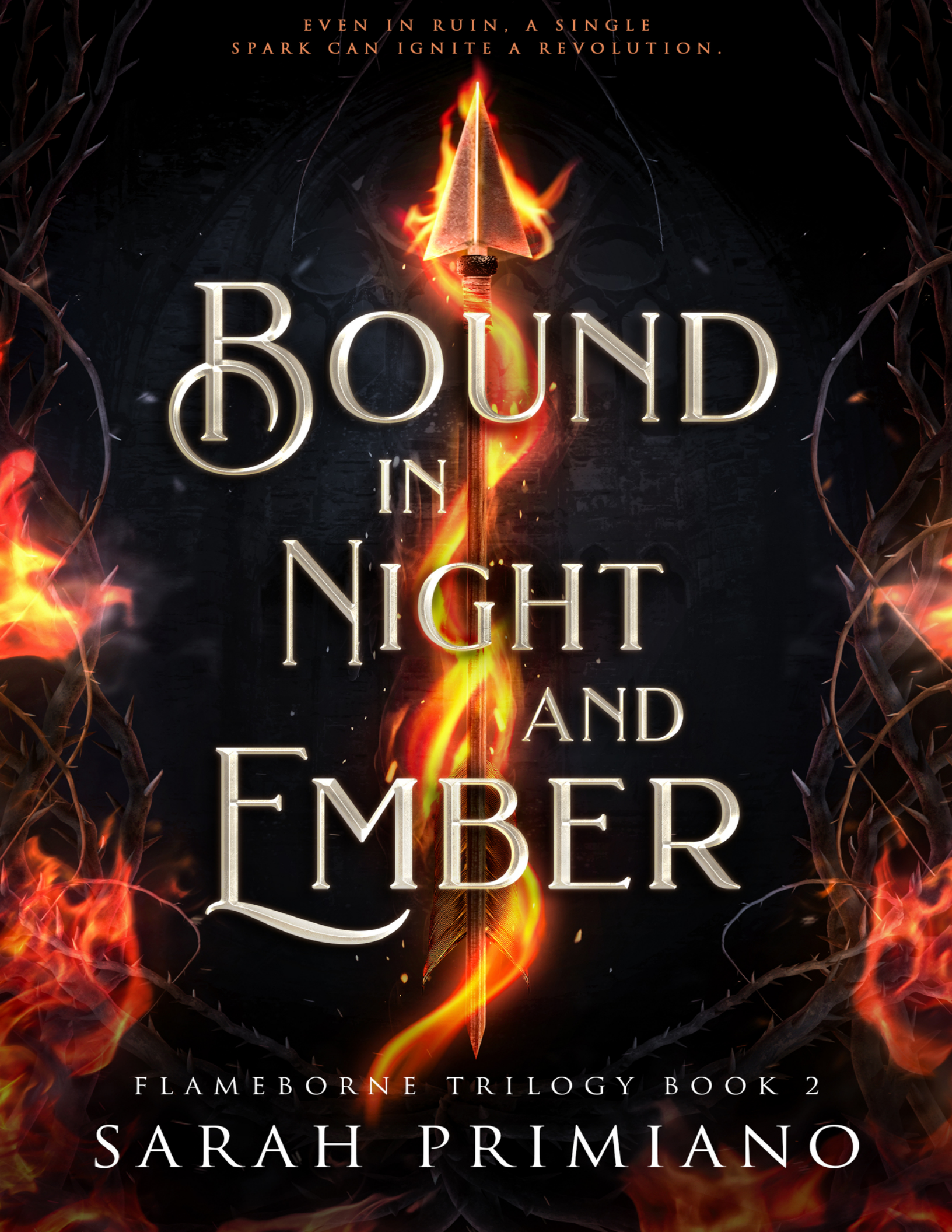

EVEN IN RUIN, A SINGLE
SPARK CAN IGNITE A REVOLUTION.
BOUND
IN
NIGHT
AND
EMBER
FLAMEBORNE TRILOGY BOOK 2
SARAH PRIMIANO

Bound *in* Night *and* Ember



SARAH PRIMIANO

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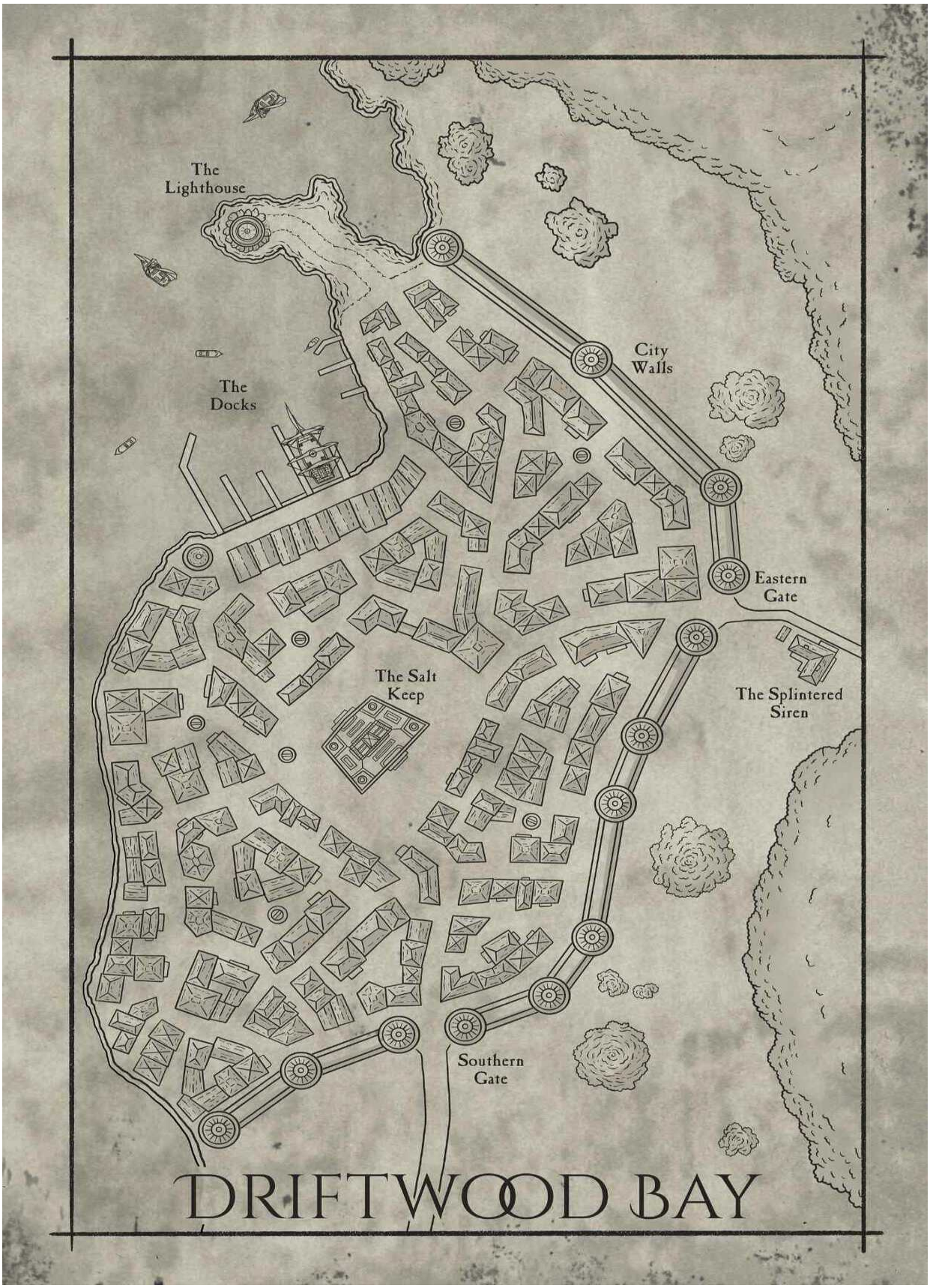
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR
ALSO BY SARAH PRIMIANO
COMING SOON

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For anyone rebuilding after loss.
This is not the end of your story. What comes next is yours to write.

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The Lighthouse
The Docks
City Walls
Eastern Gate
The Salt Keep
The Splintered Siren
Southern Gate
DRIFTWOOD BAY

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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Ren — REN
Kaelin — KAY-lin
Talen — TAY-lin
Lucan — LOO-kan
Veylan — VAY-lin
Brenna — BREN-uh
Vampyre — VAM-pyre
Vortharax — VOR-thuh-raks
Fryphessyrth — FRY-feh-seerth
Sangravos — san-GRAH-vohs
Zakhar — ZAH-kar
Azyrhael — uh-ZEER-ay-el
Sylven — SIL-ven
Valeria — vah-LEH-ree-ah
Carmilla — car-MILL-uh
Lytharien — lith-AIR-ee-en
Vaelaran — vay-LAIR-en
Pyraelia — pie-RAY-lee-uh
Tharowen — THAIR-oh-wen
Solfira — sol-FEER-uh
Driftwood Bay — DRIFT-wood BAY
Splintered Siren — SPLIN-terd SY-ren
Ulag — OO-lahg

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PROLOGUE

IN A FORGOTTEN AGE...

