when all the rooms were shut from wanderers.

I was about to return to my chamber and find an activity there when the doors I tried next opened.

It was a library.

But it wasn't yet another library filled with shelves like in Asenah's mansion. It was a library with a capital L. A grand library. Aisles and aisles of shelves stuffed with books passed two floors. Winding stairs were in the

middle of the room, and behind them, there stood a large ebony table and an unlit matching fireplace.

I walked over to all the windows between the bookshelves and spread the curtains, but the sun was covered by dark clouds, barely letting the light inside. When I was done, I was beyond marvelled, standing in the middle of it all, admiring the hanging chandeliers, the heights of shelves and thousands of books filling in the spaces. Even the biggest library in the Mortal Region city couldn't be compared to this one's impressive design, assortment and space.

I had no clue how much time I'd spent entering the aisles, picking books and looking over the text until I came across the one that snagged my attention the most—a tome about dragon tales.

A rush of excitement swept over me, but I couldn't pick it up when I had so many books in my arms. I hurried to put them on the table before I went back to get my latest discovery. I drew the book. Its edges were gilded, and as I turned it over, the golden letters glistened on the cover.

Tales of Dragons.

I opened it.

But then, as if burned, I dropped it. The book landed with a heavy thud; the sound echoing off the library's walls.

I couldn't even move—frozen out of dread spreading over me like a disease. And yet, it also awakened curiosity.

What was a platinum dagger doing in there?

I looked around the area with a silly suspicion that I wasn't alone here, but that was ridiculous. It was only me, the books and... the dagger which had inflicted the same awful sensations as the sword hanging in Chase's armoury.

Swallowing the pesky lump that had appeared in my throat once I'd sighed the dagger, I collected myself and pushed myself to woman-up. At last, I squatted, finding some outlandish strength in me to pick up the dagger by its handle. I analysed its shining blade, paying no attention to the instinctual voice urging me to put it back.

Platinum could kill dragons, which meant it could end the Bloodsucker. But why would a weapon lethal to dragons be here, within his property? Wasn't Drayard aware of its existence?

I placed the dagger right where it'd been, closed the book and pushed it back into its original place with shaky hands. I knew where it would be if I

needed it, but hopefully, that was my first and last encounter with *that* weapon.

Sitting at the table, I read the book I'd chosen out of earlier ones, which also included dragons, but this time their monarchy in the Realm of Embers. It had some useful and interesting information, but eventually, I tired of it. I couldn't read informative books as long as Kristian, who could spend the entire day with such a book without getting his brain worn out. As I closed the book, I pushed back the chair and stretched my back, only to be intrigued by the inconspicuous bookshelf enveloped in darkness in the left corner of the room.

I stood up and approached it. I studied it carefully before I reached for a random book, but my fingers, instead of grasping the spine, met the solid wall.

Even more intrigued now, I dragged my fingers across it, then removed them and sniffed them. They didn't smell like anything, and here I'd expected the scent of paint, for it was a painting posing as a bookshelf. Books were painted so realistically that they could mislead anybody.

But what was the purpose of it?

I already had an idea and therefore dragged my palms over the massive painting. I touched every bit, including the edges, but nothing happened. Even if it was a painting, I couldn't even remove it.

I would have let it be if the unlit wall sconce didn't snag the corner of my eye. I wrapped my fingers around it and pulled it down.

The painting slightly swung open.

I glanced around to make sure I was alone before I opened the camouflaged door wide. All the lights inside lit up one after another, illuminating a narrow passage ahead. I took a deep breath and only then waded into the secret passageway with cobwebs hanging in the corners. My heart was already pounding from excitement and suspense.

It wasn't particularly smart to turn a secret passage door into a painting of a bookshelf. Unless it was built so many years ago that morphs who used libraries back then were dense. Or the library wasn't often used. That could be the case.

I reached the winding stairs. Swallowing the uncertainty of where it might lead me, I proceeded up until I reached the other floor, which diverged into two ways. I captured muffled voices that seemed to come

from the right side, and as I entered the right corridor, lights lit again as if they'd sensed my presence.

With each step further, the voices grew louder, more coherent. I hadn't made a mistake. After a single turn to the right, I slowed down, for there were more cobwebs than before, and I had no desire to get them all over my face and spiders crawling in my hair.

"Why did you invite us here, Your Highness?" said a man with a light voice.

I halted and looked around. The metal rectangle caught the reflection of my face. As I shifted it, I uncovered two small holes.

I smirked.

"Perhaps for another to liberate the whores' mission?" another male said tauntingly, voice as rough as gravel.

Looking through the peephole, I beheld an environment reminding me of a study room. It was spacious, with an unusual arched ceiling. Its theme was primarily dark, apart from the claret-red rug. On the left, I could see Drayard standing behind the obsidian desk, but not the individuals sitting in the black leather armchairs that masked most of my view. I could only identify a hand resting on the left chair's arm—another furry hand.

"Do you want to go back to your prison cell, Nathair?" Drayard offered to whom I figured was the latter speaker. I pressed myself further, bracing my palms flat against the wall to have a better look at what was happening on the left side of the room. "Then think carefully before you speak."

Oh, the Bloodsucker clearly didn't like them. Who were those men anyway? Other workers of his?

"Why are we here, Your Highness?" the other one repeated.

Drayard set his gloved hands flat on the desk, leaning forward, and I could see him better now. He was unreadable, as usual. "When were you going to tell me about the alliance between morphs and enchanters to eradicate humankind?"

What?

Again, silence. Nobody spoke other than Drayard. "A plague?" He leaned over a desk. "A plague spread in the Mortal Region to get rid of humans?"

I tried to shut off my turbulent thoughts. Drayard could read them, and I was nearby. He could figure I was eavesdropping, by the look of it, his

meeting. And I had no desire to learn what he'd do once he realised I was here.

"Your Highness," the one whose name was unknown uttered with a hint of dread, "we swear by the Gods below, we hear about the plague for the first time."

Drayard surveyed his workers that might be a part of his council, suspiciously. His radiating intensity could cut through a diamond, but it was gone soon after, like a puff, and the room's aura softened. He might have believed them, whereas I was inclined to doubt them.

"Very well." Drayard leaned off the desk and clasped his hands behind his back. I released a breath, realising I was holding it this whole time. I could never imagine how those two men managed to work for such a formidable creature and with such intensity. "I need you, Kyrel, to spy on Nayden's council." His gaze shifted from Kyrel to the next one. "Nathair," he addressed him with a mixture of coldness and calmness, "find out the number of humans who died from the plague and bring the statistics to me. You have five days, not more." He paused. "That would be all. Dismissed."

As the men stood, they bowed to their King and left so quickly that I could barely register their proper appearance. Kyrel was a bat, while Nathair was a snake morph. Kyrel, from what I caught, was as hideous as the bat girls, and Nathair was something else. His horrific appearance made shivers trail up my spine. I shrugged off the feeling. I was surprised he'd left on his feet instead of slithering out.

After the doors closed, Drayard made his way to the table with a decanter. Its stopper was carved into the dragon's skull. His profile faced me as he opened it and poured whiskey into a glass. Frowning from it, I shut the metal cover and scurried back to the library. I closed the painting door and made sure it was well shut. But as I turned around, the fleeting flash of lightning lit the room as it thundered outside, and I nearly jumped, grasping at my chest.

"Bloody...!"

But the unexpected lightning or growl of thunder wasn't what startled me. It was Drayard, perched on the edge of the table, paging through one of the books.

A fire in the hearth suddenly lit up as rain began battering the windows.

"Eavesdropping is an act of offence." His eyes slowly shifted to me. "For a princess, it is an act of misconduct. Tell me, Elynn, what measures

shall be taken for violating your rights as a princess?”

I crossed my arms over my chest, lifting my chin. “Says the one who listened to siblings participating in illegal activities.”

He snickered, lifting the whiskey glass he’d brought with himself to his mouth. “How do you know sex between siblings is illegal?”

“You were taken aback by it. I suppose it’s illegal.”

He swallowed the sip. “It is illegal between royal families, yes.” He closed the book. “Though, it once wasn’t.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. It used to be encouraged, actually. It was believed that reproduction between kin kept the pure bloodline alive until more and more babies were born with defects. In order to prevent such a thing, the law forbidding romantic relationships between relatives in royalty was created. Now it’s not only illicit but shameful.”

I watched him have a gulp with a frown. He noticed it. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

I didn’t think he believed me, but he didn’t question me either, drinking again. I averted my eyes, staring at the bookshelves instead.

“You found one of the secret passages, I see.”

I looked back at him. “One of the secret passages?” I asked. “There are more?”

“Of course, the castle is big.”

“And all of them are hidden this foolishly? Behind the doors that look like bookshelves?”

He smiled. “No, all entrances are different. This isn’t a very secret passage anyway.”

“It leads to your study room where servants might overhear something they shouldn’t.”

“I don’t worry about that.”

“Why?”

“They would be thrown into lava for trying.”

There was no emotion in his countenance and tone as he said that. I wanted to comment on that, but instead, I asked, “Why are all the rooms locked?”

“Not all.”

“But most of them are.” He didn’t deny it. “Why?”

“Most rooms aren’t used. I don’t see a reason they should be accessible when nobody lives in them.”

But I remained sceptical. “How can I be sure there are no other morbid features like in the entrance of the castle?”

He shrugged. “I suppose you can’t.”

He began lifting one book after another, sorting them on top of each other.

“You spoke about the plague in my land,” I noted. “Explain it further.”

“How brash of you, Honeylove.”

“The plague, Drayard. I need to know what’s up with it.”

At least he wasn’t drinking anymore. The quarter full glass was resting on his right knee, and his entire focus was on me. “Your mother died from it. Did you know that?”

I hated that he brought up my dead mother when I had a nightmare where she died over and over again that night. However, Gen had indeed warned me to be careful around her, to wear safety equipment. Her illness was contagious and fatal. It didn’t mean that other people in the Mortal Region hadn’t been infected with the same disease. I just hadn’t considered it until now.

“Does it mean that it wasn’t an illness which arrived out of the blue?”

I already knew the answer, as I’d heard him talking to his workers or whatever they were about it. I just wanted to make sure I understood everything right.

“Well, morphs have two enemies: enchanters and humans. They despise humans the most. If Nayden had to choose, he would side along with the less despised enemy to wipe the most loathed off the earth.”

I couldn’t stifle a laugh at how ridiculous it was. “Humans are your enemies? Seriously? We are weak and *human* compared to you.”

Only when I’d finished, I coughed the meaning behind my words.

We. I still deemed myself human, even if I had not even an ounce of it. I was two other kinds, and I’d learnt about it merely yesterday. It felt like a far-off dream. The realisation of who I was hadn’t hit me yet.

He smiled at my remark, thoughtful. “Humans have hunters who own weapons which could bring death to our kind. They have witches and sorceresses who can also destroy us regardless of magic not working in the Mortal Region. Yes, they can be killed far easier than us, but if humans unite to bring morphs down, they could be the end of us. And despite

enchanters and morphs differences, as I figured from the idea of the plague, they have a common goal—to eliminate humans from the Mortal Region. That's why they created a disease they could spread through animals into human lands. I don't know the statistics of the perished yet, but I'm sure it's working like a charm."

"How did you find out about the plague anyway? Did you read somebody's thoughts?"

"No. I don't need to use telepathy to know what's going on in my lands." There was no pride in his statement, just a matter of the fact that he was the King, and he ought to know these things. "Also, your mother's illness and an everlasting animosity towards humans was obvious evidence." He took yet another sip of the alcohol.

I clenched my jaw. "You can't stop drinking, can you?"

With that, he took another sip, aggravating me even more. "Why should I when it sedates my demons?"

"Is that why you're so irritatingly calm every time? Because of alcohol?"

Tiny lines appeared under his eyes as he pondered over something. "I seem calm to you?"

Was he not self-aware? "You don't seem, you *are*."

"Isn't it interesting how our outside can be so different from our inside?"

Of course. I should have picked up on it sooner. His calm disposition was a mere facade, and he carried it well.

I was heading towards the table to gather the books and leave when the obvious struck me and I went still.

"My siblings... What if they catch the plague?"

"Well... according to my calculations..." he said and casually added, "they die."

And another sip. But now I couldn't care less about it when my siblings' lives were in danger.

"No, no, no, no." I shook my head, the beating of my heart increasing at all the possibilities, at the high chances of...

I brushed the thoughts of what-ifs aside. "You can't let them die, Drayard. Please, don't let them die."

I didn't care a whit about begging him. I didn't care about my honour or my beliefs, as when it came to my family, I could sell my soul for their well-being.

He tilted his head to the side so that I couldn't mistake it for a villain-like move. "And what's in it for me if I happen to obtain a change of heart and find a way to protect them against the disease?"

Once again, I was tossed in yet another maze that had one way out, but whatever it was, it might revolt me. I could do anything for my family. There were no exceptions. But as I thought of what Drayard might want from me...

"What do you want?" I asked. My voice didn't come out shaky, miraculously, but the opposite—steady and unbending.

Mentally, I applauded myself for not wavering.

"I don't know, Elynn. There's so much to choose from..." He tapped his fingers against the glass, watching me closely, savouring the predicament I was in, playing with time and my nerves.

"Just spill it."

Swirling the glass in his hand, he continued observing me. Pensively, he lowered his eyes to the glass before downing it to the very last drop. He set down a glass, his fingers remaining on the rim as his eyes fixed on me again. "You're in debt, Elynn. I'll protect your siblings against the pandemic. Will there be any more wishes, my *princess*?"

Now he was mocking me and finding it amusing, but I didn't let it get to me.

"Do you promise to do whatever it takes not to let them die?"

He hesitated to reply. I didn't like that, taking his hesitation as a negative answer. If I knew how to do a magical oath, I'd do it. It was a more reliable option than trusting someone I definitely shouldn't.

"Yes," he said impassively, "I promise. Now feel free to leave."

I didn't want to stay with him in the same room any longer either, but before I left, I took the pile of books with me.

Although his promise didn't reassure me, I remembered Thea once mentioning that morphs took promises seriously. Drayard was a morph. Perhaps he'd keep his promise. He had to. But maybe that was only the naïve part of my mind striving to surpass the obvious.

I couldn't do anything to prevent the plague from catching my siblings—if it hadn't already—when I was stuck in the castle, which was managed by the most dangerous creature alive. A creature that had no reason to spare two humans' lives when his walls were built of thousands of their bones.

OceanofPDF.com

XXXIV

I HADN'T SEEN DRAYARD for the rest of the week. Despite the concern about my siblings' health, I was relieved Drayard was staying away from me. Perhaps not on purpose, but it didn't matter. It was much better to live in the castle without meeting him, regardless of the constant reminder of bones located somewhere under where I was walking.

Half of my daytime I spent in the library while the other half I sewed. As Drayard had promised, I'd received all the supplies and a sewing machine. For the first time, I could make anything that I wanted from high-quality materials. And at nights, when I couldn't fall asleep, or could, but woken up from a nightmare, I sketched.

Within a week, I'd got accustomed to Baby's and Blossom's unappealing appearances. I'd gotten to know their inside, which was far more different from their outside. They weren't appalling or evil, as I'd concluded when they'd emerged on the twins' birthday. Their company was pleasant to me. I even taught Blossom the art of stitching.

On occasions, a frame similar to a person slid through the corner, or eerie sounds appeared at quiet times. Every time, I dismissed them as the shadows playing with light or my sheer imagination. But since the idea of ghosts grew more and more compelling, one day, I didn't want the bat girls to leave my room as usual after helping me prepare for a day ahead. I asked them to hang out with me. Now both of them were lounging in my bedroom.

I was on the settee, embroidering the gown I'd been working on for a week. The bat girls were on my bed I'd never dreamt about sleeping in someday, but now I did, occupied with their activities. Baby was contemplating her exposed long and sharp talons, whereas Blossom was poring over my sketched designs, propped on her elbows.

"Do you..." I said into the silence, debating how to say it without suggesting that I may or may not be losing my marbles in this Gods' forsaken castle. "Do you sometimes hear strange... funny noises?"

As I stopped sewing, I caught them exchanging glances with each other.

“No,” Blossom answered.

“Do you?” Baby cocked her navy-blue eyebrow at me.

I shrugged, resuming to sew. “Perhaps. But if you don’t hear it, then I’m sure my mind is creating illusions because it’s not getting much sleep.”

It was true. Insomnia wouldn’t leave me alone since the horrors of Asenah’s mansion. And it surely wouldn’t disappear in a place where many people’s bones were showcased on the walls.

“Are Baby and Blossom your birth names?” I asked them to whisk the remains of the grim topic away.

“No,” Baby denied, not looking away from her talons. “We were given these names by the first men we had intercourse with.”

“But didn’t you have any parents to name you?”

Blossom raised her eyes off the sketchbook. “No, we—”

Baby nudged her arm. Blossom sighed and concentrated back on the sketchbook. I watched them suspiciously, and Baby held my stare. I chose to leave whatever it was the way it was. I didn’t care to learn more about some harlots anyway.

“How often do you two satiate Drayard’s needs?”

Blossom scowled at the question right away while turning the page. Baby showed no reaction, staring at me intently. “Almost daily, love. Why do you ask?”

Blossom grimaced, covering her face with a sketchbook.

My cheeks burned, and I lowered my gaze at the burgundy dress, resuming to sew. I shrugged, trying to make it look careless. “For no reason at all. Just curiosity.”

“No. You’re jealous,” Baby stated.

My gaze shot to her. She was smiling broadly.

“What?” I forced out a laugh. “That’s ridiculous!”

Blossom looked up from the sketchbook. “She *is* jealous,” she agreed in wonder.

I opened my mouth, but Baby was faster. “Right? She’s blushing like a little girl with a crush!”

They burst into laughter, and I shut my mouth. I shook my head and continued to sew, choosing to ignore their teasing. I would like to shoo them out of here, but it would only prove their point if I did that.

At last, the mirth ended. “All right, but on a serious note...” Baby said, “we are not his whores, love.”

I ceased every movement and looked at her, confused.

“We aren’t anyone’s whores,” Baby went on. “We live however we want, do whatever we want, shag whoever we want.” Baby’s smile grew with each bold declaration.

“I don’t understand, then. What about that incident in the Realm of Bones with Fillan and Lupin?”

“It was all his Highness’ idea,” Blossom revealed whilst adjusting herself in a sitting position.

“What?”

“He didn’t go into details,” Baby continued for her while Blossom sat on her knees and resumed admiring my sketches. “All he did was tell us what we had to do, handing us syringes filled with something we were ordered to use on twins’ preciousness. We didn’t raise questions. We are not allowed. *But* he mentioned the vague reason we were supposed to do it, saying that they were abusers. How he knew that, Gods could only tell.”

“He knows everything,” Blossom mused, both impressed and reverent.

Not everything. I wanted to contradict her but decided against it.

“Whether they were abusers or not, we came to spare those girls a few safe months at least,” Baby said. “Blossom and I know what it’s like to be abused, and well... that’s been one of our proudest works, wasn’t it, flower?” She glanced at Blossom expectantly.

Blossom nodded without looking at Baby.

I swallowed hard. “Thank you.”

The look in Baby’s eyes altered.

Blossom raised hers off the page. “You were...”

“Not only I, but the other maids were their victims. I’ve sworn on my life that I would make them pay for it someday.”

Baby remained on the bed while Blossom stood and approached me. She perched a seat beside me and placed her tentative furry hand on mine. I managed to give her an appreciative but the faintest of smiles.

We sat like that for a little while.

“If you’re not Drayard’s whores and you can choose to do whatever you want, then why are you still here?” I asked.

“When Drayard became king, he freed the bats from centuries of whoring,” Baby said. “He let us choose whether to live in the towns of his realm and perform a mundane life or work for him with a right to leave

whenever we like. Most of the bats chose independent life, while few others, including Blossom and me, chose to work for the King.”

“But why? He’s horrible.”

“The luxury was the main reason,” Baby said. “We’re whores for expensive things. Also, Blossom and I aren’t family orientated. We’d have nothing to do outside the castle apart from partying every day. And last but not least, Drayard isn’t that Bloodsucker everyone is so scared of.” She paused, thinking with one eye closed. “Well... not most of the time, certainly. He’s tolerable, indeed cold, but it’s not hell working for him.”

I hardly believed anything she’d said about Drayard was true. Perhaps they’d been told to say that to me by Drayard himself. But I doubted he was the type of person who would try to prove his virtue through the bats that worked for him. He had never justified his actions, but I couldn’t disregard the possibility of him ordering the bats to speak of him nicely in front of me.

“If you’re not whores,” I said, “why are you keeping the names men gave you?”

They smiled; their eyes distant.

Blossom was the one who answered. “Those names never let us forget our past, all that we’ve gone through. This way, we see what a long path we’ve come, forging us into the strong women we are today.”

XXXV

THE NEXT DAY, I was savouring breakfast with a plate of fruits and a glass of grape juice in the dining room all by myself. I felt like a princess. Well, technically, I was one of both empires, but I refused to think about my biological parents and what titles belonged to me.

Perhaps I was more superior to humans and could live a thousand years, but my heart was a stranger to this world. I'd grown up as a human, my family were humans, and I'd been surrounded most of my life with them. They were my species. No matter what others or Drayard might say.

"Good morning, Honeylove."

Could I have summoned the villain just by the thought of him?

I went rigid once his deep voice rang behind me. And as simple as that, with his unexpected appearance, he had ruined my breakfast and all the day ahead.

Drayard sauntered beside me and stole a raspberry from my plate. I craned my head at him, glaring with distaste as he dropped it into his mouth.

"And why must you ruin my wonderfully passing week?" I didn't even try to conceal the bitterness in my tone.

"I haven't seen you in a while. Merely making sure you're alive and well, and of course, I couldn't let you get too comfortable here and forget to stay wary of my presence." He walked further away from me. "Living like a princess, huh?"

Here was that haunting word again. I held back a frown.

"But isn't that what I am?" I reached for the glass. "A princess?"

"You are," he agreed. "But nobody knows it other than me."

I raised a glass to my lips, unable to restrain a smirk.

"Ah," he said with a sigh, "You've told somebody already, haven't you?"

I took a sip. "Of course. The bats ought to know with whom they're spending their days."

"You made friends?"

"Why does that come as a surprise?"

He pushed back one of the chairs and sat down, surprisingly not at the head of the table but one seat away from me.

“Do you trust them?”

“Do *I* trust them?” I raised my eyebrows, confused by his question. “They’ve been working for you for six years while I’ve known them for a *week*.”

He stared at me for a while, and I started feeling uncomfortable, but then he smiled and what was strange was that the uneasy atmosphere dissipated immediately.

“You didn’t sit doing nothing, I see.”

“No, I did not,” I assured. “I have some questions to ask since you know a lot and reading books takes too much time, whereas it’s easier to learn essential information from you.”

“Well, I believe you’re not going to ask if unicorns exist.”

“If? Of course, unicorns exist.”

He gave me a droll look. “Now, do they?”

“Yes, they do.” I stared at him steadily, daring him to disagree with me.

“Hate to disappoint you, but I’ve travelled the world and I haven’t seen anything close to a unicorn.”

“It’s because you haven’t searched for it.”

“I think not always we must search if we want to find something.”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t always know what we’re looking for until it finds us.”

I shook my head unconsciously.

“You don’t agree with me?” he asked.

“How high are you standing in the hierarchy?”

One side of his mouth quirked at the sudden subject change. He didn’t call me on that and proceeded to explain.

“At its highest is the emperor, below him is the King of kings and queens, and then the rulers of other realms. I don’t have all the power, but I don’t have far less of it either.”

Although all I’d seen of Nayden was his back, I had sensed no power coming from him, unlike from Drayard. Maybe it was because I was looking from Drayard’s perspective, or it was because regardless of who wore the bigger crown, Drayard surpassed them all.

“If women are deemed lesser than men, then what does Nadira Haroun do?” I went on. “What prerogative does she have as an empress?”

“Sleeping with her brother.”

It was meant to be funny, but all he received from me was a pointed look. He chuckled.

“But why is Nadira called an empress if she has less power than her brother?”

“Until Nayden doesn’t find a wife—which I doubt he ever will—his sister will remain as an empress.”

“Have you ever knelt before her?”

His features turned serious. “I kneel before no one but myself.”

I blinked several times. “You are full of pride, aren’t you?”

“Hardly.”

Liar.

He winced, hearing that.

But before he could object, I continued, “Does it mean that you’ve never knelt before Nayden, the emperor?”

“Like I said, I—”

“All right, all right, I understand. ‘I kneel before no one, but myself’,” I mimicked him in a deep voice, and a smile favoured his mouth as he rolled his eyes. I pretended I didn’t see it, nor felt something queer in my belly. “But Asenah is a queen. How has she come to earn that place if the empire is against women’s reign?”

“Asenah’s father was an interesting man.” He leaned back in the chair. “He had a tendency to challenge the rules, and when he sired only one offspring—a daughter—he had to betroth her with one of the royal wolves of the continent, but he didn’t. He was sure his daughter was wise, suited enough to lead their realm alone with no problems.

“After he perished in the war and his daughter became a queen, naturally there was a scandal. Most people insisted that her cousins must wear the crown, but she laughed at them. Her cousins are immature fools who only care about festivities, not a throne. Besides, Lupin and Fillan didn’t object. Neither of them wanted to be a king. As there were no other male offspring of the high-blood wolf family, Asenah was allowed to take over the throne. That’s why she’s remained a queen.”

“But she is still expected to have a husband someday?”

“Yes, but she is as much as interested in marrying someone as our dear emperor.”

Indeed. She wasn't interested in men to begin with, and marriage was out of the question.

“But I still don't get why she flirted with you.”

The mere memory of Asenah trying to seduce him while I was dying from the heat in the greenhouse summoned the same disgust I'd felt then.

“To find out my schemes.”

A simple, nonchalant answer, which made sense. I downed the glass, simmering in silence, for I was reluctant to ask another question. “Could you tell me more about how the empire was founded? How did morphs become rulers and all?”

I expected him to mock me with this question, but instead, he nodded, his expression steady, as if he understood why I knew so little.

He remembered what I'd said near the ocean, and he wasn't judgmental. A weird feeling blossomed inside of me, and I wasn't sure what to make of it.

“Thousands of years ago, your ancestor Macegan saved all the three species in an ancient war against other continents, crowning himself and his future generation as eternal rulers,” he began. “But we, dragons, were a menace to him and Haroun eternal reign. He bargained with my ancestors. Macegan would give an island and a title that would rank them higher than the rest of the kings in exchange for the assurance that they would never try to usurp the empire. They signed a contract tied with magic to ensure their promise.

“After 105 years of war, when humans, enchanters and morphs weren't as one anymore, Haroun family remained as the supreme rulers. They have the full power of all the realms except mine. Of course, if some burden falls on the empire, it also affects my realm, and the emperor can make drastic changes if the Realm of Embers' monarch breaks a sole term in the archaic contract.”