Branches clawed at the woman’s face, but she did not dare slow down. She couldn't.

Behind her lay certain death.

Ahead was the dark, and whatever pity it had left to give.

The sky above was the deepest shades of crimson bleeding out as the sun sank beneath the horizon, yet this strange illumination had nothing to do with the setting sun.

It was the moon.

It peered through the skeletal gaps in the treetops, a stark shade of visceral, blood-red. It loomed like an unblinking eye, watching her desperate flight.

She stumbled over an exposed root and hit the damp earth, instinctively curling inward to shield the swollen protrusion of her womb.

She lay there for a moment, the breath rattling in her lungs, her forehead pressed against the dirt. The child inside her shifted—a restless movement that made her stomach turn not just from physical discomfort but from the sudden surge of memories that threatened to drown her.

She still felt the crushing weight on the grain mill floor, a brutal hand muffling her cries. Worse was the laughter that followed—the dismissive amusement of the Elder's untouchable son, reminding her she was just an orphan girl who swept the tavern.

In the village, a woman's purity was the sole measure of her worth. Once her womb swelled, the truth mattered less than the scandal. The law was clear, etched into the stone pillars of their chapel: *a child born outside the altar was a corruption of flesh–punishable by the cleansing fire or the rot of exile.*

The elders had given her a choice, framing it as an act of mercy.

Leave by sundown, or hang by dawn.

She pushed herself up. Her bones felt brittle, her vision swimming with dark spots. But beneath the profound, crushing fatigue, a spark of unadulterated fury flared to life that burned hotter than any fever.

She was furious–furious at the village, furious at the hypocrites who prayed to a silent god while trampling on the weak, and most of all, she was furious at the stark reality of being a woman in a world engineered by men, where rules were written by fathers and sons, and broken on the backs of daughters–a world where her body was a vessel to be claimed, judged, and discarded at their whim.

"Never again," she uttered, her voice a ragged promise to the empty woods. "Never again."

She forced herself back to her feet. She clutched her womb and pressed onward, following the distant, rushing sound of water.

The trees began to thin, and the oppressive gloom of the forest gave way to an open space. She burst through the final line of brush, stumbling into a wide, rocky clearing.

Before her, a river raged. It was wide and deep, its dark waters churning with white foam as they crashed over rocks, cutting a clear path through the landscape.

Collapsing to her knees at the water's edge, where the damp stones bit sharply into her bare skin, she reached with trembling fingers for the leather

pouch strapped to her waist—a heavy, sagging weight filled entirely with coarse, grey powder.

While the village believed she had merely packed her meager belongings and wept her way past the borders, none knew of her secret pact with the village witch, a woman whose dark arts were typically reserved for bleeding out unwanted babes.

This time, however, the witch's malice served a different purpose– providing the woman the paralytic herbs that she slipped into the Elder's son's cup to leave him entirely motionless yet agonizingly conscious as she dragged his heavy frame into the abandoned root cellar. There, having watched the arrogance in his eyes dissolve into a delicious, frantic terror beneath a pile of dry kindling, the woman savored his desperate screams as she struck the flint– burning him alive beneath the earth to turn his flesh and bone into the very catalyst she needed.

To summon the Night Goddess, a price of blood had to be paid.

She reached into the bag, scooping up a handful of the coarse, grey ash. She raised her eyes to the blood-red moon, her voice rising above the roar of the river.

“I call upon the Shadow that walked before the light. Hear me!”

She casted the first handful of ash into the air. The wind claimed it, scattering the remains of her tormentor across the rushing waters.

“I have trampled their laws and spilled their sacred blood! Look upon the ashes of their pious son, burned in the crucible of my wrath!”

She pitched the remainder of the ashes, which the river devoured.

“I beseech you–do not leave me to the wolves of this world!”

The wind howled. The river roared. The red moon stared down, cold and indifferent.

Seconds ticked by and nothing happened. The air remained still, devoid of magic or any divine presence. The silence of the forest seemed to mock her, returning to its natural, indifferent state.

A bitter, hysterical laugh bubbled up in her throat.

Nothing.

Tales of the Night Goddess were merely beautiful lies, spun to make women believe there was more to their bleak existence. There was no salvation in the dark. There was no vengeance waiting in the shadows.

She was just a broken, exiled woman, doomed to die in the wilderness with a bastard child ripening in her womb.

“Foolish,” she whispered, tears finally spilling over her lashes, hot and stinging against her scratched cheeks. “So very foolish.”

The sound of a snapping twig echoed sharply over the rush of the river. She froze, her breath catching in her throat before slowly raising her head.

Directly above her, perched on a thick, gnarled branch of an ancient willow tree that wept over the riverbed, sat a raven. The creature was massive and midnight-black, its feathers so dark they seemed to absorb the ambient red light of the moon.

But it was not its size that made her blood run cold.

It was its eyes.

They were two pools of molten, brilliant gold–glowing with a terrifying, ancient intelligence. The bird tilted its head at her. When it spoke, the sound resonated directly inside her mind. It was undeniably, mesmerizingly feminine, yet it carried the weight of a thousand different voices.

“You cry out for the night, yet you weep when it answers.”

“You...you are the Night Goddess.”

“Names are for the mortals who bind themselves to dirt and stone. Tell me, mortal, what is your name?”

“My name is Carmilla.”

“Carmilla,” the voice echoed, tasting the syllables. *“You have brought me a pleasing scent tonight–the ash of a hypocrite, burned in the fires of a woman’s wrath. It has been quite some time since a mortal amused me so. What is it you seek from me?”*

Carmilla dragged herself to her knees. She clutched her swollen womb with one hand, while raising her other towards the raven, palm open.

A gesture of absolute supplication.

“I pledge my soul to your shadow. Give me the malice to shatter those who defiled me, and the immortality to outlast them. Make me a creature they can never harm again.”

“Immortal life,” the Goddess mulled. *“A grand request, indeed. My gifts are not given freely. The dark demands a heavy price. What could a penniless, exiled mortal possibly offer in exchange for eternity?”*

The anger inside Carmilla had burned away any lingering traces of maternal instinct and replaced them with the iron will to survive.

“I offer you the life growing inside me.”

The raven tilted its head.

“You offer me your child? How deliciously blind you mortals are to your own depths. You speak of a singular child, but you do not harbor merely one life within that vengeful shell of yours. Nay, there are two pulses beating with you–two sparks of life fighting for dominance in the dark of your womb. You offer me a bounty you did not even know you possessed.”

A cold sweat broke out across Carmilla’s brow. Not one, but two children– conceived on the same horrific night?

The raven expanded its wings, casting a massive, unnatural shadow over the entire clearing that blocked out the crimson light of the moon. The air grew freezing cold, frost instantly crackling across the damp rocks around Carmilla’s knees.

“Hear my terms,” the Goddess commanded, her voice vibrating the very stones. *“I accept your bargain. I shall grant you the immortality you crave. Your flesh shall never rot, and your enemies shall learn to fear the shadow you cast. But the price must be paid in full. Of the twins you carry, I shall claim one. But the other shall be allowed to live.”*

“To live as a…mortal?”

“This child shall be reborn in my image. She will be a child of the night, bound to the same dark tides that will soon govern your own veins. This child will possess power that will make the elders of your village weep for mercy.”

The raven descended from the branch, landing on the rocky ground just inches from Carmilla. The golden eyes were suffocatingly close now, reflecting the terrifying, remorseless depths of the cosmos.

“But heed this warning, mortal. This child will be born of your flesh, but it will never truly be yours. It will belong to me. You will nurse a viper at your breast, and you must guide her to her destiny–a prophecy I shall reveal to you piece by piece over time. Together, you shall forge a new lineage, a kind truly invincible, until I hold total dominion over this wretched world. Every enemy who ever hunted you will be vanquished, and I shall look after my children for all eternity. Therefore, do not allow yourself the luxury of a mother’s love, for the dark is a jealous master. And remember, should you falter in your service–your immortal life will be forfeit, too. The night gives, but the night can always take back.”

Carmilla was trading one cage for another, but this new cage gave her a chance to make the world bleed the way she had bled.