“What are the contract's terms?”

“Well, the main one is that dragons can never breed with lion morphs.”

“Phew.” I drew my hand over my forehead for emphasis. “I'm safe then.”

He smiled, lowering his eyes to the table.

“What are the rest?”

He raised his eyes back at me. “The rest doesn’t matter. The Realm of Embers will remain to be ruled by dragons, or a half-dragon now.” A faint smile graced his face, but something about it hinted at sadness.

I didn’t question it, raising a glass of grape juice. I swirled it in my hand, thinking. “Hypothetically speaking... if one day I revealed myself as a daughter of Tatyana Haroun and morphs believed me, would I have the right to be an empress and reign all the...”—I conjured up an image of the map I’d seen in the Realm of Bone’s mansion’s library and counted how many realms there were in the Empire of Beasts—“...five realms?”

Drayard stared at me as if I was hiding something, his finger soundlessly tapping the wood. “You’d have the right by bloodline, yes.” He barely inclined his head. “But it’d be almost impossible.”

“Why?”

“Well, first of all, Nayden would never allow their exiled sister’s daughter to overtake his throne. Second of all, even if Nayden somehow disappeared, morphs wouldn’t look sympathetically at the woman ruler, particularly when she’s a half enchantress. And third of all, even if you became an empress, you’d be forced to marry a noble morph. Your future husband would have more authority than you. I know it sucks,” he said after noticing my eyes that I was sure were burning with indignation. “But it’s what society is like nowadays. Unless it would change someday and female leaders would become equal to male ones.”

I let out a deep sigh. I wasn’t considering becoming an empress someday. Dear Gods, I didn’t even regard myself as an Empire of Beasts’ princess. But the thought of having power, much bigger than Drayard’s, tempted me.

I smacked myself from absurd thoughts like that.

“What about my siblings? Are they all right?”

“Your sister and brother, of what I know, are both in their prime health. The plague hasn’t affected them yet, unlike the other thousand humans who’ve died recently.”

My heart sank. “That many?”

He nodded.

The wrath for the emperor and whoever ruled the Empire of Skies ignited my blood. They were killing *my people*. The disease they’d spread over the Mortal Region had already murdered my mother. Nayden and the

emperor of the Empire of Skies were already a part of my never-stopping-to-grow blacklist.

“How can you know my siblings are well if morphs can’t get into the Mortal Region?”

“I have connections some heads of authorities have no slightest idea about.”

I was sceptical about it, but he didn’t seem like he was lying. But then again, what did I know? I had no way of telling what was hiding behind his calm facade, what was in his heart if he had one.

“If you have connections, then what if I wrote a letter to them? Would it reach them?”

“Well.” He sighed, reluctant. “I can arrange that.”

I perked up. I’d had no expectations when I’d asked him that, and with his positive answer, he’d made my day again. “Really?”

“Yes.”

I could hug him, kiss him even out of glee, but of course, I didn’t do any of it, concealing my joy from his eyes.

“Do you know if Chase is infected?” It was quite a challenge to say his name out loud without gagging.

His brows knitted. “Is he your former fiancé?” I nodded. “I don’t know, Elynn. Do you care about him that much?”

Huffing, I crossed my arms. “How did you know twins were abusers?”

A momentary surprise struck him before it melted into annoyance. “The bats told you.”

“Even if they did, don’t you even dare pour out your wrath on them.”

He frowned. “I wasn’t planning to.”

I watched him, suspicious. But then I returned to my questions, not trying to figure out whether he was lying. “So? How did you know the wolves were abusers?”

“I have sources.”

“All right, then why would you incapacitate them? What good did it do for you?”

“I wasn’t invited to their birthday. I had to bring a gift.”

His lie didn’t impress me. “I need a real reason.”

He was silent. I waited, but all he did was hold eye contact with me. He wasn’t going to answer.

I arose, forcing a chair back with a scraping sound. I spun around and began walking towards the exit.

"I'm not done, Elynn."

His authoritative voice made me pause. I looked at him over my shoulder, irritated to the bone. "You're speaking now?"

"How do you like Hellrock Castle?" He dodged my question. "I prefer honesty."

I turned to him. "Why should I answer you if you refuse to answer my questions?"

"You forget who—"

"Oh, cut it," I cut him off boldly. "For the record, no, I don't forget who you are. You might be many people's walking nightmare, but you're not mine. I'm not scared of you. After all, you are obliged by a magical oath to protect me. You can't harm me. So, tell me, Drayard, why should I answer you when you can't answer me? Where's the fairness in that?"

He reached for my glass and downed the juice to the dregs. He set it down and clasped his hands on his thigh. "Just answer the question, please."

I let out a short laugh. "Burn in hell."

"I already did, making a home out of it."

Again, there was the same note of sadness, and I refused to be affected by it.

I bit the inside of my cheek, crossing my arms.

Fine, I told myself. I'll give in this time. But only this time.

"This," I said, gesturing my hand over the room, indicating to the whole castle, "is horror. I hate it with every inch of my flesh. I cannot go downstairs as I'm terrified to see the bones again. The reminder that they are there doesn't leave me for peace of mind. I loathe this place, this aura, everything."

His countenance didn't alter after my unadulterated truth. It remained the same as before I had given my frank opinion: serene, impassive and steady.

"Pack your stuff."

"What?"

"Pack your stuff," he repeated. "You have an hour."

"But why—"

"Elynn, please, do as I tell. The clock is ticking, and you have less and less time to—"

“All right, I got it!” I uncrossed my hands and made a mocking bow.
“No questions asked, *Your Highness*.”

Drayard snorted while I spun on my heel and left the room. But instead of returning to my chamber, I hastened to the library, where I didn’t forget to grab that book of tales about dragons.

OceanofPDF.com

XXXVI

BAFFLED, I STARED AT THE PLACE where Drayard had brought me. I glanced at him, wondering how much his brain was actually damaged.

“Why are we here?”

Instead of answering, he turned to the right and began to stride. I pressed my suitcase to my knees, standing for a moment or two before I propelled myself towards him. This couldn’t be all. He must have planned something more than landing before the colossal volcano.

Perhaps I was here so he would throw me in it, but then I remembered that a magical oath was protecting me. Of course, he could have made it up as much as my siblings being alive and healthy, but I’d gained more trust towards him nevertheless.

“Is the volcano active?” I inquired.

This time, he answered. “No.”

Well, that was a relief, at least.

After approximately twenty steps, he halted. Soon after, he drew a knife from wherever he had it attached to, as I hadn’t seen him pick it. I took a step back.

He slightly frowned at me and then...

And then he slashed his palm.

“Why did you...”

But before I could finish the sentence, he placed his bleeding palm against the hardened lava. I blinked in utter confusion. Once he pulled his bloody palm away, there followed a peculiar sound that I’d never heard before to name it, almost like grinding and hissing.

Drayard stepped back, and the wall began opening in front of us like doors.

“What the hells...”

As it slid open, the eerie sound ceased. I stepped closer to see what it had revealed, and it was the stairs descending into pitch-blackness. Drayard extended a hand to me. I looked up from the ground at his hand, then at his eyes.

“There’s no way I’m going in there,” I declared.

He smiled. There was a glint in his eyes, and I didn’t think it was because of the afternoon sun. A spark caught my eye, and I looked back at where the stairs were. What once had been all dark in there, now torches were aflame.

“Your choice.” Drayard started going down the stairs.

I swept my gaze around, and the same sound emerged anew.

“You have five seconds to change your mind, or it’s closing!” he warned me without looking back.

I didn’t debate it. Promptly, I rushed down the steps. The bright light was ebbing. I was so afraid of getting crushed that I didn’t notice I was clutching something, sinking my nails into something warm and stiff. Only later, when the entrance closed, and all that remained were the torches to lighten the stairwell, I realised it was Drayard’s jacket sleeve I was holding onto as if my life depended on it.

Our gazes met.

I shot back, releasing his sleeve, and pressed the suitcase against my chest, my heart pounding.

He gave me the smuggest smirk I’d seen him make. “I see where your trust lies.”

“It doesn’t...”

His smirk broadened into a smile. “Right.”

In his casual style, he shoved his hands into his pockets and continued descending. I breathed in to collect myself and then followed. It wasn’t a long stairwell. We reached the ground of the narrow corridor illuminated by torchlight...

No, it wasn’t illuminated by torchlight but by lava hindering our way, flowing down and forming a steady wall ahead.

Again, Drayard did the same ritual, pressing a bloody palm to the wall near the dropping lava. To my amazement, the lava wall parted, opening the safe passage. He went through it, and I followed. After these magical discoveries, I didn’t think anything would strike as a surprise anymore.

But if I were honest with myself, I might be proven wrong once again.

“Is it all magic?” I asked in undisguised awe.

“Yes.”

But before I could continue my admiration, the floor switched beneath me. My heart dropped, knees wobbled, and unable to maintain the balance,

I sank to my knees, my suitcase thudding somewhere near me. The floor spread under me and what had been dark stone a second ago, now it was a lava pit. But before I submitted to panic, I realised it couldn't be real. Although the image that it seemed as if I was kneeling on some transparent platform hovering over the lava hole didn't soothe me. And the lava was... rising.

"Drayard?"

He tossed me a glance over his shoulder. "Yes?"

I attempted to move, but I was stuck. I couldn't budge or stand, not because the fear had me paralyzed, but for some other supernatural reason. The lava didn't stop swelling and rising. I couldn't comprehend how it was possible as it flummoxed and daunted me at the same time. All I could understand was the pulse thumping against my ears.

"Don't panic," Drayard said calmly, making me feel more panicky. "Repeat these words: I surrender to fire."

"What do you mean? The lava is literally rising, Drayard!"

"Just repeat the words, Elynn."

"I surrender to fire. I surrender to fire! I—"

Everything was gone. The rising lava, threatening to reach my toes and swallow me, and rocky walls. Instead, it transformed into an entirely different environment in less than a blink of an eye. Now before me, there was a carpeted, blood-red staircase stopping at the landing where two flights of stairs diverged into the left and right side. It matched the brocade walls of deep red and gold, half panelled with dark wood.

Wooden double doors were to my left and right, rising wonders of what was hiding behind them as well as where the stairs led once one climbed them.

"What you saw seconds ago was an illusion to mislead any intruders if they somehow passed the other two obstacles," he explained.

"That's..." Somehow, I rose to my still light limbs. My heart returned to its regular rhythm while I was trying to hunt for the word that would define my current feelings best. But I couldn't find one, so I stuck with an original thought. "Whoa."

"It is." He had his hands stuffed in his pockets, a boyish smile playing on his mouth. "Welcome to my humble abode, Elynn."

XXXVII

I GOGGLED AT HIM. “This is your home?”

Drayard nodded.

“And what about the castle? Isn’t *that* your home?”

“Save those inquiries for later,” he said. “I’m taking you out tonight. Be ready in...” He glanced at the Grandfather Clock on the left. “...nine hours.” He was about to depart when he halted before the stairs and threw me a glance back. “Don’t go to the left side of the staircase. Other than that, you can roam wherever your heart desires.”

With that said, he ascended the stairs and disappeared into the forbidden side, leaving me flummoxed.

My attempts to accumulate my thoughts, to pinch myself that it was indeed reality, went for nought. I concentrated on my surroundings, checking what was behind the left doors first. When I opened them, I could hardly see a thing there, but from what I did, I identified it to be a dining room. Much, *much* smaller than the one in the castle and emptier. All it had was a table with chairs to accommodate six people.

I closed the doors and approached the other room. Since I expected to face darkness there, too, I was surprised when a lit fireplace appeared in my sight. I snorted quietly, as technically, this place was located inside the volcano. The thought of needing to warm oneself with a separate source of fire amused me.

But once I stepped a foot inside the room, once out of the corner of my eye I saw a shape of something I could have never imagined running into again, I froze. Slowly, I turned my head to the left.

My peripheral vision hadn’t deceived me. The grand piano placed near the centre of the room was utterly real.

Humble abode was not the word for a place with a grand piano.

Excitement kindled me, and without lingering any longer, I reached the wooden piano complementing the scheme of dark wood colours in the room and placed my flat palm on its sheen cover.

The piano's elaborate design, except the colour, was like the one I'd wished to have when I'd been playing my old piano in the cottage. Made exclusively for a professional to play in front of thousands. It must have cost a considerable amount of fortune.

I took a seat before it and lifted the board in a precisely gentle manner. Then I ran my finger over all the keys to make sure the piano was working, and the growing sound tipped its way to my music-missed ears. I felt myself beaming. It had been a while since I'd practised, but as I pressed the first notes of a song I knew like the back of my hand, my fingers recalled what notes to hit outright as though a three-month break from playing didn't exist.

I didn't play long since I had work to do, but I was going to come back to it later. I retraced my steps back to the foyer, lifted the suitcase, and as I looked up to mount the stairs, I discovered two girls standing on top of them.

I couldn't help it. My lips had made a secret deal to betray me.

I smiled.

Later that day, I was in the new bedroom, which I believed was mine now. It wasn't as spaced as the previous one, but it contained a better aura than the other. I felt more comfortable in a smaller, but still canopied four-poster bed. I preferred wall candles to the chandelier, threatening to fall on me someday, or to the splendour of sweeping windows, pouring in the light of the day. I felt... just right being in here.

I picked up a crimson crayon and bit my tongue as I coloured the sketched outline of a suit. My lip corners curled up when it was coming to life right before my eyes. Just like I had imagined. It wasn't a suit inspired by the sleeve of what the stranger had been wearing the first time I'd beheld him in my trance. It was a suit I designed myself.

"Why aren't you dressed up?"

I flinched, looking up at the bat girls standing at the threshold, their eyes fixed on me.

"Dressed up?"

Baby began going towards the bed. "Have you forgotten your date with Drayard?"

I winced. "A date?"

She leaned over and reached for the sketchbook in my hands, but before she snatched it, I pulled away.

“Not a date,” Blossom corrected as she walked to the armoire and yanked its doors wide open, revealing all the clothes I’d packed and the bats carried here for me from the castle. It was still strange how I had so many outfits to choose from when, merely three weeks ago, I’d been wearing a maid’s outfit on a daily basis. “He wants to take you out somewhere and insists that you wear something more formal.” She contemplated the dresses, dismissing one after another with a frown.

To answer Baby’s question, I hadn’t forgotten what Drayard had said before he left. How could I? I just didn’t want to go anywhere with him, no matter that I didn’t really have a choice, for he hadn’t even asked.

“Come on, stand up, love. I need to fix your hair,” Baby said, her hands on her hips as she stared at me with an exasperated look.

With a grunt, I clapped the sketchbook shut and put it in the drawer. If Blossom decided to view it, the drawing of a man’s suit might raise her questions. And I didn’t want to deal with any of them.

I slid off the bed and went towards the vanity where Baby could do my hair.

Blossom picked not one of the few gowns I’d chosen from the wardrobe at the Hellrock Castle but the one I’d worked on for a week. I glanced at her suspiciously while Baby was lecturing me on how I shouldn’t behave in front of him, which was showing off my attitude as I always did. But I didn’t listen to her. I wasn’t going to follow her advice anyway.

Baby put my wavy blonde hair in one fancy bun, adorning it with an antique comb, which must have cost greatly. After finishing with my hairstyle, she powdered my face without warning. I sneezed before I flashed her a dirty look. She didn’t mind apologising and painted my lips dark red to match the gown. They guided me to the mirror to see myself—to look closely at what masterpiece they had created. At the gown *I* had created without having the intention of wearing it someday.

I’d always been aware I was endowed with distinct beauty, but the woman in the mirror was beyond all the known levels of it. The puffed sleeves of the wine-red gown draped over my arms, exposing my bronze cleavage and shoulders. The skirt was embroidered with darker patterns, and the slit on the right side tore through the layers of gossamer, opening a view of my slender leg. I hadn’t worn anything of burgundy before, and I

should have, for it complemented my honey-covered skin more than any other colours.

“She’s radiant,” Blossom marvelled, her chin propped on her knuckles. “Doesn’t she look radiant, Baby?”

“Thanks to my skills as a beauty expert, she does,” Baby said with a tone of humour.

The corner of my lip twitched. I looked radiant indeed, and I felt radiant. But there was one minor detail I disliked about this look.

I was dolled up this exquisitely for Drayard. If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be wearing this, looking like this. But for some reason, I didn’t remove the gown and changed it into less... me.

The girls accompanied me downstairs. I had a hard time trying not to step on the hem of the skirt, which would end up falling straight on my face, and it might cause laughs to escape from the bats’ throats.

Well, Baby would laugh while Blossom might try to help me out.

Drayard, as always, emerged unexpectedly. I halted on the last step, as if his mere look at me rendered me still. He examined me without any shame. I felt naked under his gaze, making me uncomfortable. However, because of the irony of it, I, too, eyed his appearance.

I had never seen him don clothes this fancy. I could tell he put a thought in it. Perhaps *too* much thought. He rocked a black suit, an elaborate cravat, and something of the same colour was folded over his arm. The waistcoat matched my gown, which bothered me. I glanced at the girls, who had a smug expression on their faces.

I clenched my teeth.

“I don’t recall anyone wearing anything as daring nowadays as you are.”

His voice made me whip my head back, my gaze clashing with his. He stretched his hand out to help me descend the last step, like a true gentleman, although he was far from being like one.

I stepped down the last stair, disregarding his hand. “Of course, you don’t. I designed it.”

His eyebrows rose, and his change of countenance told me he was impressed. But he banished such an expression in no time, his extended hand falling down. I was about to sidestep him when his gloved hand closed over my arm, and his mouth appeared unsettlingly close to my ear.

“It suits you well. Burgundy in particular,” he whispered. “You should wear this colour more often. You look as enchanting as the sky at dusk.”

I looked up at him, our eyes locking.

My heart skipped a beat.

I swallowed.

“And you’re as hideous as the beast you are,” I stated and didn’t forget to add, “If it was supposed to impress me, you failed pathetically.”

He snorted and released my arm. I pulled away from him. “Here, put this on.” He handed me an ink-black cloak. I looked down at it with disdain. “Elynn, please, don’t get under my skin tonight.”

I returned my eyes to his, then glanced at the staircase. Nobody was on them. The bat girls had left before I could notice that.

“I will but first things first.” I slid my two fingers into my cleavage, and Drayard averted his gaze. I drew out an envelope, battling a smirk. “If you promise this will reach my siblings, I’ll be at my best behaviour tonight. I promise.”

He searched my face for a lie, and I mustered a coy smile, not giving away anything.

At last, he took the envelope from my fingers and slipped it into his inner jacket pocket. He then extended a cloak to me. “A promise is a promise.”

“You didn’t say if you promised.”

He sighed. “I promise your letter will reach your siblings.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. Instead of snatching the cloak as I’d planned, I took it like a well-mannered lady and pulled it over my shoulders.

I wasn’t prepared at all to learn what the night had written for me. *But here goes nothing.*

XXXVIII

“WHERE ARE YOU taking me?”

This time, Drayard didn't transport us by shapeshifting into a dragon. Instead, he flew us closer to the legendary City of Fire in his half-form, and now we were taking the route by foot. His fragrant smell didn't disperse yet, and neither did the feeling of where his hands had been when he'd carried me through the sky.

“It'll remain a secret for a little longer,” he said.

I almost stepped on the skirt. I had no choice but to gather it up and stare downwards to watch where I put my feet if I didn't want to collide with the ground. I wasn't accustomed to gowns since I hadn't worn one before, let alone my own. I should have trimmed the skirt, but my clever mind hadn't thought about it before we were out.

While walking like this, I didn't notice when Drayard halted beside me. His gloved hand got in my way, and I paused, raising my gaze at him.

“May as well push your pride aside and take my hand so your eyes wouldn't be at your feet,” he said. “Shouldn't a princess be walking with her head held high and locked shoulders?”

“A princess shouldn't be living under the volcano to start with but in the castle, in the tower where chirping birds would awaken her from the slumber in early mornings.”

With that, I passed him, knocking away his hand.

“You might have forgotten you were dwelling in the castle not long ago, and bats can fly, which is close to the birds.” He fell into step beside me. “Isn't that practically similar to what you just described?”

I glanced at him, but I could scarcely see him when the hood was covering my peripheral sight. “Don't even get me started on the part where you tricked me and trapped me in the worst castle ever in the first place.”

“I didn't trap you.”

“No, that's *exactly* what you did, keeping me as your prisoner.”

“Then what are you doing now if you consider yourself my prisoner? Not walking with your legs and hands free? With your mind free?”

“Yes, but with you as my chaperone.”

He sighed. “You know I can’t leave you wandering alone or else—”

I pressed the skirt anyway, and it was impossible to avoid tripping over it, but Drayard’s reaction was as fast as lightning. He gently seized my arm and held me while I regained my balance.

Swallowing, I looked up at him. “Thank you.”

“No need to be grateful. Instead, take my arm and spare yourself another fall as I might miss catching you next time.”

“But you will always catch me, *my King*.” I batted my eyelashes.

He didn’t react to my taunt but offered his arm, and I succumbed to it. A pleased smile crossed his mouth. Solely for it, I itched to pull my hand from his, but I conducted myself well because I’d made a promise. And I needed to prove to him I was trustworthy for the potential future necessities.

We continued our stroll through the bridge. The sun was half-seen on the horizon, painting the shimmery river with tones of dusk, whereas the sky was inter-flowing from ruby-red to amber as if blood was seeping into melted gold. I hadn’t seen anything like it before. If I was alone, I would stop here and contemplate such beauty, but unfortunately, I wasn’t.

“I’ve been wondering...” I began, hinting to him I was going to ask him a serious question, as he wasn’t always in the mood to answer them.

“And what have you been wondering?”

“If the curse forces morphs to stay as beasts forever except at the equinoxes, why are you able to turn into this half-beast form?”

“It’s called in-between form,” he corrected me as we reached the end of the bridge, getting closer to the city. Although I was excited to see the city I’d known about ever since I was a child, I didn’t show it. “And unfortunately, no. There’s no valid reason why we’re not entirely animals. Some speculate that it’s because the curse has errors. Some think it’s because the word *beasts* in the curse stand for in-between form, but most don’t even care about that.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, looking down at the stone-paved streets. From the previous experiences I would like to forget, I checked closely to make sure I wasn’t walking on bones. To my relief, that wasn’t the case.

“But... don’t those sorceresses living in the... whatever the castle is called in the capital, know the real reason?”

“It’s called Casidiarn Castle,” he clarified. “Regarding the sorceresses in the castle, living there isn’t the right word for it.”

“Then what is?”

He didn’t answer, and I understood why.

We weren’t alone anymore.

A few morphs were walking down the short, steep street as we were going up. Orange shade three and four-floor buildings were pressed so tightly together, the street was narrow enough to catch their whispers. I hadn’t noticed we were already in the city. Once morphs saw Drayard, they didn’t hesitate to scamper closer to the buildings to keep as much distance from him as possible, alarmed by who he was. Their reaction reminded me of who I had my arm linked with, but it didn’t terrify me when perhaps it should. But other than those few morphs, the city was quite deserted at this hour.

We reached the peak and as we were climbing down, there were no morphs in sight anymore.

I tilted my head towards Drayard. “Then what is the right word?”

“Sorceresses are imprisoned there,” he said quieter now.

I scoffed at such falsehood. “They are traitors. Disgusting, disgusting traitors.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because they permit sixteen-year-olds to be offered only for them to be slaves for the rest of their lives.”

“Elynn... those sorceresses don’t have a choice,” he said in such serenity that my rage dampened. “They aren’t Ascended. They don’t have the power Ascended Sorceresses do. Also, they are Nayden’s marionettes. If they opposed him, they’d be tortured. And any human would be afraid of morphs way of torture.”

“What are their tortures like, then?”

“Trust me when I say you don’t want to know.”

“Perhaps I do,” I countered.

“You don’t.”

I sighed deeply, giving up.

Then Drayard took an abrupt veer right into the dark alleyway. It wasn’t even night-time, and yet I could barely make out anything here.

“What are we doing here?” I whispered, not sure why. Perhaps it was an instinct to get quieter when it got dark.

“Hide your face behind a hood.” His voice turned colder than usual, but it wasn’t his intimidating regal tone either. “And don’t talk, let alone look.”

My heart was already unrhythmic when he'd pulled me into the alley, and his last words certainly didn't help to calm it down. Once he halted, it wasn't right away that I realised we were standing before the door. His knock at it three times in the same rhythm gave it away.

Fixing my eyes upon the ground, I tugged my hood down until it masked half my face.

The door opened and first, what I saw were brown paws. It seemed like the ones which would belong to a bear. I endeavoured to steady my heartbeat as morph's sensitive ears could catch it, and I didn't want to betray how nervous I was.

"Your Highness," a male greeted him.

I was curious to observe him, but I forced myself to keep my stare down. Despite my inquisitive nature, I knew when a red line should and shouldn't be crossed.

Without a word, Drayard handed something to him. I heard clanging. A pouch with coins, perhaps.

"Please, let me conduct you and your date, Your Highness."

Merely the sound of the word *date* got me clenching my teeth.

You know it's not a date, right? I warned him.

No answer came.

We got inside. It was dark, and my human-like features were well protected, but I kept my head low, taking no chances of being discovered. To their eyes, I was a human. That was why Drayard had ordered me to hide my face in the alley. But why even bother to bring me anywhere in the first place? Why risk his image?

When morph opened the door, we entered the lit stairwell. With my free hand, I lifted the skirt as we went up the stairs. Then we went down a narrow corridor, and soon he stopped to open the door for us.

"Enjoy the concert," he said.

My heart stopped.

A concert?

I would have remained unmoving, but since Drayard's hand was linked with mine, he hauled me inside. The door closed behind us, and I couldn't move a single bit, dumbfounded by the sight.

A stage. A real *stage* with chairs and instruments lining it.

As I removed the hood, I captured Drayard's gaze and a cheeky smile adorning both his face and eyes.

“A concert?” I marvelled, making sure my ears and eyes hadn’t deceived me, as it felt more like a dream would.

He nodded slowly.

I pulled my hand off his arm and proceeded over to the railing, walking about two armchairs. The concert hadn’t started yet. Some morphs were looking for their seats below me or were already sitting in them and waiting for the concert’s start. I rested my hands on the rail and observed every plot of the concert hall: the other balconies, the stalls, elaborate designs on the walls, ceiling, even morphs.

“Do you like it?”

I’d been too captivated by the hall that I hadn’t noticed when he’d appeared beside me.

Instead of answering his question, I asked, “Why did you bring me here?”

“It’s not a date,” he assured me. “I thought of giving you something you would appreciate for once. You deserved it. I was unfair and heartless to you.”

Now he seized my full attention instead of the hall.

“I know apologies won’t fix anything, but I’m sorry for making you live in the castle for an entire week.”