“I accept,” Carmilla whispered. “Take what is yours.”

A white-hot agony tore through Carmilla's abdomen, a pain so violent it eclipsed every injury she had ever known.

She screamed, but no sound came out. The cold rushed in–dragging her down into a bottomless, suffocating blackness. Her consciousness flickered, and she collapsed onto the rocks, consumed by the dark.

When Carmilla opened her eyes, the world was silent. The agonizing pain in her belly was gone, replaced by a strange, hollow numbness. She lay flat on her back, staring up at the sky.

The blood-red moon stared back at her.

But everything was different.

Carmilla blinked. Her vision was sharper–she could see every individual vein on the underside of the leaves across the clearing. She could hear the frantic, rhythmic heartbeat of a field mouse buried beneath the dirt a few paces up the riverbank.

She pushed herself up. This time, her hands did not shake. The ragged, bloody gashes on her shins and hands were gone–replaced by smooth, unblemished skin that possessed a translucent pallor. She felt no fatigue. She felt no hunger.

She felt entirely, terrifyingly empty.

The heavy, taut swelling of her stomach was noticeably smaller, though still present. The phantom weight of one life had vanished, but a single pulse remained.

The pulse was too slow for a human child.

The price had been exacted in the dark while Carmilla slept. She was no longer human.

And neither was the life remaining inside her.

Carmilla rose with an unnatural grace, leaving no trace of the broken girl who had stumbled into the clearing hours earlier. She looked back toward the direction of her village, her new golden eyes piercing the deep shadows of the forest.

The monsters who had cast her out had no idea what was about to crawl out of the dark.

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1

Present Time

Wind cut through Ren Harper's leather armor as she trudged through the snow. This far north of Pyraelia, the land remained locked in winter's stubborn, icy grip. Thick snow and slippery ice crusted hard beneath Ren's boots. Her legs trembled with every step. The air itself was cold enough to sting her lungs with every breath she took.

"Are you sure we can trust this person?" Talen Vaelaran's voice carried behind Ren, edged with doubt.

"Yes, and I'm sure Sylven's soldiers haven't gotten this far north yet," Ren answered.

That was what she told herself, anyway.

Trudging behind Talen, Lucan Brightbane grumbled, "A few more degrees of this and my lineage ends right here in the snow. Sylven's soldiers will have nothing left to hunt but a eunuch."

Just hours ago, they had barely escaped Sylven Draeth, a once-decorated officer of House Vaelaran’s King’s Guard turned traitor. To Sylven, the Crown’s sharing of vital resources to humans during the Winterblight plague was a betrayal of fae blood. He saw humans as unworthy of saving. As the officer charged with imprisoning humans and other creatures alike and delivering them to the butcher’s block, Sylven had been all too eager to march them to their deaths.

When the height of his betrayal came into fruition, Sylven didn't meet them on a battlefield as one would expect from a well-decorated officer; instead, he settled the score with a scentless poison embedded in the wine, snuffing out every one of House Vaelaran’s noble subjects in a single evening.

It was an act of personal cruelty. For House Vaelaran, wine was its lifeblood, coaxed from sun-drenched eastern vines and savored by its subjects as its greatest export. Sylven had chosen wine as his weapon, knowing fully well that Vaelaran subjects would drink it without question.

And Mount Solfira finished what he started.

Mount Solfira’s eruption tore the sky apart, reducing Pyraelia to ash and ruin. Yet somehow, someway, all four of them were still on their feet.

Alive.

It had happened too fast to feel real. All that mattered now was to keep moving. Survival only demanded motion–understanding could follow later.

Ren glanced at Lucan, and her throat tightened. Every so often, he sniffled, trying to pass it off as the wind against his face. But she saw the sheen of tears in his eyes. Against every expectation, he had survived. More than that, he had come back for them. *Rescued* them.

Talen’s pace never faltered behind Ren. His jaw was set tight, nostrils flaring with restrained fury. The last thing Ren recalled was Elira swinging her blade for Talen’s throat. Ren had thought Elira was just another prisoner she’d met on the cart to the butchering block, supposedly on her way to a blacksmithing apprenticeship in Pyraelia. Ren even grew to see Elira as a friend.

But it was all a lie.

Elira had used a glamour to hide her true lineage: she was fae, and one of Sylven's deadly soldiers. The betrayal still left a bitter taste of foolishness in Ren's mouth. She knew better than to trust anyone, yet she had let her guard

down for the first person who dared show her kindness–only to be backstabbed for it.