I blinked, baffled.

Sighing, he turned to the stage and rested his forearms on the railing. “Hellrock Castle has never been my home, Elynn.”

He didn’t elaborate further.

“I don’t quite understand,” I said.

He pursed his lips for a short amount of time, then clasped his gloved hands together, lowering his stare. “My father was born in it. I was born... somewhere. He spent his childhood in the castle. I spent mine on the battlefield. That castle isn’t my home; I don’t live there. I can’t. I only make an appearance there for meetings, and that’s all.”

“You don’t live there just because you weren’t born and didn’t grow up in it?”

“No,” he denied. “I don’t live there because the antipathy I feel for it is immeasurable.”

“But why?”

He looked at me. “Why do *you* hate that castle, Elynn?”

I frowned. “I told you. The bones, the aura...”

And then it hit me, or I assumed it did, since that couldn't be right. He couldn't detest the castle for the same reason as I did.

"Is it possible that you can't live there because of the remains of..."

I couldn't make myself finish without being reminded of what nightmare I beheld there.

"It is one of the reasons, yes," he confirmed, and from the genuine look in his eyes, I had a hard time assuring myself his expression and words could be a trick. "When I was a boy, spirits of the dead haunted—as I was inclined to believe at that time—each step of mine in the castle. And they weren't friendly." He looked at the stage and then snorted. "You must think me mad."

I didn't think he was mad because of that particular reason. I was more astounded that he was sharing something with me that had *him* involved. Although his revelation ensured me that I wasn't losing my marbles for seeing ghosts in the castle when Baby with Blossom couldn't, for some reason, I didn't relieve him by telling him I too could see them.

"Why did you bring me to the castle, then? To show me the bones only for you to apologise for it later?"

"I was..." he began, having the decency to meet my glare, "...curious to see how you'd react to it."

"And did my reaction satisfy you?" I almost gritted out.

After all, I was more repulsed by him than before.

He managed to face my glare. "I'm sorry."

I huffed with a shake of my head, and one by one, lights went off.

"It's starting." Drayard leaned off the rail. "Take a seat next to me."

"No, I'll watch from here."

I was aware of my tone. Sharp as steel. I was playing with fire, but he had never reprimanded me for that. Why would he do it now?

Only the stage lights were left on, and soon a group of morphs emerged from each side of the stage. Others applauded them, and for a moment, I resisted, but for the sake of art, I, too, clapped my hands. They took their seats, and the hall dropped into silence.

As they took their instruments, I recognised them right away as flutes, cellos, violins, contrabasses... The mere sight of them made me feel like I was in a better place and quench negative emotions. But once the musicians played the first notes, the whole environment altered. I was lifted off the floor and landed in the heaven of music.

I closed my eyes, allowing myself to bask in paradise. A reminder of the last time I'd been somewhere similar, like now twinged my heart. But it wasn't the same, for, at that time, it was one man playing the piano when now an orchestra of morphs was wielding the instruments in flawless harmony.

As I opened my eyes, there was a modification below. A morph couple was dancing away from the seats. A male spun her and brought her to himself. He dipped her, and the ends of her ashy hair grazed the floor before he pulled her back to him.

Their dance wasn't perfect. Once in a while, they stepped on each other's feet, or something else went wrong. But they laughed off each error, resuming to dance with big, genuine smiles on their faces.

Even from over there, I could feel the affection emanating from both, arousing an immense need in me to dance like they were. But I didn't move, since I didn't have a partner with whom I would like to dance like that, to learn the wonders of dancing and share my heart.

I didn't even know how to dance a simple waltz.

Why did I feel the sudden urge to cry?

He was watching me. For quite some time, but only now, I acknowledged him. He'd never gone to sit on the armchair, staying next to me.

"What?"

His eyes shifted to the stage. "Nothing."

"Liar."

The left side of his mouth curled up.

I rolled my eyes. The music ended, and the sound of applause erupted. The couple returned to their seats. The music began again.

The knot of sorrow was gradually swelling in my chest with each immaculate piece. As the last notes of the fourth song rang out and the hall dissolved into a temporary silence, there was so much I could take.

They began another piece, but a lone tear was already sliding down my left cheek. I had to give something my mind to focus on before the music consumed me along with the ghosts of the life I didn't have, nor I couldn't... have. This environment was a cliff, and I was on the very edge of it. It wouldn't take long before I fell off it, right into the sea of tears.

And I couldn't cry. Not here. Not in front of anyone, certainly not Drayard.

“Once, my parents took me to the concert,” I said without making sure if he was listening. Just in case, I pretended to push my loose strand back to disguise the wipe of the tear. “Of course, they also brought Kristian and Gen along. The orchestra hall wasn’t a place you may find in our town, so my parents took me to the city. It was their gift for me for my fourth birthday. The professional pianist played at that time, and it was the first time I heard someone who knew how to wield their instrument.

“Before I turned four, all I’d known about music were lullabies my mum sang and poor-quality instruments played in the streets. When I heard a piano for the first time at the concert hall, its sound spellbound me. I wanted to play like that pianist someday, even better, so I asked my parents to buy me a piano, which they did. It wasn’t the best quality since pianos aren’t the cheapest instruments for a family from a small town to afford, even if my parents didn’t have to count every shilling back then. They could afford me a tutor for some time, and when they couldn’t, I borrowed the sheets of notes from the library, and since I’d learnt how to read notes, I could continue to cultivate the skill.”

I took a deep breath after talking and glimpsed at Drayard, who was fully turned to me, all ears this whole time. “Music is the language my soul speaks. My salvation. My sanctuary. That’s why I am grateful you’ve brought me to the concert, regardless of the reason behind it. And not only for that. I thank you for sending the melody into my head when I was battling death. How did you do that, by the way?”

His smile was faint as he glanced at his hand resting on the rail while the other was shoved in the pocket. “Days of training.”

“Days? You must be very talented then.”

Instead of confirming it, he asked, “If you hadn’t offered yourself to the empire, would you have become a professional pianist like that man you saw playing in the city?”

I drew in a composing breath. “Being a pianist wouldn’t have provided enough money for my family. It was a risky path to take. Besides, I would have had to live in the city, and it wouldn’t have brought my family fortune either. Just for the money, I would have married the wealthiest man in town. To this day, I know that I would have never chased my dreams as I’m not the one to dream, look at the stars and wish for something naïve to happen in my life. When I think deeper about it, my family was the one who dreamt. I should have spotted the difference all along. Realised I was never

one of them.” I smiled unbelievably. “I’m a realist raised in the family of dreamers.”

OceanofPDF.com

XXXIX

THE CONCERT HALL wasn't the only surprise Drayard had prepared for tonight. Once again, I was hiding my face under the hood while he led me to another mysterious place. We entered another alley, and this time he handed the giraffe morph a pouch of coins. Without any questions asked, she escorted us upstairs, and we ended up on the balcony.

He hadn't forgotten to reserve a dinner, which we had under the moonlight seeping through the openings of the clouds floating across the night sky. Although it wasn't a date, it seemed like one. I watched him eat roast chicken, which now I was positive was his favourite dish.

He caught me staring. "Is there something you want to ask me?"

There was indeed something bothering me, but I shook my head and took a sip of the wine, concentrating on the aim to please my stomach instead.

After dinner, we left the city in no rush. I needn't wear a hood this time as it was pretty late, and not many morphs stayed in the streets once the sun descended. I was three steps behind Drayard, and neither of us talked. He seemed distant, and I caught myself wanting to read his mind like he could read mine.

I started chewing the inside of my cheek when the question I'd wanted to ask him at dinner popped into my head again. My heartbeat quickened, and he halted on the bridge.

He glanced at me over his shoulder, questioning. "What is it? You've been silent for a long time. It's unlike you."

Indeed, it was unlike me. Perhaps it was because what Drayard had done for me tonight was nothing like I could have ever imagined. The concert, the dinner under the moonlight... I had expected nothing more than decent from tonight, but I was taken by an immense surprise. And although the fatigue after many almost sleepless nights was kicking in, I didn't want this night, his kindness, to end.

"Have you ever tried to search for your mother?"

I couldn't overlook the tension that appeared in his shoulders once the question I'd been itching to ask left me. I was confident he would disregard it or remind me he didn't answer questions that involved him. That was perhaps the most personal question of them all. I was entirely positive he wasn't going to—

“No.” He turned away and slid towards the balustrade.

I watched him, beyond astonished. He had answered.

“Why?”

He looked out over the river, and I walked over to stand beside him.

“Why should I?” He turned his head at me once I reached his side. Something glistened in his eyes, and redness overflowed the gold that I didn't know was possible. “It was her choice to leave me in my father's hands, and I respected it. Why would I look for someone who made it clear they don't want to have anything to do with me?”

“But if you don't know who your mother is, and she's a bat, then what if you accidentally slept with her?”

Drayard grimaced, repulsed by my guess.

An inquiry was indeed sickening to consider asking, but my curiosity got the better of me. Since all the bats had been whores six years ago, I couldn't —

“Believe me or not, but I haven't slept with any of the bats, and it's not because of who they used to be. I don't care about that. I simply don't like fooling around.”

“You're not fond of the Sinner's Tango?” I couldn't hold back the teasing smile.

His eyebrows lifted unbelievably. “The Sinner's Tango?”

A traitorous chuckle escaped my lips, and I dropped my gaze, the warmth blooming in my cheeks. “It's what I call sexual intercourse.”

“Why do you call it that?”

I gave him a knowing look. “Because it's a sin?”

He winced. “It's not a sin, Elynn. It's—”

I covered my ears. “Blah blah blah blah...”

He emitted a short laugh. “Well, to answer your previous question, I am very fond of *the Sinner's Tango*.”—My smile broadened, and I couldn't make myself quash it—“However, now, all I feel like doing is devoting myself to that one. My wild sleeping around days with whoever I want are over.”

“You sound like an old man.”

“Yes, well, I’m old compared to you and humans dying in their sixties, but in this world, I’m still considered a very young soul,” he explained with an almost wistful smile.

“Yes, almost two centuries old makes you still a young soul. Sure.”

His smile slightly widened, and he turned his head to the view of the river ahead.

With a hoot of an owl, my attention wandered to the few trees leaning over the river. Their branches were drooping down, the tips of leaves touching the shiny water. I’d noticed before that the Realm of Embers wasn’t the most wooded realm. It was mostly plain ground with old but well-maintained structures, and an obscure mountain or two could be seen from afar. It hardly bore any nature, but at least it had sounds of nature. I looked for an owl, but to my disappointment, I couldn’t spot one.

I fixed my gaze on the water, catching the reflection of a girl staring up at me. I slightly leaned away from the bridge.

“Have you found the one you’d want to pledge your devotion to?” I asked, making my heart come to a sudden stop. The question left my lips without my knowledge. But I didn’t regret it.

One side of his mouth turned up. “What do you think?”

I searched his face. His unreadable demeanour didn’t give me away whether there was some future Queen he’d laid his eyes on or not. I had no other choice but to try a guessing game.

“Is it Asenah?”

I knew it wasn’t her. It was just something about him that made me want to irk him. I’d asked him only to see his reaction, which indeed satisfied my expectations, for he shot me an are-you-serious look.

My first impression when I’d been enduring the lack of air and abnormal heat in the greenhouse hadn’t failed me. I’d figured then, he wasn’t much fond of the Queen of Bones.

“Yes,” Drayard responded in a serious tone. “She and I are a match made in heaven.”

I was about to smile, but when I grasped the meaning of his words, I wasn’t sure if it was appropriate.

The romantic relationship between him and Asenah couldn’t exist, not only because she was interested in the opposite gender, but because he viewed his life as hell. And now when I thought about it... I didn’t think the

life I was living was heaven, but it wasn't hell either. Somewhere in between. But how miserable a person had to be to believe with their whole heart that they live in hell?

I pressed my index finger to my cheek and made a face, acting as if I was deliberating. I didn't forget to hum, making Drayard snort.

"Oh, I know!" I exclaimed, perhaps too merry, pointing my finger up. "Is it Dara?"

Suddenly, all the fun vanished from his features as if it had never been there seconds ago. No, it was not her but from what I'd seen at the Autumn Equinox, they had a history I might or might not learn about.

"Did something happen between you and her?"

The time was ticking, and he remained to hold his tongue, staring down at the railings, but I was patient.

Once I slept with her.

I stepped back, taken aback by his confession in my mind, though I should have expected it. But as I remembered Dara's petite and small frame while Drayard was tall and sturdy, and when there was an annoying fact that she was *my cousin*, I could understand why such a thought hadn't entered my mind before.

Although we were outside, the atmosphere was drenched with uncomfortableness. As much as I didn't want to hold on to this unpleasant atmosphere, there was something else that my curiosity nagged me to get out of him.

"What is it you have against Dara?" He raised his eyes at me at last. "That made her leave you to your snooping in Casidiarn Castle by threatening her to say something to her future betrothed? Something that would strip her of her title?"

He leaned away from the balustrade. "Here, royal girls don't have much to choose from. And that includes their marriage and to whom she must yield her body first and forever."

Oh.

Since Drayard had an intimate interaction with her, Dara wasn't a "pure", "untouched" princess anymore. If somebody learnt she'd failed to fulfil her duty, she would get in big trouble.

"But that's so unfair!" I exclaimed indignantly. "As much as I don't like Dara, she should have the right to do with her body whatever she pleases, not what others command."

“Yes.” He eyed my gown, a smile pulling the corners of his mouth. “I can very much see why you would think that.”

My lips parted, and he laughed. Stifling a smile, I gave a jab to his arm with my elbow. “Bastard.”

When the fun ended, I inquired, “But don’t you think people should do whatever they desire with their bodies?”

“Elynn... this empire—the entire world—has tons of unfair convictions, laws, ancient conventions, and more. And if I must be truthful with you, women’s privilege in arranged betrothals is the least of my concerns.”

I frowned. “Which should be.”

He didn’t venture into the topic with me, leaving the promise of an argument it would have ensued unspoken. He looked down at the river. I didn’t urge him to say more, even if I wanted to learn everything that concerned him, unless there was nothing. But there had to be. Why would he liberate morph bats from whoring, command the bat girls to damage the wolves’ private parts if he had no concern about anything?

I rested my elbow on the rail, propping my chin on my palm. I let the silence stay between us, leaving the owl and frogs and others to indulge in their melodies.

But then he straightened himself and turned to me. I watched him from the corner of my eye, cautious. He extended his hand. “Dance with me?”

I snorted, finding it funny.

Undeterred, he repeated himself. “Dance with me, Honeylove?”

I stared at him. He was joking. He had to be. But his determined expression told me otherwise. He was serious about this.

“Do you hear music anywhere? Because I don’t,” I said. “Besides, I don’t see a reason why I should.”

“But I do. I saw the way you were gazing at the couple dancing during the concert.”

My heart stuttered. “And what way was that?”

“Longing.”

I wanted to break eye contact with him but didn’t allow myself such a thing as it would attest that he was right, and it was the last thing I wanted.

“You don’t know how to read my eyes at all, Drayard.”

He smiled, and it was all it took for the weather to thaw. “Perhaps, but I assumed you might want to dance with somebody. Give it a try and see what it’s like.”

I looked at him, *truly* looked at him. Drayard wasn't *he*, the man from my trance. How could the Bloodsucker be the one perhaps I was meant to find and live happily ever—

I dismissed such thoughts. They were idiotic, let alone naïve. Even if I was a princess, I didn't need a prince charming when I wasn't living in a fairy tale with a happy ending. If anything, I was a stranger under the monster's keep. A prisoner, although I didn't feel like one when I should.

"All right, but longing?" I stalled so he'd give up and drop his hand, but he didn't.

There was a tiny part of me—a little girl who had listened to the tales about dragons read by her mother with her ears wide open, shrieking at the opportunity to dance. And it was hard to silence her.

"You were thinking about somebody, weren't you?"

"No," I answered way too fast. Drayard smiled conspiratorially. I shook my head. "I don't know how to dance anyway," I muttered, looking away.

"Consider yourself lucky. The best teacher out there is offering you his services for free."

I huffed, casting him a glance. "Thanks, but I'll have to decline."

He moved closer. "What princess will you be if you don't know how to dance, Honeylove?"

His warm breath tickled my skin, making shivers skid through me. I hadn't noticed how close he was. I bit the inside of my cheek harder than before, and a taste of blood touched my tongue. I let go of it and whipped my head to him, getting a hold of myself. "I was never a princess, I am not one now, and I would never be it, Drayard. So, please, stop throwing that into my face."

He sighed and grasped my wrist before I could trace it, done with my balking. Once he tugged me to his chest, I lost a breath from the unprepared touch. Then our gazes met. "You're *my* princess, but for your own safety, nobody should know that apart from the bats and me."

For quite some time, I lost consciousness of my surroundings while he guided me towards the middle of the bridge. I forced myself to wake up.

"Oh, who are you trying to fool, Drayard? Even if I was wearing a hood, they saw my skin. Do you think other morphs won't have questions about why their King was going to a concert and having a fine dinner with a bloody human?"

He turned me around and landed his hand on my waist. Strangely, I didn't feel the urge to shove it away. His other hand's fingers laced through mine, and I paid no attention to that despite gloves separating our skin, his touch warmed more than my hand.

"Put your left hand on my shoulder." His demand was mild—not the one which would belong to the King or the Bloodsucker. That was why I didn't hesitate and obeyed, placing my hand on his shoulder. "To answer your question, yes, there's a high chance they will, but why does it matter? What power do they have that I don't?"

"But can't gossip ruin your image?"

His face went deadpan, and I realised how dumb my question was.

His picture was already tainted. What bad would it do to him if the entire empire learnt he was spending time with a human? Nothing. No one would take it as something serious, certain that the Bloodsucker would feast on her sooner or later.

"How are we supposed to dance without music anyway?"

A smile caressed his face, and soon a familiar tune emerged in my head. I arched my brow. It was the same sonata he'd sent me when I was perishing in the Mortal Region.

As he began stepping in rhythm, I stared at our feet. He explained to me how to dance a simple waltz with every step. I tried to follow his counting, but sometimes I messed up the whole stepping system and stamped his feet anyway. He usually acted that it hurt.

But when I had enough of his fake moans, I deliberately favoured his left foot with a sharp heel. He didn't have to act out a cry that time, warning me that if I was going to do it again, he would get rid of the grand piano in the living room. Such a barbarous threat converted me into a docile girl for the rest of the night.

Step after step, I understood how to dance. He kept counting them under his nose for me. His voice somewhat soothed me, and I hated that as much as his gloves.

"Why are you always wearing gloves?"

He ceased counting, and the music ended, but neither of us stopped dancing. "My hands are scarred."

"Are you ashamed of your scars?"

He was quick to answer with a wince. "No. I just don't feel like exposing them to everyone, especially when I'm acting like a king. And the King

shouldn't bare his real parts to the world where there's always someone waiting for the shield to fall so they could strike."

This was the first day when Drayard had been the most open with me. I wondered how long this was going to last. *If* it was going to last.

"But you don't have to act like a king when you're with me, do you?"

He spun me around before pulling me back to him. Silent.

"Drayard?"

He sighed. "I'm afraid."

If we weren't close, I wouldn't have heard it. But I had. And I had expected anything, but not this. What could he possibly be afraid of when he was the walking nightmare many feared the most in this world?

"Afraid of what?"

Dancing became natural to me. I didn't even feel it when he had my attention.

Although he didn't haste to answer, he did eventually. "I'm afraid if I show... if I show more of what I am, there will be no way back."

He mystified me more than ever.

"Way back to what?"

"That's a thing, Elynn," he said. "It's already too late, I'm afraid."

I opened my mouth to utter more, but he was faster. "Look at you dancing so well," he said in jest to brighten up the atmosphere. "Perhaps one day I'll teach you how to dance tango as well." He winked in humour.

I couldn't help it. I threw back my head, laughing. But when I looked back at him, the smile reaching his eyes took my laugh away. A smile like his could light up the Universe and outshine the stars if he just *wished*.

"Only if I let you," I whispered.

"Only if you let me," he whispered back.

I allowed myself to enjoy the moment and forget who he was. What devil, what title he wore. I forgot that the most terrifying tale had been written about him to scare children. I forgot he was in his in-between form and something else flashed in his eyes, disappearing soon after.

But I had enough time to catch something rare and decent in his depraved soul.

XL

YET ANOTHER NIGHTMARE had intruded on my sleep.

I awakened like any other time: sweaty, panting, eyes swollen with tears. I rubbed the lingering teardrops away with my knuckles.

I had to remind myself that so far, I was safe. Lupin and Fillan were in their realm while Chase was in the Mortal Region. None of them could reach me here. The Bloodsucker was the one who could, but he didn't strike me as someone who would commit anything like those men.

I crawled off the bed and left the bedroom to pad into the kitchen and fetch a glass of water. I was sure I wouldn't fall asleep when it'd been this way ever since the nightmares had begun frequenting my slumbers.

Before I reached downstairs, muffled music greeted my ears. I smiled at the recognition of the familiar melody. But my smile faltered once it was ruined by the hit of the wrong key, and swearing made its way after, making me frown.

It restarted right from the beginning.

I crept towards the living room and opened the door as quiet as I could, grateful that it didn't make a sound. I ended up opening it wide enough to lean my head against the door jamb and watch a creature who endeavoured his best to play the piece. The set of crinkles on his forehead I could discern from here didn't favour his dragon-like face.

Ever since he'd resumed it from the start, he was decent until he reached the part when the melody intensified, where he'd failed earlier. I was worried he was going to hit the wrong note again, but he didn't. He went smoothly throughout the tricky part, and his creases faded. He closed his eyes as if confident the rest of the melody would go as fluently as the beginning.

I closed my eyes as well, enjoying his playing without realising that I was smiling this whole time.

But he missed the right key again, and my eyes shot open. He ceased playing and pressed multiple keys at once, causing such a terrible sound that made my ears bleed.

“It’s a higher chance you’ll fail if you get so irritated every time something goes wrong.”

He didn’t acknowledge me but continued to sit with his eyes lowered at the keys, shoulders hunched, tips of wings and tail grazing the floor.

“And tension doesn’t help either,” I added.

He sighed, straightening his shoulders. “Don’t bother, Elynn. Go take what you’ve come here for and leave.”

I stepped inside the room and approached the piano instead. As I propped my forearms on its cover, I met Drayard’s eyes for a split second, but it was enough to notice water touched with redness.

He’d been crying. Actually *crying*.

Drayard looked away, perhaps ashamed that I captured a fragile boy in him. A boy whose mother had left him behind the castle’s gates. Maybe that was his breakpoint, or it was only one of the many.

But I couldn’t allow myself to sympathise with him or look for the reason behind his devilishness to understand him and his actions. Nobody was born wicked to the core, but I wouldn’t question why he’d turned into the monster he was now either.

“Do you want to talk?” I heard myself asking.

I hissed at my stupid heart, although he didn’t answer anyway.

“Drayard?”

He shot up to his feet and left the room. I stayed, fighting the urge to go after him. There was no way I was doing that. I had my own problems to deal with. I didn’t need to care for some Bloodsucker who had slaughtered thousands, if not a million.

But my legs carried me to him.

Traitors.

I saw him mounting the stairs, and I followed.

Stay away, Elynn. His voice sounded in my mind. *Don’t bother yourself.*

I wish I could, but my nature of being kind doesn’t let me.

He halted on the stairs that led to his chambers. The side where I was forbidden to go for some unknown reasons. I stopped on the fourth step. He didn’t even look at me.

“I’m not blind, Drayard. I can see that there’s something wrong with you, and I’m not speaking about your corrupt nature. I don’t know why it’s like that, but I feel like... I feel like I can feel you.”

I wasn't sure why I was sharing this with him. Perhaps it was because I'd seen the glimpse of his soul when we'd danced. And what I'd seen, merely a tiny, a smidgen part of him, intrigued me. I had no clue how it was possible to behold one's soul, but I didn't dare to question it.

"I feel like I can understand you, and perhaps I'll be unwise to say this, but whatever it is, you can tell me. Of course, if you don't want to reveal your heart to me, then perhaps there is someone else who is waiting for you to open up?"

I utterly doubted that to be the case. What I'd gathered from the times I saw him with someone else, he was cold with them, spoke little or nothing if it didn't include politics.

Drayard remained silent but didn't leave either.

I blamed my heart, which belonged to the human world and not here. In the world of beasts, my kindness I'd been taught to develop could be nothing but my weakness.

"I feel like I'm communicating with the wall," I sighed and turned around, pushing myself to leave him alone. I'd tried to make him talk, but he refused. Whatever he was dealing with wasn't my problem anymore. In fact, it had never been my problem.

I headed into the kitchen, took an empty glass and poured water from the flask. I dragged in a breath before shoving all its contents down my parched throat.

As I wasn't thirsty anymore, I retraced to the living room, where I found Drayard sitting on the piano's stool again. I clenched my jaw and moved towards the exit.

Wait, his voice echoed in my head. I halted, but other than that, did nothing. *Stay*.

I debated.

One part indeed wanted me to stay, but the other, the wiser one and colder, told me to mind my own business.

"Please?" he asked, almost hopelessly.

Sighing, I turned around. He mustered a feeble smile and scooted over a little, making space for me. I gave in. As I sat down, our shoulders touched, and his body heat penetrated through his shirt, warming me.

"Did you have a nightmare?" he asked, but his tone implied that he already knew it to be the case.

"Maybe."

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I issued a short laugh. “Why should I talk about my demons if you refuse to talk about yours?”

“You don’t need to worry about me.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about you,” I said. “But perhaps it would let you sleep better if you shared what’s weighing your chest.”

“Would it make you sleep better if you shared your nightmares with me?”

I didn’t answer.

“That’s what I thought.” His eyes fell back on the piano keys.

Silence settled over the room, and all I could distinguish was our breathing, nothing else. Following his stare, I rested my fingers on the right notes and began playing the song Drayard had attempted to perform recently but had always failed.

My fingers deftly moved through the piano keys, hitting the right notes every time. After all, I’d been playing the piano for over fifteen years. I was a professional. I could play in front of the audience and never become bored or tired because the music was my haven.

Once I finished, I met his gaze. And when his eyes, glowing like fire embers, captured mine, I saw something I hadn’t before. Something too good to be real.

I averted my gaze. Suddenly abashed.

“Teach me how to play this song.”

It sounded nothing like a demand but a request.

“I will consider teaching you if you tell me at least one reason you’re the way you are.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you afraid of anyone getting to know you better?”

“I have trust issues.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course, you do, but why?”

“I have trust issues. That’s why I can’t answer you.” He flashed me a silly smile.

“Fair enough.” I looked down at the piano. “If you want me to teach you, place your hands on the keys.”

He did what I’d instructed. And as I was about to put my hands on his to guide him, a realisation struck me.

He wasn’t wearing his gloves.

Of course, he wasn't. It would be weird if he wore them to bed, too.

There was a black ring studded with a significant ruby on his ring finger. He must have masked it under his gloves along with the lighter lines on his red scales. *Scars* he'd mentioned once.

He then cleared his throat.

I'd been silent for too long.

I hastened to place my hands on his. Despite the dryness, his hands were warm and rough. And much too strained, like his body.

"Are you always this tense?"

"Yes."

"Try to relax. You can't play the piano this strained, Dray."

His mouth curled into what seemed like a smile, and I didn't understand why.

"What?"

"You called me Dray."

I hadn't even realised I'd abbreviated his name until he'd mentioned it. Feeling my cheeks flame, I looked down.

"You've never shortened my name before."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't—"

"No, no," he burst out. "You can call me Dray. I don't mind."

As I looked at him, he was smiling so adorably that it affected his eyes. I looked back at our hands and placed his fingers on the right chords. They remained strained, but not as much as before.

"Could you..." He cleared his throat. "Say it again?"

"What?" I caught his gaze. "Your name?"

He inclined his head so slowly that the nod was almost imperceptible.

The corner of my lip curved upwards, and I whispered while looking deep into his eyes, "Dray."

Something incomprehensible sparkled in his eyes. Something brand new and intriguing.

"Again." His voice dropped lower, almost sensuous, and my heart found a hard time maintaining its normal rhythm. His face was so close to mine, there was almost no room left for oxygen.

"Oh," I breathed and bit my bottom lip, not one hundred per cent conscious of my actions, let alone my upcoming words. "Would you like me to scream it this time, perhaps?"

“Would you?” He raised his brows. “Like to scream...” He leaned in even closer. “...my name?”

I thought my heart would leap through my chest. My palms dampened, and I was sure he could feel it. Despite my flaring cheeks, I couldn’t turn my gaze from him. But then his eyes dropped to my lips.

I forced out a laugh—which turned out a bit strangled—as I pushed his shoulder with mine until he was a healthy distance away from me. At least he didn’t stare at my mouth anymore, despite how one part of me begged for far more than that.

“Let’s begin our lesson, shall we?”

It was a miracle how my fingers remained steady on his hands when nervousness was tingling everywhere.

“If that’s what you want, then I’m all yours to teach, Honeylove.”

I pretended not to hear his... unseemly innuendo. “First, you have to relax,” I said, endeavouring to keep my voice balanced, impervious to his charms, unlike my body. “And try not to dwell on anything. Let the music speak for you.”

“All right,” he complied. “Am I relaxed enough?”

“No.”

“Do you want to know what could help me relax?”

I needn’t be a mind reader to read what was in his void, flooded with darkness, mind. All I needed was to see his suggestive expression and I could already guess.

“Knowing your perverted mind, I would rather not.”

“Perverted mind?” He tilted his head to the side. “Since when offering meditation is considered a perversion?”

“Oh, do not lie!” I laughed, giving him a playful push. “That was not what you were going to say!”

His smile only grew. “And what did you think I was going to say, Elynn?”

As I was shaking my head, only then I’d noticed his hands were softer under my touch.

“How interesting. You’ve relaxed.”

He gave me a boyish smile.

I figured he could have relaxed sooner, but he found it amusing to toy with me first. But I didn’t bother calling him out, and began teaching him how to play, which lasted for the rest of the night. Most of the sonata he

knew how to play himself, but some parts needed my guidance. My hands remained on his until he was ready to play on his own. In the mere first attempt, his fingers travelled lightly over the keys, and he didn't make a single mistake. Drayard was a quick learner and the first student of mine I'd ever taught. It was either I was a good tutor, or he was a good student. Or both.

We might have had no heart-to-heart conversations, and there wasn't any flirting, jokes or tears, the sound of the piano was enough. No words had to be voiced when the music was speaking for us and... our hearts.

But I wasn't sure if I should have heard any of that.

OceanofPDF.com

XLI

DRAY WASN'T HOME AS OFTEN as I'd prefer, for I'd come to treasure our sleepless nights when I taught him how to play the piano or he taught me how to dance. Sometimes we talked, but neither of us spoke of our nightmares nor asked each other about them.

"What's your biggest fear?" I asked Dray one night as I poured myself a glass of water. I leaned against the counter and watched him sitting on the kitchen's floor, poring over my sketches.

"I don't have one." He flipped over the page and studied the other drawn dress.

I took a sip. "Everyone has a fear or a phobia. Even terrifying men like you."

"Well, I'm not afraid of anything."

"You spoke otherwise when we danced on the bridge. You said you were afraid but didn't specify what."

He said nothing.

I sighed. "Is it really ghosts you're the most afraid of?"

He favoured me with a pointed look and resumed surveying my creations, whereas I remembered the words he'd said at the concert.

And they weren't friendly.

"What did you mean by saying ghosts hadn't been friendly?"

He hesitated before answering. "Well." He inhaled. "They haunted me. I was cautious in every room of the castle. They were also fond of messing with my head. Very much, if I must add."

"So, they're not your fear?"

He looked up at me. Serious. "Elynn... I had many fears when I was a child, but I grew out of them. Like I said, I'm not afraid of anything anymore."

And here he was. Lying to my face.

"I'm claustrophobic," I admitted, hoping this would encourage him to open up. "I'm afraid of small spaces."

He seemed to be assessing something. "Interesting."

“It’s your turn to tell your fear or phobia if you have it.”

“I don’t have either of those things.” He fixed his gaze back on the drawing.

“And you’re lying straight to my face.”

He was silent. Annoyed, I ran my fingers through my hair, pushing them back from my forehead.

But then his voice emerged in my head. *I’m not much fond of being left alone.*

I stared at him, taken by surprise. I hadn’t expected him to say anything at all, but, I guessed, he just didn’t want to say it out loud.

“But aren’t you, like, always alone?”

“Am I alone now?” He glanced at me over the top of my sketchbook, a cheeky grin on his face.

“That’s because you have me trapped in here.”

His response to it was an eye roll.

I’d noticed he did eye rolls more often. I guessed it was contagious. I, however, didn’t mind when he did that. It made him seem less severe, less strained and cold-hearted. More... real.

I put a glass down and plopped beside him, making sure not to get in the way of his wings as I rested my back against the wall. “I see ghosts, too.”

I felt his astounded gaze on me.

“I saw a spirit of the boy in the Mortal Region, two days before the Summer Solstice, when Gen was supposed to get offered. He helped me find a solution—a Conversion Potion, which turned me into Gen’s lookalike. But I saw him because before the Summer Solstice spirits manifested themselves to human’s eyes, or so I thought until ghosts began haunting me in Hellrock Castle, scaring me with weird noises.”

He chuckled, as if he couldn’t believe it.

I frowned at him. “What?”

He shook his head, flipping the page, practically beaming.

“What?” I persisted, but he was silent. I nudged him. “Tell me what it is!”

“Nothing, Elynn. I just didn’t expect that, that’s all.”

I observed him, searching his face for a lie, but I couldn’t detect one this time.

“What was it like in the war?” I managed to ask.

“And what do you think it was like?”

His tone didn't have a bite in it as I would have expected. Although his shoulders tensed as soon as I'd asked, his tone didn't alter, remaining warm.

"Like a nightmare."

He smiled sadly. "Worse."

I swallowed, my heartbeat increasing as I moved to the question I'd been aching but still afraid to ask ever since I'd beheld a decent side in him. "Is it true? What the tale says about you?"

"Elynn, I don't even know what the tale created by humans says about me."

I drew in a breath, gathering strength to summarise my favourite tale aloud for the first time. "Once upon a time, the Bloodsucker was sent into the war camp. At first, he was a silent wolf and didn't show his true essence. His peers got missing at night, and nobody knew why. Nobody questioned what was obvious. The Bloodsucker was feasting on them."

Creases appeared on his forehead.

"What?" I inquired.

"Please, continue."

I hesitated a bit before resuming. "As one night came, the battle occurred. He could not mask himself any longer and exposed his true self. He sucked the blood from his enemies, set on fire those who tried to quell him, and when it was over, still being famished, he did not forget to feast on the fallen soldiers, tearing at their organs and devouring them to the fullest."

I didn't summarise it all, staying silent about the stolen kids. I wasn't sure whether he would open up to me about his misdeeds in the war, and if I asked him about the kids, it might deter him from telling me anything at all.

He had nothing to say, or if he did, the silence was his best friend. His eyes weren't on me. Neither were they on my sketchbook. He seemed... elsewhere.

"Is it all true?" I said, dragging him back to the present. "Or not?"

"Yes."

But the absence in his tone told me otherwise.

"You're lying."

He remained silent. For far too long.

"Why are you lying?"

My heartbeat was only growing with his stalling. I'd hoped he would deny everything and assure me it was just a tale, an illusion to scare children to bed after they misbehaved with their parents, but he didn't. But

he was lying. He must be. Because there was no way I'd been spending my nights with the same man described in the tale.

"I've never feasted on anybody's organs," he mumbled.

My heartbeat slowed down.

"But other than that, yes, I drained the life out of them by sucking their blood. And indeed it was I who set aflame those who tried to stop me."

"But why be so cruel?"

"It's war, Elynn. It changes people. It leaves eternal scars not only on their bodies, but inside their heads. It's something nobody can evade if they make it out alive. But none of us actually make it out alive." He sucked in a breath. "This one is a beautiful design. You are going to work on it, right?"

But I stared at him when he was poking at whatever dress I'd sketched.

"Dray—"

"No, please, Elynn." He held my concerned gaze, eyes pleading. "Don't provoke the horrors. I don't want to remember anything from those times."

I watched him, sentences and further questions rising in my mouth, ready to be voiced, but I didn't. I looked at the gown and chuckled.

"What?" He arched his brow.

"It's a wedding gown."

He peered closer at it. "It's... not like any wedding gowns I've seen."

"I thought you got used to my scandalous fashion?"

His smile was faint. "*Got used to it* is not how I'd describe it. More like I'm still adapting. But it is pretty. Are you planning to marry someone?"

"Yes," I said, his inquisitive look on me. I puffed out my chest and deepened my voice. "I marry no one but myself."

He stared at me for a while, and I tried my best to maintain a straight face and not laugh. But he couldn't help it and let out a snort. "I see... I see. You're not only sharp-tongued but a mocker."

"And very beautiful," I added.

He laughed through a wide grin.

"What?" I frowned, acting offended. "You forgot to add that!"

"You're gorgeous, Honeylove."

He lowered his head, breaking eye contact. I was thankful he had, for I felt my cheeks growing warm.

"Are you going to work on this dress?" he asked.

"I don't sew all the designs I draw. Mostly I'm just messing around. This dress is one of many I've messed around with."

He winced. "It doesn't look like messing around."

I said nothing, standing up to fetch more water. I'd become thirstier at night. I blamed the volcano, regardless of it being inactive.

As I drank water, a pucker collected between Dray's brows. I didn't step closer to see what design he was inspecting now. He must not be fond of that one.

But he was looking at it way too intently. I rested my drink on the counter and slid towards him. Once I caught a glimpse of the design, my heart stuttered.

Promptly, I grasped the sketchbook, but he gripped into it, lifting his quizzical gaze at me. I pulled it out without a fight, for he let go of it, allowing me to have it.

"Is a crimson suit messing around, too?"

My cheeks burned. "It's not..." I tried to find the right words to say, but either they didn't exist, or I couldn't think of any.

The sketch he'd seen wasn't supposed to be there. I'd forgotten all about it. I should have looked through them, made sure there wasn't anything I wouldn't like him to see. But it was too late. Dray had already seen a sketch of a man's suit inspired by my trance.

He rose off the floor. "It's not what?"

"Ugh, nothing!" I made to pass him, but his fingers closed over my wrist.

"It isn't nothing if you're blushing. What is it you're hiding, Honeylove?"

I dropped my eyes to the slippers. He'd caught me. I should have behaved otherwise, but it was too late now. He'd already seen how excessively I'd reacted to what should have been no big deal, even though it was far from being one to me.

Tenderly, he took hold of my chin and lifted it, seeking my eyes, but I avoided his like the plague.

"Elynn?"

I wasn't sure why, but I wanted to spill everything to him that hadn't been leaving me for peace of mind for four years. I felt like he was the sole person who could understand, which was stupid as he might laugh from it, assuring me whoever the man from my trance was, he wasn't real. Dray didn't believe in unicorns...

But he saw ghosts.

“Do you believe in trances?” Somehow, I faced his gaze.

He let go of me, and the heat left my skin. I ignored the knowledge of wanting it back. “Yes, I do.”

I drew in a breath, steeling myself for confiding in him with a secret I hadn’t told anybody yet. “A few years ago, when I was lost in the music, somehow I disconnected from my body and appeared in someone else’s. Almost like the time I accidentally slid into your...”

I stopped amid the sentence, startled.

No, I refused to believe it. Dray couldn’t be the one I was talking about, as when I’d got into his head during the Autumn Equinox, I hadn’t felt the smoke like the one in my trance. The chances of the Bloodsucker being my soulmate perhaps were... none.

Perhaps.

But what were the odds of it turning out that I’d been spending time with my one all along?

“Almost like the time you accidentally slid into my...” he prompted.

“You know what? Forget it. It’s stupid.”

I left the kitchen, but his footsteps came behind me. “I’m sure it’s not stupid. Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

I pursed my lips and halted because something continued prodding me into telling him. Dray knew a lot. If he believed me, perhaps he could help me understand my trance better. Maybe it meant nothing. Maybe it had been all in my head all along.

At last, I spun to him. He stared at me with curiosity mingled with concern. I swallowed. “I transferred into a man, saw a black sleeve of the suit as he was fixing it, and I felt him... I felt the smoke. And then he said: I feel you too, stranger.”

I expected him to laugh, to assure me it was a dream or a hallucination, but he didn’t. All he did was stare at me.

“Go on, tell me how ridiculous it is,” I mumbled.

But instead of agreeing with me, an inquiry left his mouth. “You *felt* the smoke?”

“Uh... yes.”

“But did you smell it?”

I winced. “Smelled it?”

“You said you’d felt the smoke, but perhaps you smelled it instead since you can’t feel something like smoke without smelling it first.”

“I don’t quite understand why you’re asking me this?”

He lifted his shoulder. “It’s just interesting because if you smelled smoke, you saw, as you call it, a trance of your mate.”

I blinked incredulously. “What?”

Mate?

“Mates smell each other. They recognise each other by their distinct scents. If you smelled smoke, you felt your mate, which if it’s true, you have one.”

Not only was I speechless, but perplexed to the moon and back. Such a thought hadn’t occurred to me, but how could it have when I hardly thought about my trance and learnt about mates’ existence not too long ago?

“I thought he was my soulmate... not mate,” I mused. “My one.”

If I hadn’t sounded like a naïve girl before, now I definitely did.

“Maybe he is.”

“Do you truly believe me?”

Bewilderment shone in his face. “Why would I not believe you?”

I shrugged, looking down. “It just... sounds unrealistic.”

“It seems like you don’t believe what you saw or felt yourself, Elynn.”

As if now, when he’d said it, it hit me he could be right. There was no probability of my trance being real because if the stranger was my mate, he would have found me already. Morphs were the only species that had mates, and I was in the world swarming with them.

And one of them was standing before me.

When I looked at him, my pulse was already out of control, legs numb, but I managed to form the words. “I know it’s going to sound even more insane, but... but is it possible for you to be *him*?”

Stupid, stupid, stupid! my inner voice yelled.

The longer he took to answer, the more I wanted to dig a hole, bury myself in it and never leave.

Finally, he spoke. “Do you feel the smoke now? Smell it?”

I swallowed, trying to focus despite anything. I hadn’t felt—smelled—smoke anywhere before. And I didn’t sense one now.

“No.”

“Then you have your answer.”

Dray wasn’t him.

But relief didn’t come.

“But I don’t quite understand...” I said. “Why can you get into my head from such a far distance? How could I have gotten into your head when I was asleep? I don’t think that’s how telepathy works.”

“An oath made me tied to you,” he said flatly.

Right. *That* magical oath.

“But why are you still protecting me? The part of the bargain your father agreed to doesn’t exist anymore. Your kind is dead.”

Since Arragon was dead along with his kind and only the half-breed Drayard had remained after the enchanters’ raid, I figured it was pointless for him to keep that oath, and yet he did.

“But I’m not,” he said. “If I don’t keep the oath, I die.”

Oh.

“Is there any way to liberate you from it?”

“Yes, there are two ways. First, all people who are a part of the oath make a deal of mutual interest to terminate it. Second way involves Ascended Sorceresses or Witches. Their power can unbind it. And the final one, someone included in the bargain, perishes. But Tatyana is very much alive, exiled somewhere, which means I’m bound to protect you despite anything forever.”

Well, if Dray was *him*, he would have said it. Why keep it a secret? Not to repulse me or scare me off? I was the one who confronted him, after all. And I thought I’d made it obvious that I wasn’t revolted by the idea of him being my one. But in the end, everything indicated Dray couldn’t be *him*, and I was holding on to someone who didn’t exist.

“Good night, Dray.”

I was made to retire to my room and try to sleep for an hour or two, but he stopped me once again. “Before you go, I have something for you.”

He pulled something out of his pocket. It was an envelope.

“Your siblings wrote you back.”

Dear Elynn,

Kristian and I are glad to hear you’re safe and well. You deserve to be happy.

To reassure you, we are both healthy and safe. We burned our mother’s body, and we both missed your presence at the funeral, but it is what it is.

Sometimes I get angry. Worse than before. Sometimes I don't know what to do with myself. But I'm all right.

Sometimes I'm angry at you. That you left us here. That you got into that world in the first place. That now you're a part of it. That you've always been a part of it, but none of us had a clue.

But I also miss you. We both do. This can't last forever. Startels are better when they stick together. Whether or not your blood is a stranger to ours, you are not and would never be a stranger to us.

Hope you're still doing well,

*Love,
Kris and Gen*

I couldn't tear my stare off the letter. I couldn't stop rereading it, searching for something more than this because I hadn't expected it to be this short. I'd written two pages of mine. But despite its shortness, it was Gen's handwriting. It wasn't forged, as it might have been.

At least both of them were healthy, albeit unhappy. But how could they be when our mother had passed away recently? The happiness would find its way to them someday, anyway.

I slept for an hour as I awoke with a foreboding in my chest.

However, I dismissed it, choosing to forget.

OceanofPDF.com

XLII

FOR THE FIRST TIME, I was awakened not by a nightmare, but by a shaking underneath me. My bed and other furniture were shaking and shifting from their places.

I had never experienced an earthquake before.

Or perhaps it wasn't an earthquake but a volcano eruption.

But Dray had assured me it was inactive. He wouldn't lie about it, would he? But then if it was an earthquake, what if we all get buried here?

Out of the blue, a growl thundered in my head, rattling my brain cells. I winced. Such a growl could only belong to one morph who had access to my mind.

I left the bed and held on to it until I found my balance. Then I dashed from the room, leaving the doors wide open behind me.

Are you all right? I asked him, but no answer came.

As I descended the stairs that led to my side of chambers, the earth stopped shaking. I lurched to a halt on the landing and looked up at the flight of stairs leading to his rooms—to the side where I wasn't permitted to go.

Only then it clicked that perhaps it wasn't an earthquake. But it would be ridiculous to assume Dray could be the cause of all this. How could he make the earth tremble? It wasn't possible for him. Or was it? He had mastered telepathy, which morphs didn't have...

"Elynn?"

I swivelled my head back and met Blossom's gaze.

The ground began vibrating anew, and I would have fallen, but I grasped onto the newel in time to avoid the accident. I looked back at the stairs ahead of me.

One part of me told me, *screamed* to go and check if he was all right when it was evident that he wasn't. Perhaps there was something I could help him with. But there was also a more reasonable voice that urged me to return to bed, snuggle under the covers and hope whatever it was, it would pass.

But instead, I stepped towards the stairs.

“Elynn, no!”

I looked over my shoulder at Blossom. “Why?”

Her eyes were frantic, concerned to the bone. “It’s a full moon, and he’s a dragon. The full moon affects all morphs, but dragons in particular. He might hurt you.”

He might hurt me...

But I shoved such a possibility away. He had proved himself within days we’d spent together that he would never raise a hand against me. However, my past trauma told me not to trust anyone, as I could always be deceived.

“He won’t.”

My voice was more assured than my brain.

I hastened up the stairs, straight into the forbidden zone. My mind was already bellowing at me how stupid I was by likely handing myself to the claws of death while my heart said otherwise.

He would not hurt me. He would not...

The corridor of his chambers was parallel to mine and the foyer: deep red with golden patterns. But here, in semi-darkness, red struck more like blood than anywhere else. I took a composing breath and continued my walk through the corridor, supporting my hand against the wall.

The further I went, the more potent the tremble was. It was getting harder to maintain the balance and not fall, but I wasn’t giving up. The longer I was taking to find him, the more suffocating hollowness was spreading throughout my chest, the more it was harder to breathe. I couldn’t explain, let alone think, why it was like that when my mind was elsewhere.

A few days ago, Dray had confessed his fear. He wasn’t fond of being left alone. Perhaps what he needed right now was someone next to him to hold him and whisper he wasn’t alone. Not anymore, at least.

The ground ceased to quiver. It was as silent as the forest in the Realm of Bones. But this silence disturbed me more than any.

Perhaps it was over, and I should retrace my steps back to my bedroom.

But I kept going.

I’d definitely gone mad.

At last, I approached two doors left ajar. Ignoring the fear of facing Dray, probably in his worst state, I peeked into the room. What I beheld shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did anyway.

The room was in absolute disaster: painted canvases littered the room, paint scattered over the ground, their dashes all over the place, the easel cracked in two and left lying on the wooden floor.

I didn't even know Dray was a painter. He'd never told me that.

I entered the room and looked for him, but he wasn't here.

I was on my way towards the door when I stumbled over one of the lying paintings. I squatted down and brushed my fingertips over it. It was mostly dark, but the middle that was scratched had a smudge of maroon. I pushed the peeled off pieces into their original places and discerned a cowering child with medium-length burgundy hair and horns and—

A sudden roar and shaking around me made me drop to the ground and release the painting. It was quick to stop again, and the utter silence dismayed me. I wondered where he could be. Perhaps in another room.

As I managed to stand back up, I exited the painting room. I crept closer to the other opened doors. Once again, I took a peep into the room in case he was there, as he might not be too pleased to see me where I shouldn't be, but he wasn't in his bedroom either.

Like the painting room, his bedroom didn't endure any softer blow. The burgundy wallpaper had talon scratches as his bedsheets. The feathers were dispersed not only on the bed but all across the room. The mirror in the corner was broken, its glass shards lying on the floor before it. Some even had traces of blood.

Then I heard the ragged breathing nearby. As I peeked around the door, I discovered Dray behind it. His hands were grasping his head as if he had a severe headache, his chest rising from the laborious panting. And he was half-naked.

His bareness disturbed me, and I would have averted my gaze, if not for the unusual look in his eyes. He didn't seem as if he noticed my presence. His body was here, but his consciousness was... absent.

A horrific growl escaped his throat, and the ground trembled again. The furniture shook, and I hung on to the door handle to avoid meeting with the floor.

"Leave. Me. Alone," he said through his gnashed teeth, and for a second, I thought it was meant to me, but that wasn't it. He wasn't even conscious of me, standing so close to him. "Please..." His voice faltered.

If it wasn't obvious before, it was now. He was hurting. Why, I had no clue, but it stung me to see him this vulnerable. I'd rather see him cold,

demanding and monstrous than this weeping, utterly destroyed creature.

I let go of the handle and dropped before him. Many distressing emotions crossed his eyes, pinching my heart. He stared at nothing, which ensured that he didn't see me here, on my knees in front of him.

"I'm here," I breathed out as if my lungs were out of air. I clutched his knees and spread them to fit myself between them and get closer to him.

He was shaking his head perpetually, babbling something incomprehensible under his breath.

I touched his nape. His skin had never been this hot and damp, like burning with fever.

"Dray, you're not alone. I'm here. I'm here..."

What was this man trying to fight? What kind of demons did he have that made the fearsome Bloodsucker be in a wretched state like this?

He remained to ignore me. I tried to approach him otherwise. I took his light hand and laid it on my chest, where my thumping heart was hiding.

"Listen to my heartbeat," I ordered. "Listen to my heart, Dray."

"Leave me alone," he cried with a voice drenched in pain.

I shut my eyelids, and once I reopened them, impenetrable darkness enveloped me. The horror washed over me. I shrieked, and it echoed throughout the space, receding into the void.

Where was I?

It was so cold... so dreadful... so horrible...

You're weak.

I cast around the black-pitch area frantically but didn't detect anyone to whom the voice could belong.

My son cannot be weak.

A cry thundered that didn't belong to me, but I felt an ache to weep, too.

I'm sorry, Father, a much younger voice said, and somehow, I knew it belonged to the man in whose head I was trapped.

Gradually, the blackness was ebbing, painting into a more vivid environment.

In front of me materialised a towering man staring down at me. His eyes were golden with bits of red. Like Drayard's. But the man wasn't in his in-between form. He had a human-like body, despite the wings peeking from his shoulders and those familiar twisted horns protruding from his head. He owned cruel and cold face features.

But it wasn't Dray. I knew it and felt it.

That was Arragon.

“Step out of the way, Drayard,” Arragon demanded.

Little Dray shook his head. “No, Father. You can’t hurt him. Please, don’t do it.”

Arragon’s face contorted with displeasure. I sensed Dray’s fear of him, and it was worse than I’d ever felt in my entire life about anyone.

His expression suddenly loosened. “All right, I won’t.”

Dray’s eyes widened. “You... you won’t?”

“No,” Arragon said, “but you will.”

Dray’s little heart thudded, and he glanced at the person behind him. A human. It was a human whose tears were gushing down his face while he recited prayers I knew by heart under his breath.

“Father, I can’t.” He flicked his head back to Arragon.

“This is war, Drayard. They are our enemies. We must send the message.” Arragon’s countenance remained honed like a blade. “Kill him.”

Dray was hesitating, and it didn’t satisfy Arragon. He took a cautious step back. “It isn’t—”

“Kill him!”

Dray flinched. I could feel every little Dray’s emotion, hear thoughts I wished I didn’t.

He wasn’t a killer. He knew that, and his father—more than anyone—was aware of it too. Arragon didn’t like his son for his tender heart because it weakened him. And no dragon, especially not a sole heir to the throne, should be *weak*.

“Kill him,” his father persisted.

I came to loathe him. If I could get into the memory, I’d make Arragon pay for tormenting his son like that, regardless of not standing a chance against him.

Dray’s eyes locked with the human’s sky-blue ones that were imploring him not to do this mutely. He swallowed hard, the pounding heart threatening to jump out of his chest. I didn’t want to hear his thoughts, but here they were, sliding into me, and I was powerless to fend them off.

Kill him. Kill him. Father will love you. Kill him. Kill him. He’ll be proud of you. It’s so simple. Just kill him. Kill him. And it will be over.

He will love you.

He closed his eyes. He didn’t see what was happening, and neither did I, but we both heard an agonizing shriek that split through my soul. *His* soul.

Once the screaming ceased, there stood merciless silence. As little Drayard cracked his one eye open, nothing of the human was left, except the ashes of his bones and the stench of roast flesh.

And as if the invisible replay button was pressed, the memory repeated, right from its start.

I couldn't bear this any longer. I did everything to leave his head, to escape these dark talons of the void. To my relief, I managed, and I was yet again left with my own demons to struggle with, which were angels in contrast to what was lurking in Dray's head.

His hand was on my chest as I'd left it. I moved my hand down to his shoulder and shook him gently.

Dray, it's over. I tried to reach out to him. *Please come back. Your father is dead. It's over.*

He didn't react to any of my pleas.

I'm here. Elynn is here. You are safe.

If the memory was repeating in his head non-stop, it'd drive him insane. I didn't know how commonly he experienced something like that as I doubted it was a one time thing. If he suffered like this every full moon, it would be amazing he stayed this balanced and composed and still somewhat sane on a daily basis.

Or it was his exterior that fooled me, when in reality, he was a drowning ship inside.

The tears flooded from him. I also felt my damp cheeks, tasted the salt. I must have been a crying mess, but I didn't care.

Listen to my heart. I closed my eyes. *Please.*

Elynn?

As his voice echoed in my mind, for the first time, it was an immense relief to hear it there.

I opened my eyes and found him already staring at me.

He saw me.

I smiled and nodded to assure that it was indeed me. "I'm here, Dray."

He wrapped his hands around my waist and pulled me even closer. His face sank on my chest, and I had no other choice but to slide my hands over his neck, not sure how else to deal with his proximity.

"How are you?" I whispered.

He craned his head back and tucked my hair behind my ear, gazing at me with tear-stained eyes as if I was a ray of light in the dark.

Better when you're here.

My heart cracked a little.

You don't have to talk if you don't want to. I unconsciously traced my fingers over his nape, his skull. *But know that I'm here and you're not alone.*

His smile was feeble. *I know.*

But if you do want to talk, I'm here to listen, too.

I know.

He brought me onto his lap, curling his arm over my waist. I nestled against his heaving, bare chest, and his breathing eventually steadied.

I couldn't tell whether he knew I'd been in his head or not. I wanted to ask more about it, but also, I didn't want to push him after I'd learnt what past horrors he battled there. It was his call whether he wanted to open up to someone. And tonight, it didn't seem to be the right time for him to share his darkest thoughts, nor the demons that were eating him piece by piece.

But now, I wished to understand him even more. There was more of him than he let others see. There was more than *A tale of the Bloodsucker*. There was an entire novel I was eager to explore.

But the question was, would he allow me to understand what war he was fighting in his head or not?

XLIII

DRAYARD WAS AVOIDING ME. When I went downstairs during my sleepless nights, I didn't find him sitting at the piano, attempting to play something. It felt like we'd backed away a step or more. And here, I'd assumed our relationship had reached its next level because of what had happened that night, but I was tremendously mistaken.

I wondered why. Perhaps I had made a mistake trying to reach out to him that night. But he was hurting, and I wouldn't have been able to rest well if I hadn't gone there and tried to find out what was wrong with him. And perhaps I'd discovered something by accident. A fragment of what had caused him to be the way he was now. His father was undoubtedly one of the reasons. I'd seen with my own eyes how he'd broken his child. It disgusted me.

As I played one of the piano pieces Drayard had handed me one day, my body detached itself from my mind. It took me one minute of relaxation to be swiped back into the void and darkness, back into the Bloodsucker's head, which induced horrors.

This time, however, it was different. I wasn't stuck with his mindset when he was conscious of his surroundings.

As I recognised a study room in dreadful Hellrock Castle, it was enough for me to want to get out of here. But I hesitated once I saw two males with unappealing appearance sitting on the chairs across from Drayard.

"As you may be aware, the Winter Solstice is coming," Drayard spoke with that bone-chilling voice of the King.

This kind of voice reminded me of his father. The way he'd looked at his son as he'd demanded that he kill an innocent human—

I shrugged off the memory.

"And we remain to be beasts." Nathair sighed disappointedly.

Kyrel wasn't looking at either of them when he muttered, "I miss my love's true beauty."

"And I miss *my* true beauty," Nathair said.

Kyrel snorted, while not even a muscle twitched on Drayard's face. He stayed silent, listening to his advisors complaining about their lives as beasts.

After a few exchanged laughs between two men, Kyrel turned to his King. "Why are we here, again, Your Highness?"

Drayard, with his hands clasped behind his back, went and stood before the window overlooking the entire City of Fire and the volcano standing behind it like an ominous haze. "I need you two to bring me a few sorceresses."

I realised his mind was somewhere else rather than at the meeting. He was contemplating the Winter Solstice and some sacrifice. But his thoughts abruptly went blank to me, and I couldn't tell what was he thinking anymore.

Did he know I was here?

"But all the sorceresses are in Casidiarn, Your Highness," Kyrel noted cautiously.

"I know. That is why you will have to bring them to me."

"With all due respect, Your Highness, but how are we supposed to do that?" Nathair inquired, bewildered. "Steal them from right under the emperor's nose?"

"No, make a bargain." Drayard glanced over his shoulder at the men. Nathair raised his eyebrows questioningly. "A romantic affair between two royal siblings is illicit. If Nayden doesn't cede you the sorceresses, threaten him you will disclose his incest relationship with the empress to the empire."

"Hold on a minute," Nathair said. "Nadira and Nayden are... banging?"

Drayard's silence spoke volumes. Kyrel cringed from repulsion whilst Nathair seemed as if he couldn't believe his ears.

"And I thought they were two boring, pompous siblings..." Nathair mused, leaning back in his seat. Then he straightened, looking at Drayard. "But why can't you go there and threaten them yourself? Your art of blackmailing is more mastered than ours."

"I have other things to do," Drayard replied.

I expected the men to question him about what he was up to, but they didn't, to my immense disappointment.

"For what reason do you need sorceresses, Your Highness?" Kyrel asked.

Drayard sat in the armchair in the corner and pressed his forefinger against his mouth. "I cracked the curse."

Deathlike silence sank upon the room.

Kyrel and Nathair stared at him agape while Drayard didn't show any reaction. I was as astonished as his advisors were but also not quite.

Drayard was the wisest person I'd ever met. He could make pawns shift in his favour and spot important details where nobody else could.

He had discovered Nadira and Nayden together a few months back, and now he was going to use their relationship to get sorceresses for some unexplained reason. And I was sure he was going to get all the sorceresses he needed.

I would have clapped, but then again, if he hadn't figured it out already, he didn't have to know I had revisited his head.

"H-how?" both men asked in unison.

Drayard didn't bother answering.

"But who's lost and found?" Kyrel recalled the words of the curse.

And only one word, one name, echoed in Drayard's head.

Elynn.

The meant to be, yet doomed to fall, shall bear them lost and found whose blood shall be spilled once the longest night falls.

Only then, humanity may take over their shapes for life.

Once I'd asked Drayard what sick game he was playing. He'd answered that many. I hadn't known I was quite a big deal in one of his major games.

Tatyana and Aytigin were soulmates, but when their relationship was close to ending, to prevent it, they ran away. They couldn't be together; they were condemned to separate eventually, and that made them meant to be, yet doomed to fall. And as I was born, I was their lost and found—the answer to the curse.

I had to be sacrificed at the Winter Solstice as soon as night fell. In one month precisely. And the curse would be lifted.

That was why Drayard had welcomed me under his wing, and it wasn't because of the magical oath. It had no purpose when his kind was already dead. He'd lied about the part that he would perish if he broke it.

He'd saved me from dying of the effects of the Spell enveloping my home twice, not because of the oath, but because I needed to die for a

reason on a particular day, at a specific hour.

That was why he was keeping his distance after that night. He didn't want to get attached to me when I'd be sacrificed in a month. If, of course, he was capable of getting close to somebody else apart from himself anyway.

I glanced at my bracelet. If I removed it, my powers would come cascading to me. But that also meant I might catch the curse and become the beast. If I happened to have enchantress' abilities, I doubted they would impede Drayard for enough time to—

The book! I had that book with a monstrosity in it!

As I was playing other melodies on the piano, I sorted out a plan in my head. I had a well-thought plan by the time I finished a third tune. Then I went to implement it before Drayard was back and ready to face me.

First, I needed to ask Baby with Blossom when he was supposed to be back, so I would have time to prepare myself for a mission to kill the most terrifying morph in the world.

The condolences I'd felt after learning that his father had played a significant role in his questionable personality vanished into thin air as if there had never been any compassion for him to begin with.

He'd been playing with me all along, but he would not sacrifice me at the Winter Solstice. I'd ensure he wouldn't.

Drayard might have started the game of chess, and the rules were his, I could outsmart them. I might be just a pawn, but I hadn't been aware of it before, making me clueless and weak.

But not anymore.

If he hadn't sensed me in his head, he didn't know I knew everything, and such knowledge gave me an advantage.

And even if he had felt me, I'd not bail when my life was at stake.

XLIV

I LEARNT FROM MY PERSONAL MESSENGERS that he was likely to return from his “business trip” tomorrow. In the meantime, I slept, waited, schemed, waited again, and debated.

I couldn’t deny how disappointed and upset I was. I had sincerely thought we had something. Something inexplicable but worth treasuring between us. I’d reckoned our relationship was leading somewhere, and perhaps he would have had a single friend, but he ruined this for himself by turning me into his pawn.

I revised the plan I’d made yesterday. I knew my strengths, and it was always my beauty. I needed to dazzle him with my feminine glamour to strike the dagger into his heart when he least expected that. I knew how risky it was since Drayard was no other ordinary man. It would be a challenge to seduce him. But it was a challenge I was willing to take. I had nothing to lose anyway.

When the night arrived, I chose to wear the most scandalous dress I’d sewed—a scarlet one with two slits, prettified with a loose golden star belt. My breasts were at their proudest display. I loathed using my body like this, but if it meant the spare of my life, I would sacrifice my dignity for it. It wasn’t like I hadn’t done something similar before.

Before I went to the dining room, I rechecked if the dagger was strapped to my right thigh. Indeed it was. With my head held high, shoulders locked, I walked graciously towards the room, nervousness tingling my bones. I didn’t think about my plan anymore, in case Drayard heard it.

When I opened the doors of the dining room, Drayard wasn’t there. I let my shoulders relax as I surveyed the food choice on the table. Food I’d asked the bat girls to bring from the city yesterday. The most exquisite they could find.

But where was that bastard?

“I’m here, Honeylove.”

My heart leapt, and I grasped at my chest as I whipped my head at the man behind me. “Heavens...”

He smiled with his distinct charm and walked around me, eyeing me from head to toe. Once his eyes reached my chest, I felt the urge to cover it, but I didn't. It was a part of the plan.

"Enchanting." His gaze returned to me. "Did you dress up this shamelessly pretty for me?"

I opened my mouth to make some sarcastic retort, but I stopped myself. Instead, I drawled sensuously, "To whom else would I expose this much skin if not for you, Dray?"

The look in his eyes altered. He'd noticed it wasn't what I would typically say. But I continued gazing at him and bit my bottom lip, favouring him with a smile which, when I'd been eighteen, made all human men go wild. It always worked miracles, but Drayard hardly paid any attention to it. It either didn't affect him, or he didn't show it, as he was quick to focus on the table and its assortment. I released my lip.

"For what special occasion is all this?" he asked.

"I've never expressed my gratitude for saving my life twice. I thought it was about time to do so."

Well, it wasn't an absolute lie, at least.

He stared at me for a while, but he didn't seem to smell a ruse. At last, he sauntered over to the table, took a plate and began picking his food, not giving a single glance to my side.

I followed his movements and examined the food I should eat that wouldn't make me look like a wild animal. I needed something that would paint me attractive and desirable. Strawberries with whipped cream seemed the easiest food to play with. I picked that. Of course, I didn't forget the roast chicken. I knew how much he adored it. That was why I'd insisted on the bat girls bringing it at all costs. Perhaps seeing me eating one would make him go nuts for me.

If not, I had other advantages. Even if Drayard was older, had way more experience in almost everything than me, he was a man. He needed something that only women had at least once in a while. My plan had to work.

As foreseen, Drayard took a seat at the head of the table. I sat next to him, receiving an odd look from him. I expected him to inquire about my uncharacteristic behaviour, but instead he took off his gloves, placed them neatly on the left side of his plate and concentrated on the meal, uttering no word.

“So...” I spoke after a moment of silence. “Where were you this whole week? I kind of...” I looked down at the plate like a coy girl. “...missed you.”

I sensed his inquisitive stare at me. “I was on a business trip. Didn’t Baby with Blossom inform you?”

I lifted my gaze at him. “I must have forgotten.” I flashed him an innocent smile.

Drayard observed me, sceptical. He bit into a chicken leg, eyes never leaving mine as he was chewing it.

I raised a strawberry, dipped it into whipped cream and tasted it with the tip of my tongue. He kept chewing the bite while watching how slowly I was savouring a strawberry. As we swallowed our bites at the same time, he looked away.

He then cleared his throat. “How was your day?”

I stifled a smirk.

There was undoubtedly a new sensual aura hanging in the air because if there wasn’t, he wouldn’t have asked such a mundane question.

Hesitating to answer, I slid my leg off its heel. I leaned over the table, closer to him, and propped my chin on my palm, but he refused to look at me, acting as if the food had his full interest. I raised my leg and touched Drayard’s shin with it.

As his questioning eyes flew to mine, I drawled, “Awfully, awfully boring without you, Dray.”

The tips of my toes went up to his leg while I held his stare. My smile was growing bigger, but he looked away and continued eating, unmoved by my flirt.

“You must have done something,” he said after swallowing another bite.

I didn’t stop caressing his leg lazily. “I did.”

“And what did you do?”

“Not much.” I dampened my lips while he lifted a glass of wine to his mouth. “I played the piano, tried on some black undergarments before the mirror and... played with myself.”

He choked on the gulp, and I covered my mouth to control a laugh craving to escape. He hammered his chest, drew a handkerchief out of the inner pocket of his black suit and dabbed it against his mouth. As my toes resumed drawing teasing circles against his calf, he captured my ankle, and

his intense eyes took hold of mine. The touch of his bare skin on mine sent improper feelings to me.

“I don’t think you are here to dine with me.” His voice turned husky, and a trail of shivers rushed through my back.

His coarse thumb stroked my once injured ankle, letting almost therapeutic warmth spread over my skin. My heart started to race, and butterflies fluttered in my stomach.

Focus, focus, focus, Elynn!

I mustered a half-smile. “And you would be right.”

The heat on my skin disappeared, and he leaned back in his chair, which he pushed back, his gaze gliding down my neck, down my deep cleavage. I wasn’t uncomfortable or feeling a need to cover myself as I had before, but the opposite. There was something about his stare, likely the sparks of fire in it that heated not only the environment but sparked a flame in me.

“Elynn.” My name slid off his tongue like a far-off, forbidden siren melody. “Demonstrate to me how you played with yourself while I was away.”

I snapped back to my senses and blinked, puzzled by his sudden desire. “Now?”

“Now.”

Oh, heavens...

I racked my brain, searching for ideas to get myself out of this situation, but it was utterly blank. But I had to say something. Anything.

“It’s hard to reach it while wearing a dress.” I smiled slightly. “Why don’t *you* play with me instead?”

He wouldn’t agree to it.

There was no doubt.

But a disarming smile made its appearance, and he patted his thigh. “Come here, Honeylove.”

Crap.

I’d underestimated him.

Of course, he would want that. He was a *man*, and *I* was seducing him. How else had I assumed it would go? He would lean for a kiss while I’d be drawing a dagger and then slash his neck?

Without lingering any longer to grant him with unnecessary suspicion, I arose with elegance, but before I could straddle him, he stood up. His height dominating mine made me to raise my head, and once I did, his eyes

ensnared me. Before I knew it, I was trapped not only by his aglow gaze, but his body. The back of my thighs grazed the edge of the table, and the only way to escape him was crawling over it.

That was *if* I wanted to escape.

I clung to the table, digging my nails into the wood to pull myself out of this absurdity and his charms, to concentrate on the role I had to play here, but I couldn't.

He took my hand and pressed his mouth against my palm; his kiss was so tender and so warm. That was all it took for the plans of what I was supposed to do, dissolve into a forgotten nook of my mind.

"You are displaying wonders of your beauty to the wrong eye, Elynn." He gazed at me with such fiery passion, I was surprised I remained intact. "Showing parts of your skin to someone you should be exposed to the least. But no matter how hard I try to resist, I can't tear my eyes off you. You enchant me."

My breathing hitched. "I... enchant you?"

He moved closer, and I shifted further back on the table, pushing the dishes aside. I settled upon it, his breath tickling my face and eyes drowning in mine.

"Yes," he breathed.

He was lost as much as I was, if not more. I could do it now—pull out the dagger and plunge it into his monstrous heart if I wasn't interested in learning where our coquetry was going to lead us.

I hooked my unarmed leg over his hip and pulled him even nearer, closing as much distance between us as it was possible. His mouth slightly quirked up while I rested my one palm on his firm but slightly heaving chest. His delightful, with a promise of sin scent, was corrupting my senses—I wanted to drench myself in it.

"Elynn..."

I looked at him from under my lashes. "Yes, Dray?"

"What game are you playing with me?"

My heartbeat quickened.

But before I could collect a wise reply, his scaled hand skidded under my thigh, igniting me but not even nearly enough. "When was the day when you started looking at me differently? What did I do to deserve the kindness you've given me in these past months? Please, tell me why."

Our latest memories rushed my mind, but I tried to fend them off. I tried to ignore the sting in my eyes or anything else that should be ignored until it was forgotten forever.

This man wanted to *kill* me. He wasn't my friend. He was *a monster*.

He was the one who'd been playing with my feelings ever since we'd met. Now, he was doing the same. I couldn't take any of this to heart. All I had to do was to resume my game and ensure I was the one who was going to win it.

"Because I'm attracted to you," I said, ensuring myself this was yet another lie out of thousands that left my mouth. "You tell me how much I must be wicked if I'm attracted to such a scheming devil like you?"

He smiled. "On what scale?"

"One to ten."

"It would be a thousand, then."

An honest chuckle broke through, betraying me, and I dropped my gaze, cheeks burning. Hastily, I composed myself and looked back at his golden glittering with red dust eyes. I had to remind myself I was acting. Merely acting...

He caressed my cheek, sweeping the golden waves away from my face. He moved closer, his face a hair's breadth away from mine. I clenched the edge of the table harder, surprised it didn't break.

"But you're not a fracture as wicked as I am, Elynn." He lifted my leg above his hip, a rough pad of his thumb drawing circles over my sensitive skin, dispatching itches to a forbidden zone. "I'm afraid if you stay, I'll break you."

I grasped his shirt as I had no plans to swoon and drew him closer, holding onto him as if he was my willpower or perhaps my most dangerous weakness. Our lips were an inch away from connecting, if not less, as I demanded against his mouth, "Then break me."

An unadulterated confusion crossed his face. He hadn't expected that. Neither had I, but I had him wrapped around my finger. I had to proceed to the next level before I went for the final blow.

I landed my fingers on his nape and brought myself closer to him, my lips almost brushing his ear. "Break me into a thousand shards, if you must," I whispered. "Break me however you like. But before you do that, set me aflame." I looked in the eyes of the man who believed every word

leaving my lips that I began doubting if there wasn't some truth in them, after all. "Let me burn, Dray. Let me burn with you."

He didn't tear off his gaze. Neither did I.

I wondered what was going through his mind. I wondered if my words sounded believable. They must have or else he wouldn't be staring at me as if I was a ruby in the rough.

Then he leaned in.

My heart turned into a wild tempest.

Our mouths were close to joining for the final when I reached for the dagger. I ignored my quivering fingers while searching for the sole weapon that could close the Bloodsucker's eyes for eternity.

But my heart stilled along with my hand on the strap.

The dagger wasn't there.

It wasn't there.

The dagger wasn't there!

I whacked a glass of wine off the table. Drayard drew back, his black trousers moistened with wine.

"Oh, clumsy me!" I exclaimed. He looked at me from his shirt mutely.

As I was about to grasp the handkerchief off the table, with another "accident", the fork clattered to the floor.

"Oh, dear!"

Once I'd got the reason to jump off the table, I promptly kicked the fallen fork under it. As I ducked behind the table, I checked under the dress first. The leg strap was empty indeed. I must have lost the dagger. But how? It wasn't anywhere on the floor, either! And I could sense the dagger's suffocating energy. It was close. But where?

However, I'd already lost. I'd had Drayard under my spell, and now it was all gone.

Swallowing the defeat, I grasped the fork. I concealed my disappointed face as I emerged from under the table. I brushed my hair away once I stood up. "I think I'm not feeling—"

When I looked at him... Oh, when I looked at him! He stood with one hand propped on the table while he stared at the dagger in his right one.

My dagger.

His eyes flashed at me.

Clouded with the endless void.

Shivers erupted all over my body whilst he never stopped staring at me.
He didn't have to speak, as no words needed to be said for me to realise.

I had never played Drayard.

Drayard had played *me*.

OceanofPDF.com

XLV

MY VOICE WAS LOST SOMEWHERE because it surely wasn't with me.

I couldn't speak other than stare at Drayard in total disbelief. At the dagger he was holding. *My* dagger he had somehow stolen from right under my nose.

He tilted his head, dragging his finger against the blade like a villain.

But he was. A villain.

"Pray, do tell me, Elynn. What was a princess planning to do with such a dangerous dagger strapped to her thigh?"

Anger filtered through me, and with it, my ability to speak flooded back as I gritted out, "I'm not a princess."

"You are right. Princesses don't carry weapons with themselves. That is why I'm asking what you were planning to do with it. You might have hurt yourself. And my heart would have shattered if something bad had happened to you."

What a dramatic bastard.

"Liar," I muttered, clutching the fork tighter.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Liar!" I was burning. Without being able to control fire, I was still burning. "You played me! Is that what it'd been all along? A game for you?"

He didn't answer.

He had played me while I, like an utter fool, had believed I was the one holding the reins when in reality, it'd been him all along. It was always him, and it would always be him. Who was I compared to the Bloodsucker? Nothing. Inferior. *Female*.

But a female with nails.

"You like to play, don't you, Bloodsucker?" I slid a dangerous step towards him. He remained silent. "Answer me, you bloody bastard!"

He didn't even flinch from my ear-splitting tone. "I think we both like to play, Elynn."

I scoffed, stroking my thumb against the fork's handle. I wouldn't wound him with it, let alone kill him, but I could try to pluck his eyeball out.

"You knew I was planning this."

"Indeed."

"How?"

"You are fond of my tale. Your admiration for it helped me to understand what books you like. You stumbled across the only book of tales about dragons in the library. You were intrigued by it. You saw what was inside and you took it. And with that move of yours, you failed."

"You set it all up," I said, both disgusted and amazed. "But why did you do it? For fun?"

"No. I did it to see if you had a weapon, would you use it against me."

"So, it was a test?"

"Yes."

"What type of test?"

His shoulders slumped, and suddenly all the pretense vanished, taken over by a broken man. He let go of the dagger, which clattered to the floor. I hardly glimpsed at it, gauging the chances I had to reach it and stick it into where it was supposed to be now—In Drayard's rotten heart.

"I wanted to trust you, Elynn," he said, snagging my absolute focus. His eyes were... shattered. "I wanted to trust someone because you know I don't trust anyone. I don't trust anyone other than myself. And I thought perhaps you would be someone I could put my trust in, but that would never be the case, would it?"

He was lying shamelessly to me. Boiling my blood. Breaking my heart. Summoning up tears.

Although sorrow alternated between anger, the rage overpowered them both. I lunged towards him, ready to plunge a fork into his eye, but he captured my wrist, the fork stilling an inch away from my aimpoint. Unfazed by a close call, he cocked his head to the side, one eyebrow arched as if to inquire what silly children's game I was trying to pull off here.

Clenching my teeth, I lifted my fist, but he caught it mid-air before it could meet his face. He raised both of my hands above me, spun me around effortlessly and pinned me against him, pressing my hands to my front. I wriggled in his hold, trying to escape. As I understood that wouldn't work, I whipped my head at him and spat at his eye without aiming first. But I hit his mouth instead.

Instead of whipping it off like a normal person, he licked it off.

The bastard licked it off.

At this point, I was too livid to be surprised.

“That wasn’t very dignified of you, Honeylove.”

“Dignified?” I spat with undisguised animosity. “Let me go, and I will demonstrate to you exactly how my father taught me to deal with sick bastards like you with the dignity you deserve.”

He dared to smirk. “As much as I would like to see that, it is not a time or place for it.” He began prying the fork from my tight grasp. “Now, what was it you lost in my head this morning, huh?”

“You are going to kill me.”

His movements went still. He lifted his eyes to me, a new emotion sparkling in them. “Kill you?”

“You’re planning to sacrifice me at the Winter Solstice.”

He stared at me for a while, as if stricken by the truth.

Liar. Liar. Lying bastard.

“Elynn...” He sighed. “I don’t think you understood the curse right.”

“Oh, I understood it well!” I thrust myself forward, and he let go of me, but the fork was in his hand. I swivelled to him like a whirlwind of emotions I couldn’t keep imprisoned anymore. “*The meant to be, yet doomed to fall, shall bear them lost and found whose blood shall be spilled once the longest night falls.* You told yourself it was me. You *thought* of me. I am the one who must have been sacrificed all along. You are not keeping me safe and sound because of that oath, which, by the way, you made up. It’s because you’re planning to slaughter me like a bloody lamb in a month!”

His look was blank. I couldn’t read him. “Yes, you *are* lost and found. But you forgot one of the most important parts of the curse. *The meant to be, yet doomed to fall, shall bear them lost and found whose creation’s blood shall be spilled once the longest night falls.*” He took a step towards me. “*Whose creation’s blood, Elynn.*”

I had forgotten that part of the curse, which changed things drastically.

He was lying. He had to be lying.

If I was lost and found, and it was my creation’s blood that should be sacrificed...

“But how can I be lost and found?” I asked, though I already knew the answer. Felt it with every bit of my heart. Soul, even. “I’ve never been lost.

And what isn't lost, it can't be found. So, how can I be lost and found, Drayard?"

"Well..." He glanced at the platinum dagger lying on the floor behind me before his eyes returned to me. "It doesn't matter now, does it?"

"Yes, indeed it doesn't matter, it would never matter because if I am lost and found, then you are keeping me trapped in here to bear a child you'd sacrifice later on, aren't you?"

He stared at me as if unable to believe it, then his expression faded, and he propped his chin on his fist, taking a deep, theatrical sigh.

"How are you even planning to do that?" I continued as he didn't reply, casting thunders at him. "Send strangers to rape me over and over again until one of them gets lucky?!"

And another sigh.

"Or you would assault me yourself until I get pregnant with your child and sacrifice your own baby?! But no..." I shook my head, looking down. "You won't sacrifice a part of the dragon. They are too precious," I mused to myself before I looked back at him. "Then what? Those sorceresses you want to get from the emperor are magically going to insert a child in my womb and force me to give birth before this Winter Solstice?"

It was actually impossible. Even if it took a week or so to get pregnant, nobody could speed the process to grow a baby faster than in a fortnight. Even in a magical world like this, it was beyond reality.

He sighed again. "Are you finished now?"

I didn't respond.

I hate him. I hate him. I hate him!

"Good." A faint but fiendish smile. "Yes, you understood the curse right. Your child could break it. And indeed, at first, I thought once you had that hunter's child, I'd find a way to take it away and well... sacrifice it, but then you offered yourself to the Empire of Beasts, and those two lunatics abused you. I assumed then, well, maybe you'd happen to carry one of their offspring, but you didn't. So, I dug into the terms of the curse deeper, rethought what I knew about your story to see if there was something I'd missed, and indeed there was. But you won't like the price of lifting the curse either."

"If it isn't my unborn child, what should I worry about?"

"Your mother, before she died, had given you the answer."

I frowned. "What are you talking about?"

“You can’t have children, Elynn.”

My lips parted from the unexpected, utterly impossible, absurd declaration. “Excuse me?”

The look in his eyes was drenched in condolence, but I didn’t believe it. He was a one broken male, and even if for a moment I’d thought about helping him to carry the pain his past had inflicted, I was disgusted with myself. Why would I care about him if he showed no interest in caring about me? At least not the way I had when I’d held him and whispered that I was there for him.

And yet...

“Your human mother couldn’t have children, but you, after whispering a magical sentence in the language of dryads, passed on your gift to her. She got pregnant with your brother two weeks later. It was not a coincidence. And unfortunately, your given power perished along with your mother.”

I shook my head, refusing to take it as given. Mum had mentioned before she died that she’d had a dream where I carried a babe.

Or it was her hallucination caused by the illness, I reminded myself.

“How... How do you know any of this?”

“Does it matter?”

And no, it didn’t. Not now.

I wrapped my arms around myself, tears pricking my eyes, but I held them back. Drayard stepped closer, as if to embrace me, but I stepped back.

“What’s the answer to the curse?” I tried to sound as strong as I could, which, as I heard, I’d achieved.

He stared at me with the same apologetic look as he said, “Either one of your siblings.”

Time passed. Long, slow and ticking.

What the...

I couldn’t believe what he’d said until the realisation sank in. Then a new wildfire of rage consumed me. I lunged for the fallen dagger, but he was faster. Drayard kicked it, sending it skimming over the floor into the corner of the room. He also blocked my passage, standing tall and superior. “Seriously, Elynn? I—”

“Don’t you even!” I fumed. “You are not sacrificing either of them! What are you even thinking?”

"I don't have another choice," he said flatly.

"Yes, you do! To. Not. Sacrifice. Them. Find the other way."

"There is no other way, Elynn. I wish there was, but a sacrifice must be made. Someone must be killed to save morphs from the curse."

"Save morphs?" I scoffed. "They shall all go to hell, you including."

He released a sigh of exasperation. "Morphs are a part of your kind, Elynn."

"No, they are not!" I drew a step closer to him, unafraid to close the distance between us. "Humans are *my* kind. Genette and Kristian are *my* family. And morphs are *my* enemies. The curse shall remain. And that's the end of it."

"You're playing with dangerous fire," he warned me, advancing towards me as well, our chests almost touching. I had to raise my eyes to hold his flaming ones. "Besides, I never asked for your permission."

I gritted my teeth. "I. Am. Your. Princess."

"Oh, you are now?" He raised his eyebrows ironically. "What was that talk about when you said you weren't the princess now, and you would never be one, then?"

I gripped my burning bracelet in desperation, threatening to peel it off and show him whatever powers I had.

His look dropped to my wrist, then shifted back to mine. "If you remove it, you will turn into a lion forever."

"Perhaps not. I'm a half-enchantress. Have you forgotten about that?"

"You are, but are you sure you want to take that risk?"

He knew better that I wasn't going to. But I played with his nerves by holding his daring stare, my fingers remaining on my bracelet as a threat to take it off at any second. But after a moment of intense staring, I stepped back, letting go of the bracelet, sick of playing games with him anymore.

"Burn in hell, Drayard." I pivoted on my heel and stomped toward the exit.

"I am already burning. According to you, I'm the devil here."

I halted and glanced at him over my shoulder. "Barely. You're way worse than them. They were, after all, exiled from heavens while you were a mistake of your father's seed."

And just like that, I stormed out of the dining room, conscious of my words smiting his corrupted heart.

Once I entered my bedroom, I slammed the door behind me. I didn't know where I'd gained the strength from, but it shook the whole place. I wasn't able to restrain the tears anymore. They were already gushing like a waterfall as I moved over to the vanity and swept everything off it.

The bottles of perfume and all cosmetics smashed on the ground. The scented liquid spread over the floor, whereas most cosmetics remained unharmed except for eyeshadows and rouge.

I sank to my knees and dropped my face into my palms.

No children. I would never be the mother of any children.

If what Drayard had said was true... If I'd given that power to my mother... But such a decision when I'd been just an infant shouldn't have been even allowed to be made! Besides, if the Mortal Region was secured from magic, why could such a thing have even worked? Didn't it involve magic to give the ability to have children to another human being?

I shuddered as I drew in a deep breath.

A hand landed on my quivering shoulder, but I shoved it away.

"Go away!"

Go away. Go away. Go away! I yelled at him.

"It's us," Baby said, and I uncovered my face, meeting Blossom's face before me.

No doubt, *he* had sent them here so I wouldn't feel like I was alone. As some debt, he felt obliged to pay for being with him on his worst night.

I hate you. I sent him my curse, but no answer came.

Of course, it didn't.

"Do you want a cup of tea?" Blossom extended a cup to me, smiling kindly. Frowning down at it, I smacked it off her hands. The cup fell on her lap and hot liquid spilled on her skirt. With a light yelp, she sprang to her feet.

Morphs could get hurt by hot water... Noted.

I felt Baby's deathly stare cutting into my back.

"Leave. Me. Alone," I said, since it hadn't been apparent to them before.

Baby and Blossom had done nothing wrong to be treated this savagely. But they were working for Drayard, and he was resolved to sacrifice one of my siblings. For his kind and himself. If Baby and Blossom were on his side—they were my enemies as much as Drayard was.

"With pleasure." Baby clutched Blossom's hand and dragged her out of the room. Blossom glanced at me with deep concern instead of anger or

fear, but then she disappeared from my sight. They both did.

I turned my head to the mirror and stared at the reflection of the weeping, defeated girl. I pursed my lips tight to repress my upcoming sobs.

I wanted to trust you, Elynn.

I inhaled shakily, blinking away the welling up tears.

“And I already trusted you.”

OceanofPDF.com

XLVI

I SPENT THE REMAINDER of the week in bed. I didn't want to see any of the deceiving faces. I couldn't even make myself go downstairs and play the piano.

Baby was the one who brought me food, but I hardly ate anything. I couldn't stomach it. Just a single glance at it made me sick. But I had to force it through my mouth, for I had no wish to starve to death yet.

Nightmares didn't help to feel any better, either. As claws, they reopened my wounds, prohibiting them from sealing once and for all. I doubted the day would come when nightmares would say their last farewell to me.

Although the Winter Solstice was approaching, I had no idea how to elude the sacrifice. I didn't even have any clue who Drayard was going to pick for it. I'd saved Gen once from being offered to the empire, but I couldn't protect either her or Kris from Drayard's stubbornness. I was powerless when it came to him.

And I hated it.

Ever since that dinner, I hadn't spoken to him. He hadn't tried to talk with me, either. And days had already passed. The regret of calling him a mistake of his father's seed was gnawing at me, even though it shouldn't be when he was eager to slaughter one of my siblings in three weeks.

But one time, I thought I'd heard his voice at night, like a far whisper in my ear.

I wish we had met before I became the King. Everything would have been different then, he said.

But when I parted my eyes, there was nobody there. Only the aching finger, which when I touched with my tongue, had a metallic, bloody taste.

Since the whole night was a haze, I doubted if any of it was real. I might have pricked my finger with a splinter of wood jutting out of the bed frame.

I was hugging the pillow to my chest and staring at one dot in the ochre wall when Drayard contacted me for the first time after that dinner. The smell of my sweat bit my nose, but I didn't feel like standing up and taking

a bath. The bed had me locked with its welcoming, comfortable and soothing arms.

Can I come in? he asked.

No.

You're hurting, Elynn, he noted. You can't dig a deeper hole for yourself, which you won't be able to get out of later. Let me help you.

Don't sacrifice my siblings, and I'll consider your offer to help.

You know I can't. It's for the entire empire's benefit. Just one life in exchange for the lift of the decades-old curse. I'm sorry it had to be one of your siblings' lives.

As much as he sounded consoling and genuine, I didn't care.

Who is going to be the victim? Have you already picked? Did the counting-out rhyme?

Yes.

And who is it?

He spoke after a moment of silence. *Your sister.*

I gnashed my teeth, gradually squeezing the pillow, sinking my uncut nails into it. Deeper, deeper and deeper.

Can I come in? he tried again.

Go to hell.

Drayard attempted to reach out to me with telepathy a few other times, but I shoved him out every time. I'd learnt how to do that. Everything was possible when you were brimming with hatred and drowning in heartache. Even forcing a demon out of my head before he could utter half a word.

I left my comfort pit the next week. I asked Baby for a bath where I not only scrubbed off the week-old sweat, but relaxed and gathered my thoughts. Less than three weeks were left until the Winter Solstice, but no plan on how to spare my sister's life once again.

The only plan I could think of entailed taking off the bracelet. But if I turned into the beast form, I wouldn't be able to save her. I couldn't risk it without being guaranteed it would ensure Gen's rescue, but not taking that chance wasn't saving her either.

I was lost in a dark maze with this.

But I was the one who never gave up and always looked for solutions, despite how dark and impossible everything seemed to be. There was always the way. If there had been a boy's spirit to guide me to the right book, something had to be now, too.

As I stepped off the bathtub, dried myself and put on a robe, I walked into the bedroom where I found Baby with a tray of food. She set it on the bedside table and cast me a deathlike glance before leaving.

“Baby, wait.”

She halted, but hesitated before turning to me. Arms crossed across her chest. She was still mad at me for behaving like a brute the day when I’d found out I was infertile and one of my siblings would be sacrificed at the Winter Solstice. I’d spilled hot tea on Blossom that same day.

I felt no contrition for it. I hated them almost as much as I hated Drayard. But in the past week of doing nothing, being left with my own poisonous mind filled me with enough guilt to realise the least I could do was apologise.

“Well?” She began tapping her foot. “What do you want?”

“Can you tell Blossom to come here?”

“So that you could smash a plate into her face?”

“No,” I said, keeping the cadence in my voice balanced. “I want to apologise to you and her.”

She searched my face for trickery.

“I swear,” I added.

Baby stared at me for a while until, without another word, she spun on her heel and left.

I sighed and headed over to the armoire. I squatted down, opened the first drawer and searched for something to wear. I picked a white shirt and floor-length skirt since there was nothing else better here.

As I was brushing my damp hair, two girls stepped into my bedroom. I looked at them. Baby had a vigilant look fixed on me while Blossom stared at me with wariness.

I attempted to smile at them both, to show there was nothing to be alarmed at, but their countenances didn’t alter.

I arose from the chair. “Is it too late for me to say sorry?”

Baby narrowed her eyes while Blossom’s look softened in no time, and she smiled amicably. “No, not at all.”

“I’m sorry then for mistreating you when all you wanted to do was to help me. I’m sorry for spilling hot tea on you, Blossom.”

The alert look in Baby’s eyes dampened. I took a wide step towards them and embraced them carefully, not to graze their wings. Blossom didn’t hesitate to hug me back while Baby did, but she succumbed to it eventually.

The following days I spent plotting, but I always hit the wall. Two weeks. I had *two weeks* to come up with a plan. The last time I'd come up with it two days prior to the Summer Solstice. I was close to selling my soul when the miracle fell out of the blue. Perhaps this time, it'd emerge out of nowhere, too. But it was one thing to overcome the Summer Solstice offering, and it was another thing to trick Drayard. My last tries told me crystal clear—fooling him was as much as impossible as trying to outrun death.

I prayed in vain. The time only passed, and there was no solution. I couldn't wait for the miracle. I had to do something before it was too late. However, I had already faced a dead end.

But my parents hadn't raised a quitter.

Gen must be in the empire by now, brought by sorceresses Drayard had surely received from the emperor. I wondered how she was treated.

I didn't want to know, however.

I could, after all, remove my bracelet and see where my caged powers would lead me. But before I grasped at straws, I ought to attempt something else first. I doubted it would work, but it was worth a try.

I stepped into the forbidden corridor and strode towards the painting room. I didn't have to look for him. I knew I was going to find him there. How, I wasn't entirely sure, chalking it up to a hunch.

The room was in a much better state than the last time I'd seen it. The canvases weren't littering the floor, and the paint was washed off it but remained on the walls, giving the room a messy artistic touch. The easel was new. And right before it was sitting no other than the devil himself.

I stood before him.

His hand with a paintbrush stilled once he noticed me.

"Elynn," he said, astounded by seeing me here. He must not have heard me coming since he was so immersed in his art. "What are you doing here?"

I tried to keep my focus on his face instead of anything else. Behave as if I wasn't affected by his black shirt, which first three buttons were unbuttoned, opening a glimpse of his red-scaled chest, and the crimson brocade waistcoat emphasising his fine chest. Behave as if his legs propped on the stool, the cuffs of his trousers unrolled, showing his powerful calves had no influence on me. Or act as if I wasn't conscious of the yellow paint

dash on the tip of his nose, painting him not only as a handsome beast but as an adorable, taken by surprise, half-dragon.

I ignored all those aspects and raised my chin to display confidence and strength. "I came to make a bargain with you."

His eyebrows knitted. "A bargain?"

"Yes."

He placed his pallet with a paintbrush on the table next to him. "What bargain?"

I revised it to make sure if that's what I wanted, but when my sister's life was at stake, there had to be no doubts about the opportunities to save her. So, I quashed them. "If you don't sacrifice my sister, I will sell my soul to you."

I was well aware that selling a soul meant the same thing to morphs as to humans. Selling my soul to him meant I would be his in every way. I would never deny him, and he would do anything he pleased with me. I figured he might use me for my title to get whatever he needed. Drayard wasn't interested in my body or having a shoulder to cry on anyway. He was far more interested in saving his kind and changing the emperor. Perhaps my title would give him easier access to the latter aim if he intended to achieve it someday.

Drayard stared at me with an unreadable look for a while, until he sighed. "Elynn... I don't need your soul. I don't want to have a pretty walking doll believing every word I say, obeying anything I tell, and doing everything I demand. I don't want that."

"Then what *do* you want?" I inquired impatiently. "What do you need from me that would make you reconsider the sacrifice of my sister, Drayard? Tell me. I beg you."

I would go down on my knees if that was what he wanted. If caressing his ego would spare Gen's life, so be it. But if he didn't need to have control over me, he wouldn't care about whether or not I grovel at his feet. It wouldn't change his stubborn mind.

"I don't want anything from you, Elynn. Forgive me, but your sister must be..." He inhaled deeply, "...killed tomorrow night," he said as if it too was hard for him.

What a false bastard.

"But there must be another way."

I was close to falling and begging on my knees, but Drayard must have seen my despair, for he left the chair. He placed his hands on my arms and held me from humiliating myself. I didn't shove his hands away. Not yet. "Elynn, I told you, I—"

"Please, Drayard, you can't take my sister away from me. My mother died from the plague inflicted by your kind and enchanter. Don't take my sister's life too." I tried to speak softly despite the awakening fire in my veins while gazing deeply into his eyes in a hopeless attempt to touch his unreachable heart. "Please, Dray. I'm begging you."

His mouth parted, but then closed. What he said next, however, I knew wasn't what he was planning to say initially. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do."

I winced and drew away from his arms. I clenched my teeth, and the simmering rage took over me. My palm connected with his cheek. Only when the sound of a slap echoed through the silent room, it hit me what I'd done.

His face veered left from the remarkably strong hit. I hadn't expected to smack him, but also, I didn't feel any regret after. He deserved it. He deserved way worse than a slap from a woman.

As Drayard looked at me, the look in his eyes utterly changed. Feigned warmth was gone like it had never been there, replaced with an abyss of the endless void. He locked his shoulders, and in a mere second, he dropped his mask, becoming the monster he was turned into by his own father.

"If I'm the devil, my home is hell. Then you must know you are testing wildfire," he said with extreme calmness, but a threatening undertone didn't elude my ears. "But are you sure you want to stoke that?"

"I'm not scared of you."

I knew with whom I was playing, and I should stop before flames caught me and consumed me, but I didn't care. I didn't care because I didn't want myself to stop.

He slid closer to me as if to prove me wrong, to intimidate me, but I stood erect, unbending. He seized both of my wrists in his sole grip, while with the other hand, he caressed my cheek with his exposed talons, but they didn't dig deep enough to draw blood. I held his stone-cold eyes. My skin broke out into gooseflesh, as if from his freezing stare the temperature dropped lower.

Or it was that he could indeed manipulate temperature.

His talons stayed on my bare skin, and my thumping heart betrayed my fear. I tried to convince myself that he couldn't hurt me. The magical oath forbade him. But the thought that he might risk it and make me regret slapping him didn't leave me for peace of mind.

"Oh, don't be scared, my sharp-tongued beauty," he drawled, tilting his head as his single talon brushed across my chin. "I've got no wish to see you bleed. Because when you bleed, I bleed with you. And I've already bled enough."

He dragged his single talon down my neck. I stretched it and captured my breath, holding it checked in place. I was afraid to let out a single puff in case his talons sank into my flesh, despite what he'd said. He was still a liar.

A talon reached my neckline and continued its path downwards. As it grazed over my shirt, my body strained like a string. I exhaled through my parted lips, unable to hold my breath any longer when his closeness affected my body. My intensified breathing gave me away. He looked down at my heaving chest, and a devilish smile caressed his mouth as his talon trailed down my shirt, cutting it open. It slid between my breasts and down and down and...

"What are you doing?" I breathed.

"What you crave me to do."

"I don't..."

His talon stopped before it reached my navel. He caught my stare. Shivers trailed down my spine, and I was already flushing. I couldn't disguise it, and I could only blame myself for it.

He cupped my chin, his bare talons on my skin, like a threat. "You're telling me how you despise me, but your body sings the opposite, Elynn," he breathed into my face with a luscious tone I'd never heard before in his voice, weakening my legs. "If I'm sacrificing your sister, you should feel contempt, not lust. Perhaps I'm not the only one who is broken in this room."

I gritted my teeth, getting a hold of myself. "You're the monster, not me."

"So let us hope it stays that way." His fingers left my chin, and he let go of my wrists. "Now, leave my painting room."

I pulled away immediately and as I glanced down, I discovered a part of my top exposed. He'd torn my shirt with his single talon. I tugged at the

remaining parts of the shirt to cover my bareness from his wicked eyes, even if he wasn't looking at it but at the wall behind me.

“You will regret not taking my offer,” I threatened before stalking off.

OceanofPDF.com

Part IV: Notes of Curse & Winter

OceanofPDF.com

XLVII

IT WAS THE Winter Solstice Day.

Eight hours were left until the night would rise, and my sister would be sacrificed only for the four-decade-old curse to be broken.

Drayard was gone. Most likely already at the unknown place where the sacrifice ritual was going to be held.

I took a cold bath to awaken myself from an hour of sleep and prayed to Gods to bless me for the venture ahead.

Once I was clean and feeling much lighter after prayers, I was back in the bedroom. I had clothes already picked out. I changed into them and sat before the vanity to work on my hair, which I braided so it wouldn't be a burden to me later. I had no clue what would happen to me tonight. But the high chance was... I might die.

My plan wasn't the neatest. It had loopholes, but I'd rethought it as many times as I could and didn't come up with a better one. But I was prepared for anything, even to die. If it meant saving my sister's life, I'd give up my own in a heartbeat.

After breakfasting downstairs, I assuaged the anxiety by playing the piano, perhaps for the last time.

It might be the last time my fingers would wander across the keys. The last time I would enjoy music. I felt sorrow starting to kick in my chest, but I made it go away. I didn't have time for that.

As I finished playing, there were a few hours left until nightfall. I headed back to the corridor leading to my chambers, but instead of going there, I passed my room and strode to the end, where I barely set my foot in. There was one room, a smaller one than mine, where the bat girls resided.

On some days when I'd been dying out of boredom, I was mingling with them in their room, chatting about inconsequential things, sharing laughs. My heart twinged. Nothing like it might repeat ever again.

There was very little I could do in the volcano's house. Like play, sketch, sew, eat, get under Drayard's skin, chatter with the bat girls, make some

modifications to the clothing and repeat it all over again because it was dangerous for me to step outside. But it was going to change today.

I opened the door without knocking, which I should have done beforehand, but now it was too late.

Baby and Blossom whipped their heads in unison from their bed, both startled. Both of them were in the full set underclothing I couldn't bear to put on my body. Their chests were pressing as they stared at me wide-eyed, caught right in the act.

Baby frowned. "Elynn, what the hells?"

All I wished to do was to pivot on my heel, rush out of here and forget I'd walked in on something... private, but I didn't let myself do that. I held Baby's glare, despite the immense awkwardness permeating the air.

"Are you going to join us, or are you going to just to stand there?" Baby cocked her brow.

Blossom looked down.

I swallowed the awkwardness. "Dress up, you two. I need your help."

With a huff, Baby stood off the bed and planted her hands on her curvy hips. "Drayard warned us not to help you with anything if you asked."

"Well, I don't see that bastard anywhere, do you?"

"He will kill us," Blossom murmured, smoothing the creases of the sheets, keeping her gaze low.

"Not if I do it first."

Blossom raised her unbelievable eyes at me. I ignored the pang in my chest. Baby scowled, glowering at me.

"It's either you choose to help me out of your own free will or not. If you choose to defy me, things will go nasty." I held up my wrist with a bracelet threateningly.

"You wouldn't," Baby said in a low voice.

"Try me."

Baby gave me a reproachful look. "You're going to regret this, Elynn."

I already did, but I had no choice.

Both of the girls got dressed in appropriate attire. Baby was glaring at me the whole time. Surely, I'd made myself an enemy for a lifetime. Perhaps more than one, since what Baby was against, Blossom followed. But that was the least of my worries. I wasn't planning to make it until the next day anyway.

“Where’s the sacrifice taking place?” I inquired coldly. I didn’t like behaving like a witch but being soft with them wouldn’t help me figure out essential matters. “In the capital?”

The bat girls were bringing up the rear once we left their room. They could have attacked me by now and certainly won against me, but for some reason, they hadn’t.

“No,” Blossom replied as Baby refused to speak with me anymore. “In the Realm of Bones.”

The horrid memories of that place struck me like lightning, but I didn’t let them frighten me enough to make me reconsider my mission. I breathed in more air and whisked the daunting thoughts attempting to slide into my head away. They could be my ruin tonight, and I couldn’t allow that.

Baby and Blossom must have noticed my tremor, but they didn’t note it aloud. I had some undealt business with those three wolves. Perhaps if they were there tonight—which I was confident they would—I’d find time to kill them not only for my own sake but Thea’s, Imogen’s, Jill’s and even Clare’s.

“You’re going to fly me there, then,” I said.

“Oh, hells, no!” Baby objected.

I halted at the foot of the stairs and turned to them standing above. “Don’t test me, Baby.”

The Realm of Embers was surrounded by the Indigo Ocean. Even if I removed my bracelet and transformed into a lion, I wouldn’t be able to cross the ocean while being a feline. I needed the bats as my transportation.

I thought Baby’s burning glare would scorch the hole in my forehead, but it never did.

“What Baby meant to—”

“Blossom, don’t,” Baby interrupted Blossom in a low voice.

Blossom cast her an apologetic glance before her focus returned to me. “We don’t need to fly you there when there are portals.”

My eyebrows rose, whereas Baby pinched her nose, letting out an exasperated sigh at being betrayed by her own girl.

“Portals?”

Blossom gave me a brief nod and even attempted to smile, but it faded once she saw Baby’s disapproving stare nailed at her.

“Where are those portals?”

“In the volcano. Hidden as well as this place,” Blossom replied as she went down the remaining stairs.

As she reached the plain wall, she took the vial of blood out of her pocket.

Leaving the volcano was less complicated than entering it, as it didn’t have any traps. But we wouldn’t leave this place without Drayard’s blood. It was the key in and out of here. Thankfully, the bat girls had saved some of his blood. He’d left some to them in case they wanted to go to the city, which turned out to be convenient for me.

Blossom uncorked the vial and poured it over the wall. It absorbed the blood, and soon the double doors materialised before us. As Blossom opened the doors into a dark tunnel, we all entered it. We reached the end. I couldn’t see, but I believed Blossom did the same with another vial of blood as the peculiar sound ensued, soon opening the doors.

Once the sound ceased, we mounted the stairs. I squinted at the light, shielding my eyes. It took me some time to adjust to it because it’d been a while since I’d been outside. I drew in a deep breath of fresh, mildly cool air. I anticipated snow as now it was wintertime, but the ground was as the last time I’d seen it—obsidian. Of course. It was the Realm of Embers. No snow was falling here.

Blossom was walking in front of me while Baby was behind me as a looming threat. I could feel the daggers she sent to my back with her stare alone. I was getting tired of it, so I turned to her. “What’s your problem?”

“What’s *my* problem?” She raised her dark brows. “You threatened us to achieve something. It’s what Drayard does. He threatens to get whatever he wants. You’re turning into him.”

I winced at this absurdity. “I’m not turning into him. Drayard is a monster. We are nothing alike.”

Baby huffed and walked past me, knocking my shoulder with hers. I stumbled back, clenching my jaw, but then released it. It was not the time to succumb to outrage.

But the words escaped my mouth anyway as I followed her. “I need to save my sister. She’s innocent, and you’re all sacrificing her!”

“Some sacrifices must be made.” Baby’s voice came along with the wind as she glanced over her shoulder. “Deal with it.”

I couldn’t believe she’d said that. I was seething with rage, and my bracelet burned my skin. The powers I had were trying to escape their cage

already, but I didn't let them. Not yet.

"She's my sister!"

"I had a younger sister, too," Baby said bitterly. "She was killed for no reason. Your sister is going to be killed for a reason. Be proud of her."

I was a mere inch close from favouring her ugly face with my fist.

Blossom and Baby stopped before the other side of the volcano, and I did, too. Blossom drew a spare vial of Drayard's blood from the pocket and glimpsed at me. She must have seen the ire twisting my face since the look in her eyes turned kind, and she almost imperceptibly shook her head as if to tell me to cool off a bit.

And I did. I acted as if I hadn't heard what Baby had said, concentrating on my mission instead. Regardless of how wrong her words were.

As the other stairwell emerged below us, they began descending while I remained in the back. It was too dark here. Nobody could light the torches when not one of us manipulated fire. But the bats could see in the dark since they had night vision, which I would also be grateful to have now.

Blossom was the one who waited for me on the stairs and gave me a hand of help to guide me down the remaining steps.

Strangely, the air was frigid here, and the smell reminded me of a sea. I almost tripped over something, but Blossom held me. If Baby were the one guiding me, she'd have let me fall on my face and break a nose without a doubt. She despised me now.

The dim rays of different colours spilled through the arched passage. As we entered the area that looked like a cavern, there were five portals of varied colouring planted in a crescent shape.

The first one from the left was filled with a clear black fluid. The following was of forest green. The middle one was yellow, parallel to the portal in the Mortal Region that had taken me to the Empire of Beasts. Perhaps this one also teleported there. The fourth was white, and the last one was fawn brown. Judging by its colour, it had to teleport to the Realm of Bones. I'd worn a brown maid uniform when I'd been a slave there. I believed brown was the colour of the Realm of Bones.

I couldn't stomach the thought of returning there, but it was not like I had much of a choice.

"You're coming with me," I ordered.

Blossom nodded while Baby said nothing.

"Baby?" I addressed her.

“Do I have another choice?”

“You always have a choice.”

Something passed through her eyes, but it was gone too fast to identify what it was.

Blossom stepped towards the brown portal, as I’d predicted she would, and disappeared in less than a blink. I turned to Baby, lurking in my shadow.

“Are you planning to stab me once I turn around?” I asked.

“I would, but I’m not sure which metal can kill you.”

I stared at her with suspicion for a moment. At last, I pushed Baby’s spite aside and approached the portal. As I slid into it, I fell into a pit of cocoa.

OceanofPDF.com

XLVIII

JUST LIKE THE LAST TIME, my landing wasn't the neatest. I tumbled into the snow, and slight dizziness weighed my head, but it was gone a moment after. At least my knees didn't hurt, albeit they were cold.

Baby laughed behind me, but I ignored her. I stood up and wiped the snow off my knees.

She and Blossom had landed beautifully. Both of them stood on their legs, unbothered and impeccable. They had to be travelling through portals more often than I was. After all, it was only my second time.

At least I hadn't lost my vision this time.

As I eyed the place surrounding us, I recognised it as the same silent pine forest which brought unpleasant memories: the attack of the wolf and then dryads, fleeing from the Bloodsucker, meeting Gen, who'd come accompanied by Chase.

I shoved my hands into the pockets of my coat as my limbs began to cool.

"What's your next move, Elynn?" Baby asked me, her tone of voice mocking.

I paid no attention to it.

My plan was already laid out in my mind. I crossed one thing off the list. I was already where I needed to be but not quite.

"Where is the sacrifice ritual?" I crossed my fingers it wouldn't be at the mansion.

"In the mansion's garden," Blossom answered, as if she'd read my fear.

How great.

"I guess we're paying a visit to the sacrifice ritual." Baby linked her arm with Blossom, who cast her a warm smile. "Hopefully, the bastard won't gut us."

Baby's remark washed the smile off Blossom's face. Then her violet eyes found mine. "Good luck," she said as if she meant it and then added, "And don't die. Please."

In a heartbeat, both of them turned into the bats and, without rushing, flew past over my head.

Blossom's words pinched my heart. It seemed as if she truly didn't want me to die. And maybe she didn't.

Sucking in a deep breath, I steeled myself for anything and followed the bat girls, as I didn't know where the mansion was. I couldn't risk getting lost again.

While walking, I was getting warmer. My ears caught the distant music, which was growing louder with each step taken further. As the mansion from my nightmares rose from behind the trees, I halted. The bat girls barely glanced at me and disappeared behind the pines. I was left alone and with a minuscule chance to save my sister in my hands.

As I hid behind the thick trunk, I tried to listen, taking peeps at the garden from time to time.

From the brief looks and what I heard, I realised morphs were having a good time. Sharing laughs, dancing, mingling... It disturbed and irritated me to the bone, although their inconsiderate and unmindful nature shouldn't faze me. But the bracelet was already biting my skin, tempting me to get rid of it and turn into what I was terrified of all my life.

A morph.

But I ignored the temptation by surveying the garden instead. There was a new addition to it—a dais amid the garden. I was confident it was the place where my sister would be sacrificed if my plan failed, but it wasn't going to fail. I didn't spot Drayard or Gen anywhere. She might be brought later to spice things up for mere entertainment. The thought of it made my blood boil again.

"Why aren't you joining them, Princess Elynn?"

I flinched, turning my head at the creature.

A dryad. The same one whom I'd helped to find his parents, only for his father to nearly turn me into a cripple later. Juniper.

"Princess Elynn?" I asked, confused.

"Most at home call you Princess Elynn because you saved the heir of the forest's nymphs from morphs."

I furrowed my eyebrows, baffled at first, but then it dawned on me. "You're the heir?"

He smiled shyly as he nodded.

I didn't believe in miracles, but after all the things that had happened this year and continued occurring, it was hard to put that all down to coincidence. Dryads were in debt because I had saved the heir of their world, and it seemed I was quite well-known there, being called a princess. Perhaps I could use this to my advantage.

"I've heard the curse will be broken today."

"It might not if I save my sister in time." Juniper stared at me, quizzical, so I clarified, "My sister's death is the answer to breaking the curse."

The silence descended between us, and only the sounds of music and morphs chatters were heard behind us.

"Did you come here to save her by yourself?"

"Well, I'll try."

Juniper pressed his wooden fingers to his lips and bit into one of them. "Do you need... help?"

I considered dryads' role in my mission, but concluded they would merely cause an inconvenient mess. However, I could still use Juniper's help.

"You rule the forest, right?"

He frowned. "No, my dad does. I'm too young to rule it yet."

"But could you somehow mute the sounds in the forest?"

A proud smile spread over Juniper's face. "It's easy."

My heart was already thumping as I looked at my bracelet. I found the clasp before I returned my attention to Juniper. "If I scream or do anything else, mute every sound that comes out of my mouth."

Juniper nodded.

Certain that he would do what I had asked, I focused back on the bracelet. Part of me didn't want to remove it as I was afraid of what kind of creature I would turn into as soon as I did. Also, if I did it, there would never be a way back.

My fingers were already quivering. Although I was nervous, I was also curious to learn what powers I had, what kind of creature I was.

As I exhaled, I was made to unclasp the bracelet, but before I did, the firm hand closed over my arm and spun me around.

Then the deep voice spoke in a low tone, "What do you think you're doing?"

I was staring at the steely eyes bored into mine.

Juniper hid behind me as if I could somehow protect him from the Bloodsucker. My heart rate had increased. From the look on his face, I could tell he was far from being happy about finding me here.

“Let me go.” I tried to pull my wrist out of his tight grip, but I couldn’t. At least my right hand was loose.

“Whatever plan you have in that pretty little head of yours, it won’t work, Elynn. It’s not safe for you to be here, especially if you remove your bracelet,” he stated as I attempted to escape his grip again, but it was mission impossible. “Who’s brought you here?” he asked, but I didn’t answer. “Baby with Blossom, right?”

Little by little, the sky was growing dark, and with it, I had less and less time to save my sister. I needed to work *now*, but Drayard was stalling everything!

Juniper, however, remained behind me. I was the only one who could understand him since I knew the language of dryads. Still, I had no clue how and why, but such a matter wasn’t important now.

But what if Drayard also knew Dryad language? I wouldn’t be stunned as the Bloodsucker was endowed with many skills, and knowing Dryad language could be one of them. But if he knew it, it would bring about my inevitable fall.

“Remove my bracelet, Juniper,” I commanded him gently, not looking away from Drayard.

Drayard frowned, which proved to me he didn’t understand a word. Smiling, I leaned closer to his face to block his sight from Juniper.

“I’ve dreamt of you,” I whispered into his face. “You said you wished we had met before you became the King, and things would have been different then. But here’s a thing, Drayard. I don’t dream. So, tell me, what did you mean by that, and why did you prick my finger?”

His grip slackened on my wrist, but I didn’t pull it away yet. My heartbeat continued to be mad, but for a whole different reason. I had no clue how many secrets he was carrying with himself, perhaps a gazillion. But at least I knew I could expect anything from him, and whatever he might pull wouldn’t shock me anymore.

I watched his throat bob as he swallowed. “Elynn, I—”

“I don’t know how to remove this thing!” Juniper whined behind me.

Drayard's eyes flicked to him, but before he saw anything, I pinched his chin, turned it to me and smashed my mouth to his.

I did not think this through, but it was the only idea that had popped into my mind that could divert his attention from Juniper.

Neither of us opened our mouths, but I kept mine pressed against his anyway. He didn't pull away, either. For an ephemeral moment, I caught myself wanting him to part his mouth. A wish which I suppressed in no time.

Meanwhile, Juniper was trying to solve the mystery of how to unclasp the simple bracelet.

"Just yank it, Juniper," I muttered against Drayard's mouth.

Drayard drew back promptly. "What are you..."

Juniper pulled off the bracelet. I winced from the pain caused by a sudden tear, and Drayard looked at my bare wrist.

His eyes flashed at me. Wide. But the sense of pride was almost heady, and I even dared to smile at him. For the first time, I had achieved something without Drayard thwarting me.

He seized my wrist and pulled me closer to his chest. He clasped my chin with his fingers, forcing me to look at him as he whispered, "You've made a huge mistake, Elynn."

Oh, he was angry, and his touch on my bare skin felt slightly different without a bracelet. It sent a wave of heat rippling through my flesh, warming me like a lighted fireplace on a winter's night. I forgot how frigid it was outside, and I was supposed to be shivering from the cold.

However, despite it, I didn't feel any other alteration. No power was trying to escape the cage they'd been in since my birth. Perhaps I'd been lied to, and I'd been human all along. The bracelet was nothing more than an accessory that tended to burn my wrist every now and then for no reason whatsoever.

"We'll see."

"I'm serious, Elynn. If you have an enchantress's powers, then as soon as they show up, morphs will be notified of you. The Empire of Beasts is protected from enchanter's magic. It takes one to step in our zone and use their powers for the high morphs to be warned of their presence," he explained keenly but quietly as his grip on my chin weakened. "It's a part of the treaty your grandfather travelled to the Empire of Skies to establish. I won't be able to save you."

“Perhaps, I don’t need to be saved any—”

The pain slashed through me, and I clenched my teeth. I cast Juniper a glance over my shoulder and mouthed, “Now.”

I could only hope he understood what I’d meant, for I couldn’t tell whether he was quieting my moans. Hopefully, he was.

The unfathomable pain shot through my knees, and I’d have fallen if not for Drayard holding me. He wrapped his hand around my waist, keeping me on foot while I was wincing, enduring the immense pain scorching my cells.

“Oh Gods, Dray, make it stop!” I dug my nails into Drayard’s coat. “Please!”

As I was sinking to my knees despite Drayard’s hold of me, he descended into the snow along with me. If he said something, I didn’t hear it because of my incessant screaming.

The ground began to tremble while my body burned, but I wasn’t set in flames as much as I could see. It stopped once cold water rushed over me. The wind started twirling around me—us—like a small tornado, but his hands remained to hold me, and it was his voice I heard in my head that helped me to bear the pain, assuring and comforting. *I’m here. I’m here.*

But then I vanished from his arms and appeared a few feet away from him.

The anguish that wrecked my body ebbed until I felt nothing. Panting, I looked at the two startled beings standing before me. I endeavoured to rise to my feet, but as if my knees were knocked down, I fell. But I didn’t fall on the snow. I fell into his arms.

Thoughts, many strange thoughts, which didn’t belong to me, were thronging my head.

Morphs’ thoughts.

I winced.

But all chatter dampened once I caught his eyes. He looked dazzled.

“Have I changed that much?” I asked with a tease, smiling. My voice, as much as I was aware, sounded the same.

He shook his head. “No…” he breathed, the corners of his mouth pulling up. “Your beauty has always been enchanting. With or without a touch of magic, Honeylove.”

Heat flooded my cheeks, but before I could collect something to say, my lungs were hit by another type of pain. It felt as if they were sizing down.

And the ground was getting closer, as if my body was shrinking down, too. My hands transmuted into tawny legs with broad paws, and my vision altered. The colours turned different.

Once the pain subsided, I raised my head at Drayard. He cursed under his breath.

The curse had caught me. I had shapeshifted into a lioness, but that didn't bother me when it was a part of my plan. I had seen this coming.

As the drums rang out in the garden, I took it as a signal.

It was time to save my little sister from morphs' maws once again.

OceanofPDF.com

XLIX

AS I RAN OFF, surprisingly, Drayard didn't try to stop me. I passed Juniper. I couldn't communicate with him anymore, which was unfortunate. I could have used his help more.

Elynn, Drayard said in my head, *whatever you're planning to do, don't.*

But I ignored him.

With my improved sight, I scanned the trees for a climbable one, but they were all pines. Not even turning into a wild animal whose strength was climbing would help me here.

Abandoning that idea, I sneaked over to a bush and peeked at the garden. My vision was better than being in a human's form, albeit the colours were strange. All of my five senses were heightened. I could hear the quietest conversations and smell the food that Imogen must have cooked all the way from the kitchen.

For the first time, I felt free. As if half of my true self had been hidden longer than it should have been. And now, when that part of me was out, I felt alive. If not for my mission to rescue my sister, I'd run through the forest, climb the mountains and connect with the enticing nature in its best ways.

If being a morph improved my senses, I wondered how certain things would feel like in my human form from now on. But perhaps I'd never find out if I kicked a bucket tonight.

Morphs were already gathered before the dais. I saw Baby and Blossom in the distance, watching from the shadow of the tree, whereas Drayard was nowhere to be seen.

I spotted Thea next to the other maids. She looked the same as I remembered. I wondered if she missed me or had any clue that they were going to sacrifice my sister I'd disguised as for a while. Of course, Asenah was here too, standing in the first row, her cousins with Fawne and Kayla flanking her. My fur bristled.

Suddenly, the drums rose to a crescendo, and two high-blood-looking morphs stepped onto the dais. One was wearing a gilded crown of lions in

motion, whereas another was not. And if it wasn't already apparent who they were, their fur matching mine obliterated all doubts of them being the emperor and empress of the Empire of Beasts. Nayden and Nadira. My biological uncle and aunt.

Together they met in the middle, and once they turned to the audience, drums ceased playing. Nadira dropped her eyes to her feet, taking a step back from her brother. The garden was in deadly silence.

Nayden spread his hands wide. "Good evening, my lords and ladies, kings and queens," he greeted them gleefully with a broad smile splattered over his lion-like face, exposing his shining maws. He then clasped his hands before him. "As many of you know, we are gathered here tonight to break the four-decade-old curse."

The sounds of cheering, whistling and clapping erupted. My claws dug into the snow. The applause ended.

"Due to the King of kings and queens, Drayard Emyur, a human girl is our answer." His toothy smile tempted me to knock his teeth out. "Alas, he is not here to witness the sacrifice along with us, but we shall hope his speculation is correct."

What did he mean Drayard wasn't here? Drayard *was* here. Then why did Nayden say that he wasn't? Hadn't Drayard done his dramatic entrance yet, or was he watching from afar without planning to join them?

"Bring her here," Nayden ordered nobody in particular.

All eyes shifted to one side, and I followed. My sister, my little sister, was brought forcefully by two hawk-like guards in manacles. I had expected her to look poorly, like a prisoner, but despite the manacles, she looked nothing like one, unscathed. Her skin and hair were healthy. No sight of bruises or wounds, no other defects. I didn't know how long she'd been imprisoned, but, by the look of it, it wasn't very long, or she was treated well, which was impossible to believe.

The panther, Dara, emerged on the dais. My lioness's body strained. I could still remember how she'd made me fall at the twins' birthday and morphs having a nice laugh at me.

Dara replaced the guards and stood behind my sister. She placed her hand on her shoulder and forced her to kneel. The emperor approached them. Dara collected my sister's hair into a single grasp and jerked it down, causing Gen's head to tilt back. I ground my teeth at such a cruel treatment.

Nayden laughed, staring at my sister from above like she was an amusing jester. It made my fury rise a degree higher.

“What an adorable little thing,” he drawled. “What’s your name, human?”

Gen spat on his foot.

Nayden sneered, but one of the guards reacted fast and dropped to a crouch, wiping my sister’s saliva off the emperor’s foot with his sleeve.

Heavens...

The crown stayed as silent as the dead. Nobody laughed. I would have, if not for the crouching guard, who now stood up and retreated.

“What an exceptional day,” Nayden said, putting on a smile. “Out of nowhere came an earthquake, and an enchanter was spotted nearby. But there’s no need to worry. My men are working on it,” he hastened to say after the crowd broke into worried murmurs. “Despite the unforeseen errors, we’re ready for a sacrifice. *The meant to be, yet doomed to fall.* Whatever that means.” He sighed and made a dismissive movement with his hand. “Go on, Dara. It’s almost dark.”

After encouraging her, he walked off the dais. Nadira scurried after him, her head remaining low.

Dara dragged my sister in the middle of the dais by her hair, and Gen let out a yelp. I had to restrain myself from jumping over the bush and murdering Dara for harming Gen. It wasn’t the right time to do it yet.

So, when is it going to be the right time, Elynn? I chided myself.

But I didn’t know when the time would be right for me to strike. Perhaps never.

Then Dara began intoning, “*Shapeshifters of the empire turn into beasts...*”

The crowd followed, uttering the beginning of the curse in unison as a prayer.

“...but shall return to their true form when days last as long as nights.”

I didn’t get why they were reciting the curse. It said nothing about quoting it during the sacrifice. Perhaps it was to bring a dramatic effect to this abhorrent event.

“The meant to be, yet doomed to fall, shall bear them lost and found...”

What should I do?!

The time was slipping away, and nervousness was only rising. I didn’t have a steady plan, as I hadn’t known what I’d do exactly once the bracelet

was off my wrist. In fact, I hadn't thought I'd get as far as removing my bracelet.

"...whose creation's blood shall be spilled once the longest night falls."

Dara looked up at the sky. The sun was already setting, and mere minutes were left until the darkness suffused the grounds. I had less and less time to save Genette with my inexplicable stalling.

"Only then, humanity may take over their shapes for life!"

Something glistened in Dara's hand.

My stomach pummelled.

A dagger.

I didn't linger anymore. As morphs were repeating Dara's words, I jumped over the shrub and ran onto the dais as fast as I could with the lioness's increased speed. Some people yelled to warn Dara about me, but it was too late because my maws were already on her gracious neck.

"Tatyana... Tatyana is here!" Morphs exclaimed in awe.

"But what is she doing here?"

"How..."

Dara's dagger dropped, leaving Gen alone. I couldn't tell her to run in words. So I roared.

She raised her head, and her eyes found mine. They narrowed. "Lynn?"

Yes, it's me, Gen! It's me! I wanted to tell her somehow, but Dara turned into a panther and broke free from under me. She stood in an attacking stance, the sharp teeth belonging to a wild feline threatening to bite me. I took a cautious step back, alarmed, and she pounced on me without giving me a chance to prepare for it. As her teeth sank into my leg, I let out a cry.

I endeavoured to do anything to escape the panther, but it was impossible to deal with a more experienced being in a fight. She was biting me in every spot she could get her sharp teeth on. As shocking as it was, I did some damage to her, too.

I bit her ear.

I couldn't attack her anywhere else. It was obvious that I wasn't getting out of this alive. How could I, when I was callow in a fight, let alone being in this body?

From the glimpses I was able to catch of the garden, it was in utter mayhem. The roots were coming out of the ground, grabbing every morph

they got a hold of and fighting them. Half of the morphs screamed for help, while the others stood to fight the roots controlled by the invisible power.

But I knew what that power was and to whom it belonged.

Dryads were helping me without me needing to ask, causing warmth to flood my chest.

But the trees didn't catch the two people I secretly desired to get mutilated the most. Instead, they were right behind my sister, holding her so she wouldn't escape. I didn't like that their hands were on her, but I was too busy fighting Dara to get to them.

I found myself shouting for Drayard's help in my mind while being wounded by Dara's teeth and claws. I was sure I was bleeding in many places, but I couldn't feel any pain when the adrenaline was pumping my blood.

Drayard didn't respond, and I didn't catch sight of him either. He was gone.

Coward.

At last, Dara pinned me to the floor. She showed her teeth, threatening to attack my neck and end this children's play for her. I tried to fight her off, but I was too weak and too wounded.

But then I smelled a smoulder, and Dara paused. Her nostrils flared, sniffing the air. Out of the blue, she sprang back as if lightning almost struck her. I raised my head. Dara seemed to be as much as baffled as me until her jet-black fur sparked into flames. With a yelp, she began rolling on the ground, trying to quench the fire.

It reminded me of the way Fillan had been rolling on the grass after his maws left my ankle. As if his fur was set on—

Memories from that night flashed into my mind. To me, the pine forest was a dead environment. No birds, no animals, except the ones Chase had slaughtered. But I'd seen a bat before I'd encountered a glosse.

There was nobody else who could control fire. Nobody else but Drayard.

Why hadn't I made a connection sooner? It had been *his* voice that told me to run, that helped me to detect the oak. Drayard hadn't saved my life twice. He had saved me three times, now four times.

And the smoke was all I could sense now.

I stood on my own four legs and gathered my balance I'd lost from the fight with Dara. Everything was in pain now. My body. My heart. And my head when my sensitive ears captured every morph's shriek. It was hurting

not only from their screams but their thoughts swelling into a painful clamour.

Tatyana Haroun was dominating their minds.

But I wasn't Tatyana. I was Elynn. Completely lost and not a found soul.

I didn't know who I was seeking in the crowd, let alone what I was even doing. I felt detached from everything happening around me until I met the owner of grey-blue eyes stomping towards me. From her stare, I could tell she knew exactly who I was. Not Tatyana, the woman she loved. She knew my identity, my birthright. Her unsecured thoughts exposed it.

But before Asenah could reach me, she was yanked and dragged by the small branch from the dais. I noticed a little kid behind her. He vanished in a second after giving me a cheeky wink.

Finally, I turned my whole focus on the twins holding my sister. I prowled to them, ready to attack. I was eager to rip their throats out, disembowel them for everything they had done.

But as I was about to pounce on them and tear them into ribbons with my brand new teeth and claws, a blade thrust into my sister's chest. The twins released her, letting her fall to her knees.

I stopped. Frozen.

"You've failed, cousin," Dara's breathy voice sounded behind me.

As I glanced at her, she flashed me the most wicked grin there was.

I was tempted to slaughter her, but knowing better what to do instead, I ran to my sister's lifeless body and halted near her. Her tear-stained eyes locked with mine.

No, no, no, no, no.

I put my paws on her chest blooming with blood, but I couldn't pull the weapon out. I couldn't stop the blood from spreading. I couldn't stop anything!

"It hurts, but it's okay," she said quietly through a wobbling smile, and a tear trickled down her pale cheek. For a split second, I saw our mum in her. On her deathbed. "It's okay, Lynn."

Her fingers reached up for my nose, but her hands dropped with her last breath before her human fingers brushed against my new beast's nose.

L

A BLAST OF WIND SENT ME flying from Gen to the other side of the dais. I didn't care whether it hurt or from where the explosion had come. I didn't care about anything but Gen.

Promptly, I crawled towards her body, but warm hands came around my waist and dragged me away. I screamed, kicked, and that someone released me. At last, I scrambled back to Gen and brought her still-warm body in my arms. I hadn't been aware until now that I was back to being my normal self. Not a lioness.

Drayard was right. My sister's death was the answer to the curse. He hadn't made a mistake. Of course, he hadn't.

But she couldn't be dead. It was too quick. It couldn't be real, despite my palms dripping with her blood.

"You're not dead," I denied under my nose, rocking her body, naively expecting she would wake up and we would have a nice laugh at this absurdity after. "You're not dead, Gen. Wake up. Wake up! Now is not the time for playing games. Please. P-please—"

I choked on my tears and let my face fall into the crook of her neck.

It's okay, Lynn, her last words rang in my head like a heart-wrenching song.

But it was not okay.

I hated that I couldn't speak, to say something, anything. All I could have done was let out an agonizing growl before I was thrown to the other side of the dais.

It's just another nightmare, I convinced myself. *She's alive. I'm about to wake up as usual. I have to wake up.*

It isn't real.

It couldn't be...

"Elynn," the deep voice hissed behind me, "we have to go."

But I didn't budge.

He tried to haul me away from Gen once again, but I held onto her body. I couldn't leave her. Not here... Not with them. Not with those who felt no

sorrow to the fallen innocent girl.

I didn't have to look to know that dryads were gone, and now everybody was staring at me, their thoughts crushing my brain.

Thoughts that wanted me dead.

I disregarded Lupin and Fillan standing a few steps away from me, doing nothing, just staring at me wide-eyed like dorks they were.

"Elynn—"

"No." I sniffled. "She's not dead. S-she can't be... She can't. I'm not leaving her."

The smell of the campfire was threatening to drown me, but I refused to focus on anything I saw or felt... or smelled.

"Elynn, please..."

But I didn't listen to what he had to say. I closed my eyes and pressed my lips to my sister's head. I caught myself clinging to the memories of her like a desperate child, and the first that popped into my mind was the day when I'd made her laugh after a long, long time.

Kris had been in the library, closed between the bookshelves, whereas Mum had been in her bed, refusing to leave it ever since our father's death. I was playing the piano when Gen began talking about our father, sharing her best memories with him, encouraging me to open up, too.

I would give up anything to come back to that day. To come back to the moment when we'd laughed and cried and laughed again. Gen had moved on then, made peace with the fact that he wasn't coming back. And it was *I* who helped her to achieve it.

Because I always found a way to make everything better.

And yet... I'd failed.

I felt as if I was going to throw up, albeit the thoughts of strangers vanished, leaving my head in peace. But as I opened my eyes, we weren't on the dais located in the Realm of Bones anymore. Instead, it was replaced with a glowing fireplace.

I knew this place...

I was back home.

"Oh, mother of... Elynn!" Drayard exclaimed in frustration behind me.

Gen was in my hands. At least I hadn't left her in that realm. I'd brought her home despite the cost.

I buried my face back in the crook of her neck and shuddered with a loud sob.

She was dead.

He pulled me away from her, and I didn't fight him off. I couldn't. I was too tired to fight.

As he got me standing on my feet, he spun me around, and I met his face.

His human-like face.

My heart dropped to my stomach.

His hair... his flowing hair glistened like a burgundy wine, and his copper skin glowed in the firelight, casting a light on the right side of his face. The same twisted horns were at their finest display, unchanged as much as his golden twinkling with ruby dust eyes. He didn't remind me much of his father, but he reminded me of someone else, which was my greatest nightmare.

And just like that, every memory struck me like a hit of a scourge.

Every moment to which I turned a blind eye.

And every minor detail I'd chosen to ignore.

Now everything was as clear as him standing before me in his real, unmasked form.

I yanked my hand from his grasp and stepped back, thunderstruck. I tripped over Gen's body and fell back. *Almost* fell as a firm, streaming with heat hand clasped over my wrist and held me from hitting the ground.

Gold flecked with blood flashed before me.

"I know you're angry, and more hostile feelings are fogging your mind, but we have to go," he said. "Unless you want to join your sister, then I'm not stopping you."

I recognised such a voice way before I'd met him.

His eye and hair colour and some other details might differ, but other than that, he was the same man I'd drawn years ago.

But all I felt now was infinite anger. "Let go of me."

"If I let go, you'll fall."

"Better than *you* catching me."

He tugged me to his firm chest as he pinched my chin and made me, even gently, look at him. He inspected my face, my neck, and his unsettling face creased with deep concern. It stung where his rough fingers touched my neck, but I would be lying if I said it didn't sting everywhere. "You're bleeding."

Indeed, I was. Inside and out.

“No hells.”

His eyes flicked to mine. “Hate me after we get out of here, but now we —”

I spat into his eye. He scowled and let go of me. As he pulled out a handkerchief, I seized my chance to run, but once I left the living room, I almost collided with someone in the corridor.

“Elynn?”

I would have smiled. Smiled at the sight of my brother looking safe and sound in front of me, but I couldn’t. It was not the time for the family meeting. Even if he was the only one left of it.

“Kristian, you need to... you need to run!” I tried to form the words, despite my frantic heart and thoughts. “Gen is... Gen is...”

“Hold on.” He grimaced. “Calm down, Elynn. First, what are you doing here?”

“I...”

His blueish eyes rose over my head, and my body went numb. I’d expected Kristian’s face to drain of colour, but his facial expression was nothing like it. He was... confused?

I whipped my head back. Drayard was staring at me. Very annoyed. “Elynn, I’ll not repeat myself—”

“Shut up!” I seethed. “You killed her... you...” My eyes travelled back to Kris, who did nothing apart from standing. Perhaps he was stupefied by the unexpected “guest”. “He killed Gen,” I said, and Kris’s gaze shifted to me. “She’s in the living room. She’s...” I bit my tongue, unable to voice that word.

Something altered in his eyes, but I couldn’t tell what was it when tears blurred my sight. He looked at Drayard. “You didn’t—”

As I glanced back at the Bloodsucker, he had his forefinger pressed against his lips. But as soon as he noticed me staring, he dropped it.

Everything inside me stopped functioning. Something... something was off.

“He didn’t...” I turned my head to Kris. “He didn’t what?”

Kris stared at me as if he was... sorry.

“Nothing, Honeylove,” the Bloodsucker answered. “Now we—”

“Do not call me that!” I turned to him, balling my hands into fists. “What on earth is going on?” I turned to Kris. “How can *you* be so calm when Gen’s dead body is lying in the living room? Is this another one of my

nightmares, or am I losing my mind? I must be... losing my mind because you..." I gestured my hand at Drayard. "Oh... hells..." I got my hands on my head and took a deep breath.

"Lynn—"

"Kristian," Drayard cut him off in warning.

Perplexed, my eyes flitted back and forth between Kristian and Drayard as I lowered my hands. "You know each other..." I trailed off. "But how... What... What the hells is going on? Can someone tell me, for heavens' sake?"

"Elynn, I can assure you it's not a nightmare, and you're not losing your mind," the villain said. "It's all real, and the longer we stay here, the greater our chances of dying. We have to go. Please."

Please.

"Without me, you won't leave the Spell," Kris intervened, and I shot him a baffled look.

"And you are right," the killer agreed. "I suppose, no horses?"

Kris shook his head. "Waiting for—"

"Kristian," Drayard interrupted. "Two hours."

What the...

I stepped back. Back. And back until I hit the wall. I didn't understand what was going on. Had no clue. But neither of them answered me. It seemed as if Kris tried, but the monster silenced him every time.

What was going on?

Why didn't Kris show any concern that our sister was dead?

Two hours of what?

I felt something being put on me. I wasn't in the right state of mind to note what it was when I was trying to hold on to my sanity. Trying not to yield to my emotions. Because all I was burning to do right now was scream and scream and scream.

"Elynn?"

I didn't realise someone was calling me. I didn't realise I was being hauled.

Somewhere an owl hooted in the dark, snapping me out of my stupor. Something weighed on my neck, and as I looked down, I saw a black necklace. *What...*

The snow was crunching under our feet. Kris was treading nearby, and a winged man was before me, his hand—

I dug my heels into the snow, putting all of my left strength into my leg muscles so that he wouldn't be able to move me wherever he liked, like some doll. Drayard paused and turned to me.

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me how the two of you know each other."

Kristian pursed his lips while Drayard stared at me as if I was a child refusing to leave its playdate. I attempted to pull my hand off his grasp, but he held it firm.

"Too bad, Elynn," he said, taking a step closer. "That's too bad."

Before I could follow, in a mere second, he lifted me up as if I weighed nothing and tossed me over his shoulder.

"Let go of me, you sick, sick bastard!"

"Sick bastard... Something new."

"Oh, do you want more? Monstrous, filthy, blood-sucking bastard!"

"Doesn't she have a sharp tongue?" Drayard asked in a tone tinged with bite. "Your sister?"

"To be frank..." Kristian said, "I hear her saying something like it for the first time."

"Do you even know who he is?" I snapped at my brother. He raised his head at me. "He's the Bloodsucker! He's real, and you are letting him go away with Gen's murder?"

"I know who he is, Lynn."

I was robbed of my voice for a moment. "W-what?"

His eyes travelled to Drayard as if to ask his... permission? *What is going on...*

"I'm sorry, Lynn," Kristian said with a sigh. I gathered the Bloodsucker didn't permit him to say something. Something they both were hiding from me. "Just... it all happens for a reason."

I scoffed at such an unreasonable thought. "It all happens for a reason? How can you say that? Our sister is dead, Kris! And you dare to say—"

"Ely?"

Drayard halted, and I lifted my head. Here he was. My former fiancé. Armed with golden weapons, prepared for a hunt, as always. I wasn't sure whether it was the effects of the Spell or his mere presence, but my stomach churned.

Once Drayard turned around, I couldn't see Chase anymore.

Kristian crossed his arms as he glared at Chase.

“Who are you?” I heard Chase ask.

Drayard put me back on my feet and pushed me behind him.

“Drayard Emyur,” Drayard replied.

I stole a look at Chase’s expression over Drayard’s shoulder. The name seemed to say nothing to him as he held on to his most precious child—Goldy.

Drayard sighed. “Better known as the Bloodsucker?”

Still no reaction. “The Bloodsucker?”

He doesn’t know who you are, you idiot, I informed Drayard.

What an uncultured prick, then, he crooned.

“If you attempt to use your weapons, it will be very foolish of you, huntsman. You allow us to go, and no damage would be done to any of your precious body parts,” Drayard said serenely.

“You’re a dragon,” Chase thought aloud, as if Drayard’s wings and horns hadn’t made it apparent before. Then his eyes caught mine. The look in his emerald gaze altered, and a chill of disgust ran through me. “You’re one of them.”

“We’re leaving,” Drayard announced.

But Chase had other plans. “A dragon, really, Ely? And here I didn’t listen to what your girlfriends had to say about you. I should have believed them. You *are* a slut.”

Drayard was about to lunge at him, but I seized his wrist. He glanced at me over his shoulder, eyes fiery. Mutely, I shook my head, and the fire in him dampened.

“What did you just call her?” Kristian inquired, tone acid.

Drayard and I looked at Kristian in unison.

“Kristian, I like you, man. I really do, but forgive me when I declare the truth that your sister is a one big—”

“We are leaving, and if you follow us, consider yourself dead,” Drayard interrupted Chase.

He took my hand, lacing his fingers through mine, and whirled around.

“Kristian,” Drayard called.

It took a while for Kristian to tear his glare off Chase to follow us. I glanced over my shoulder, wondering if Chase left, but he was still there, unsheathing his Goldy.

Dray...

He stopped and glanced back at Chase. He snorted. "What a fool," he murmured before he released my hand and turned to Chase fully. "Bring it, huntsman. Show me what kind of fragile clay you're made of."

And Chase did, surprising me. Once he charged at Drayard, I just knew Chase's minutes were counted, if not seconds. It hadn't occurred to me until now that if I had stayed in the Mortal Region, I would have married the imbecile of the century.

Drayard *screamed* danger. Even unarmed, he was a walking threat. But Chase was too ignorant to realise he'd just signed his death contract.

I backed away once Chase got close. He swung his sword to Dray, but he dodged it with no effort. Chase grunted and tried again, but the other hit was also unsuccessful. Dray was toying with him and even had the audacity to yawn, showing how boring it was for him.

Chase's face dyed puce with rage and frustration. "You took my fiancée." Another lunge; another failure. "You ruined her, and you turned her into one of you. *A monster.*"

Drayard opened his mouth, but I beat him to it. "A monster?!"

As Chase's attention for less than a second flicked to me, Drayard seized a chance to capture his wrist with Goldy and slide behind his back, twisting his arm under it. Chase winced.

"She's not your fiancée, you fool," Drayard hissed close to his ear. "Apologise to her for calling her nonsense words or else say goodbye to your tongue."

"I have nothing to say to her," Chase spat with endless disgust.

"Nothing?" I balled my hands into fists. "You have nothing to say to me after taking your anger out on my body, gifting me with bruises?!"

I felt Drayard's astounded look on me. I shoved his voice out of my head before he uttered a word.

And then Chase said the fatal, "You deserved it, slut."

He cut off the last thread of my self-control. I was made to strangle him, but Drayard was faster. He knocked Chase to his knees and clutched his hair, pulling it back.

I paused, interested in what he was about to do.

"I've sucked huntsman's blood before," Drayard informed, and something sharp glistened from under his lips. "They usually have the worst flavour, but perhaps newer descendants taste better. Doubtful, but I am gulping you until the last drop anyway. I haven't had time to eat today yet."

A terror was etched into every line of Chase's face, and soon, as Drayard yanked him up, his fangs buried into his neck.

Chase winced while Drayard was sucking his blood. My heart thumped, being reminded of Drayard's real nature.

He was a *bloodsucker*. A *killer*. A *bastard*. And yet, the image representing all his unmasked glory didn't make me feel intimidated by him, but the opposite. I felt... drawn to it.

Drayard was right. He wasn't the only one who was broken.

But I was flashed back to my senses once a sharp pain smote my abdomen. Unconsciously, my eyes lowered.

A bolt was sticking out of my middle.

I touched the aching zone under it, and as I raised my fingers, they were red.

"Elynn?" Kristian called.

One last time, I looked at Drayard. At the man who had murdered my sister. At the man who was plotting something behind my back. At the man who, despite all the mentioned and unmentioned faults, lured my heart out and crowned it as his.

"Dray?"

He looked up at me from Chase's neck. His pupils dilated, eyes bloodshot. I fell but didn't reach the ground because he had caught me before I hit the snow.

EPILOGUE

Death was natural.

Death sooner or later came for everyone.

Death could not be avoided, let alone outwitted.

But such things didn't apply to him. To a man who put out its blows like wildfire destroying everything it touched. And although *death* had always found a way to waltz in, it uttered hello as quick as its goodbye. Because it couldn't take him along. As if it didn't accept him. As if he was too fiendish for even the Gods below to consider welcoming him to their kingdom.

And now, when *death* had approached *her*, there was no way he was going to allow it to take *her* away from *his* arms.

He hefted her off the ground and swept the loose waves of her honey-blond hair away from her face. He patted her cheek gently. "Elynn?"

Her eyelids slightly parted.

"Try to remain conscious." His voice was as calm as the sea before a storm, unlike his roaring heart. "I'll get us out of here." She didn't say anything. He mildly pressed her head against his chest as if afraid to break her and began striding towards the Spell. Its effects fed on his insides, but his focus was on Elynn's life, not his. Regardless of her wearing an enchanted necklace on her neck, she was still dying. Dying from the gold in her bowels. And he couldn't let that happen.

But he wasn't going to let that happen.

A taste of copper coated his mouth. He abhorred that huntsman's blood. He loathed him. But not as much as he loathed himself.

He craved to avenge her. To rip the huntsman into tatters and leave them for animals in the wild to devour, but he didn't succumb to his animal-like urges. He blamed himself and only himself for letting this happen. For letting her obtain a golden bolt in her abdomen in the first place.

How could he have missed the crossbow?

"Why didn't you tell her?"

He'd forgotten her brother was here, trying to catch up with his fast strides. Drayard didn't answer him.

Kristian looked down, scratching his nape to conceal his concern for his sister's life. "You will save her, right?"

“She is not dying,” Drayard almost hissed at such a possibility.

He stole another look at her, and she didn’t show any signs of reacting.

“Elynn?”

No reaction.

He patted her cheek. “Elynn?”

Her eyes barely cracked open, and her lips slightly parted, but she didn’t say anything.

“Just hold on,” he told her. “Hold on a little longer, Honeylove.”

He could feed her his blood, but he didn’t even consider it. It might do her more damage when they were still in the Spell’s area. He couldn’t risk it. His priority now was to get her out of here. And as soon as possible. Then he would deal with the rest.

The smell of freedom teased his nostrils. It was so close, within hand’s reach, but as he took another wide step further, he bumped into an invisible wall.

The Spell.

He glanced at Kristian, who sighed and passed the invisible wall without any problems. Drayard wasn’t sure whether he liked this guy. No, he was sure. He just didn’t want to admit it.

As he stepped further once again, he didn’t hit the wall this time. His powers returned to his blood, as familiar as home—if he had one—and hastily walked further away until he couldn’t feel the Spell’s ill energy. He collapsed near the river with Elynn on his knees.

“Elynn?” he asked.

She didn’t react.

As he caressed her honey-brown skin, it was hotter than his normal body temperature. Feverish.

Swallowing all the possibilities, frights and the rest that could dispatch him to agony and rage, he drew his fangs through his wrist, paying no heed to Kristian’s grimace, and pressed it against Elynn’s hot lips.

But she didn’t take his blood.

He could feel the desperation swelling up, but he didn’t act on it. Not before trying everything he could.

He raised his head at standing Kristian. “I need you to hold her a little.”

Kristian swallowed while his hands were shaking.

“Kristian, I need you to hold her and stench the blood,” Drayard repeated, but less mildly.

His patience was wearing off, and Kristian, not wanting to test Drayard's nerves, knelt down and carefully took Elynn from him. Once Drayard's hands were free, he rushed to take off his coat and laid it on the snow.

"Lay her on it," he ordered. "Just gently. And don't remove your hand from her wound."

Kristian did as he'd been told while Drayard unsheathed his two daggers. Once Kristian saw the weapons in his hands, his eyes widened. "What are you going to do with those?"

"Remove your hand, Kristian."

Kristian did it grudgingly. Then Drayard spread Elynn's wound with the help of his daggers, and Kristian watched with horror as Drayard, like a skilled physician, removed the barbed golden arrowhead without tearing Elynn's flesh more. He dropped it aside, along with his daggers.

"Put your hand back on the wound," he told Kristian before he punctured his wrist with his fangs again and pressed it to her lips.

Drink, Elynn, he demanded in her mind, but, as before, she didn't.

He gathered her back to his chest and replaced Kristian's hand while his other hand remained pressed to her lips, imploring her to drink over and over again in her head and out loud until she'd listen.

But she didn't listen.

The dryad kid appeared near them. It didn't take long for another to turn up, too. A Queen of the Dryads. And Drayard was aware of them both.

Those dryads had been getting on his nerves lately, and there was a reason for that. Since the little one had removed Elynn's bracelet, the Empire of Beasts had learnt about her existence. They would demand her head sooner or later. And it was all thanks to the dryad Prince.

"Princess Elynn," the Dryad Queen spoke in his native language, and Drayard caught her glowing eyes. She stretched a vial out to him. "To Princess Elynn."

He furrowed his eyebrows, but took the vial, taking no chances. He knew dryads were well known for their healing ability. At least female dryads were when males liked to tear apart whoever tried to harm their kind. Perhaps whatever liquid was in the vial it would help Elynn.

The Dryad Queen blessed him with a benevolent smile and put her hand on the boy's shoulder. They disappeared in the small whirlwind of pine needles within a moment.

He looked back at Elynn, opened the vial and poured its essence into her dry mouth until the last drop. She didn't drink it like his blood, but it filled her mouth until it dissolved, disappearing out of his sight.

This had to work. He didn't understand yet why dryads cared for Elynn that much to consider saving her life, let alone how did Elynn herself know their language, but at this exact moment, he couldn't care about it. This had to work. This *must* work.

But she stayed feverish, and her breathing slowed down.

Drayard's muscles stiffened, and water burned his eyes. "Elynn?"

But she didn't respond.

Her chest stopped rising.

But as Drayard was about to curse dryads, Elynn drew in a loud breath as if brought back to life, and her eyelids snapped open for a second, only to get shut again.

The marks Dara's teeth and claws had left in her skin healed over, along with the wound in her abdomen. It wasn't a neat healing process, leaving an everlasting scar in its wake. But at least she was breathing. She was *alive*.

Drayard issued a sigh of immense relief, and his shoulders relaxed as he rested his forehead against hers, breathing into her scent of honey and sweat, calming his racing heart.

"You care about her," Kristian noted. He had been kneeling across from Drayard this whole time, but he had forgotten all about him once again, adding tension to his muscles. "But why care about someone but paint yourself as a villain to their eyes?"

Drayard raised his head and brushed Elynn's hair away from her damp face. Her skin was coming back to its normal temperature only because he was the one keeping it in balance.

He couldn't even look at Kristian when his sister was all he could see now. "Don't you have another sister to take care of?"

"About that..." Kristian began. "I don't understand why you didn't tell Elynn anything, making her believe that... Unless you want to be a villain?"

"I'm not a villain, but I must be one in her story."

"But why?"

Drayard dropped his eyes back to Elynn, stroking her hair. He restrained himself from smelling it, despite her scent already dominating his air. "I'll

be a villain in her story because there's no way I'll let her fall for someone like me."

Because she deserves a thousand times better, he thought, and meant it.

"How can you be so sure she hasn't fallen for you already?"

For a split second, Drayard's heart stopped, but then he dismissed such a probability. It wasn't possible. Not for him. "She strongly believes I killed Genette."

"Yes, but before... Before she even met you... She'd already been admiring stories about dragons, but not the way she had *A tale of the Bloodsucker*. She was ensorcelled by it but didn't want to admit it since the events in the tale were horrible. Also, she was staring at the fire on winter nights for no particular reason. Sometimes she smiled as if she saw something in flames."

"Bonfires have that influence."

"No, she believed in something. Do you know what she said before she offered herself to the Empire of Beasts? She said that it felt right. And Elynn is a huge liar. She lies to protect. But she wasn't lying then."

Drayard swallowed hard.

"And I see you're doing something similar. But you can't hurt her, Emyur."

"I already did."

"That you could fix by telling her—"

"No." Drayard flicked his gaze at him. "I may not be a villain, but *I am* a monster. I must lie. She must hate me. If not..."

His attention moved back to Elynn. The mild wind made her hair cover half of her face. He tucked it behind her ear, his touch gentle, almost tentative.

"How many secrets are you hiding?"

"Too many I'm not willing to share."

He could tell Kristian was speculating on what his secret might be, reminding him of his sister, but he wouldn't be able to guess it. Few knew what he was hiding, and he'd already made sure they would not speak a word about it.

Kristian adjusted his glasses. "You know, if she likes stories about monsters, it doesn't mean that you have to be one in her story."

Drayard wanted to deny it, but he figured he'd be better off staying silent.

“When did you fall for her?”

A bitter smile touched his lips. “Does it matter?”

“Yes, because she’s my sister. I don’t care that biologically she isn’t because the blood doesn’t determine one’s family. So yes. It matters when you laid eyes on her.”

“If I don’t tell, you are aware it’s pointless for you to try something against me, right?”

Kristian rolled his eyes. “We’ll have to talk about this later. Just...” He raised his eyes at the clear midnight-blue sky and rested his hand on his knee. “I believe it had to be this way and not the other. She had to return home so that you would save her from the Spell’s effects. Twice. Every time she walked away from you, she faced difficulties, which ended up almost costing her life. Her every path has been leading to you, which makes me think—”

“That’s enough.” He frowned, staring at Kris’s eyes twinkling with knowledge. “Go back home and wait. Your sister is my priority now. Her health, her happiness is my priority. Nobody would hurt her as long as she’s with me. I promise.”

Nobody would hurt her anymore, except me. But he didn’t voice this part aloud.

“I know,” he said, standing up. “I saw it with my own eyes. That she’s safe. Only read why the world fears you.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. “Maybe I shouldn’t leave her with you, but I trust you. Besides, I believe it all happens for a reason.”

Which could be your mistake, Drayard thought.

He watched him walk off until he disappeared behind the trees. Immediately, his shoulders sagged, and he brought Elynn closer to him, listening to her even heartbeat as if it was the most beautiful melody alone.

He planted a gentle kiss on her temple before resting his forehead against hers. “For a second, I thought I’d lost you,” he whispered. “And that was the scariest second of my life. Don’t scare me like that, Elynn. Hells, I—”

But before Drayard could finish, the sound of clapping interrupted him.

He raised his head and saw the last person he would have expected to see here.

A stranger emerged from behind the trees where he’d been hiding for a while, now clapping his hands with a smile that melted hearts.

But he wasn’t a stranger to Drayard.

“My oh my, isn’t that one heart-touching sight?”

Drayard bristled, but he concealed his emotions from the world. Always did. “What are you doing here?”

The stranger acknowledged Elynn in Drayard’s arms. His smile broadened as his gaze returned to the one holding her. “Isn’t she a delight to behold?”

“What are you doing here?” Drayard repeated himself, his tone fiercer.

The stranger squatted down before them and was about to brush a golden lock from Elynn’s face when Drayard pulled her away from his reach.

The stranger laughed. “I’m not her enemy, dragon boy.”

But Drayard wasn’t so sure. “Are you?”

To that, the stranger didn’t respond. “Well, I see I’m not welcomed here.” He stood up, fixing his crisp-blue cloak. “My apologies for interrupting your sweet moment. I hope you weren’t planning to say something like... hmm... What was it? Oh, right. Like I feel you too, stranger?”

Drayard masked all the emotions attempting to burst into the surface. Although a myriad of thoughts and questions arose to him, he wasn’t going to ask at least one of them, because he knew better. Instead, he remained expressionless and silent.

It amused the stranger, drawing another dimpled smile out of him. “Well, goodbye for now. We’ll meet again soon.” He turned around. “Oh, I almost forgot...” He threw a glance back at Drayard. “Don’t forget to cut your hair. It suits you better than...” He eyed Drayard’s flowing hair distastefully. “Whatever that is.”

And where he’d come from, he disappeared.

Drayard looked down at Elynn. At unconscious Elynn, who was now in her dreamless slumber, oblivious of this scene.

Then Drayard’s eyes travelled back to where the man had vanished.

He could have sworn that both Gods and the Universe were watching him. *Laughing* at him and his predicament. Because in the deepest, shadowy corner of his subconsciousness, the boy was laughing the loudest of all.

Author's Note

This book almost didn't happen.

When I first got the idea, I was writing the second book in my first fantasy series. I really didn't want to leave it unfinished, but the new idea was so intriguing...

As you might have already guessed, I'd relented. I remember plotting the book during almost every lesson, biology class in particular. I couldn't wait to go home afterwards. And when it took an hour to get home, the anticipation only grew, and therefore, I finished the first draft in less than a month.

I named it the Empire of Beasts.

In July, I started publishing it on Wattpad. It was my first story written in English I'd published there. A month passed... No reads. Two passed... NO reads. I knew the story was good. I never stopped believing in it, but I was planning to take it down until... one reader appeared.

It really takes one person to make a difference, huh.

That one person inspired me, and I wasn't even close to being popular on Wattpad. I never thought I would be since not only did the book have many errors, but it wasn't your ordinary Wattpad story. I've always known it was bigger than that, and it had to go bigger, too. With as less errors as possible.

Before I graduated, I decided to unpublish it from Wattpad along with two books of a series and rewrite the book for publication. Three months or so passed, and I received a DM.

It was a poem about Drayard & Elynn from a reader.

First of all, I thought my book had been long since forgotten, so imagine my surprise when I received a poem. A poem from a reader! About the two characters *I* had created! The sensitive girl I am, I exploded into tears. It's been a year, and if that person is reading this, I remember you and I appreciate you. You motivated me to finish that rewrite, needless to say, made not only my day, but my year.

Free from school at last, I sent the letters to some agents. Although I received rejection after rejection, I wasn't discouraged. If anything, I was more driven to let this story out into the world.

It has changed a lot in the past two years. Now, when I look back, I can boldly say that from bad things, good things arise. If I hadn't experienced an awful downfall in the music department when I was truly considering suicide (which was stupid, but I was in a bad place), this book wouldn't exist.

Elynn wouldn't exist.

Drayard wouldn't exist.

This entire world wouldn't exist if over two years ago, a hopeful seventeen-year-old girl wouldn't have stood on the stage only to experience an ultimate let down.

Bad things bear good things.

No matter how dark everything might seem to be, there will always be a ray of light in the darkness. You might not see it yet, but it's there. Just hold on a little longer because, trust me, it's going to be worth it.

Love,
Austea

About The Author

Born and raised in Lithuania, Austea hasn't had a chance to explore the world beyond it yet. To make up for it, she started creating worlds while dreaming about savouring tea in Scotland. Currently, she's a mother of three endearing kitties writing about everything she finds intriguing: witches, dragons, enemies-to-lovers trope, soulmates, strong and admirable women, etc.

You can follow Austea on [Instagram](#).

[OceanofPDF.com](#)

[Thank you so much for reading!](#)

I hope you enjoyed the story! If you did, please consider leaving a short review on Amazon, GoodReads or your other favourite book website. Reviews help every author, and even leaving a line or two can make a huge difference.

[Amazon](#)

[GoodReads](#)

[OceanofPDF.com](#)