After witnessing what she thought was Talen's death, Ren remembered being swiftly pulled to the void within her own mind–whatever that place was. That was the final straw for Ren; she couldn't accept a world where Talen did not exist.

Ren's gaze drifted over Talen's shoulders, catching a glimpse of his sister, Princess Kaelin Vaelaran. Kaelin followed with her chin lifted, though the motion seemed forced. Her steps were uneven, and her violet eyes shone bright with tears. This was not the fierce princess who had once stood untouchable beneath the banners of House Vaelaran. This was someone carrying the ashes of a fallen kingdom on her shoulders and still trying not to break beneath the weight of it.

Ren turned back ahead as tears burned fiercely behind her own eyes. She could only make out the black sky and the dark shapes of pine trees covered in snow. They were all here. *Alive*.

But even as Ren led them through the darkness, her thoughts drifted back to earlier, when she had regained consciousness. The last thing she felt was Eve's lips pressing against her clammy forehead. And above her, Kaelin's face appeared. Fear had stripped Kaelin bare, her eyes bright and wide, her expression fractured. The sight lodged itself deep in Ren's heart, an ache she knew would never fully fade. In that moment, Ren wanted to cup Kaelin's face and banish that fear, to be the one steady thing in a moment that had nearly broken them both.

Alive, Ren affirmed again, clinging to it like a sacred vow.

Fryphessyrth lumbered behind them, her wings half-furled. The dragon's wings drooped at her sides, each step slower than the last. She'd flown them across nearly half the continent in hours, turning what would've been a three-day ride into a desperate sprint across the sky. Their options were few and far between, but Ren knew one place that might take them in. A weathered tavern on Driftwood Bay's outskirts called the Splintered Siren.

Driftwood Bay squatted along the northern coast of House Vaelaran territory, a port stitched together from stubborn souls who refused to leave. Trade came in fits and starts, drawn from ships stopping to resupply. No one lingered in Driftwood Bay unless they had roots deeper than the tides.

Ren hoped the tavern keeper still remembered hers.

They had only been walking for fifteen minutes, yet the brutal cold had stretched every minute into something that felt closer to an hour. Ren squinted into the night air as the Splintered Siren mercifully came into view, lanternlight wavering against the warped timber of its windows. A cracked female figurehead watched from the roof above the front door, her splintered form mirroring the tavern's name.

This had to work. History was history.

Right?

Each porch step groaned under Ren's boots. She rapped twice on the door. The door was made of thick, weathered planks, reinforced with long black iron hinges hammered into the wood. Rust clung to the metal from the volatile weather of this region. The wind never stopped, and it showed.

As they waited, Ren glanced back. Kaelin simply crossed her arms, gaze fixed on the tavern door, her expression carved from ice. She had not spoken since they began traveling. When Ren had first met the fae princess, Kaelin had been cunning, intelligent, and a fierce protector of her people, but especially well known for her cutting remarks. Needless to say, Kaelin's silence was uncharacteristic.

Ren hadn't found a moment to pull her aside, to ask if she was all right. Yet Ren recognized the hollow stare Kaelin had–the kind of shock that suffocated you from the inside and left the world around you blurred and far away.

Ren knew what that felt like.

The night Ren's parents were murdered, everything afterward had passed in a blur. She remembered only pieces. She didn't fathom the elderly couple who found her wandering barefoot on the road, or the warm blanket they wrapped around her trembling shoulders. She didn't feel the rickety wagon that carried her away from the ruin of her life. She did remember staring at her blood-stained hands, blinking at them as if they belonged to someone else.

Kaelin wore that same look now. The knowledge sat heavy in Ren's chest as she ventured a step forward, trying not to choke on her own nerves as her knuckle rapped against the wood in a second round of knocks.

"You look like you're about to bolt into the woods," Lucan noted, pressing his palms together and rubbing them for warmth against the bitter cold.

Ren scratched the back of her neck. “Last time I came here, we didn’t exactly part on good terms.”

“What did you do?” Talen asked.

The door swung open before Ren could answer.

And there stood Brenna Thornell, the owner of the Splintered Siren. Her lumbering frame was caught in the firelight from behind her, her green skin gleaming like weathered jade. Broad shoulders filled the doorway, heavy with muscle, her posture relaxed only in the way of someone who knew no one there could move her if she chose otherwise.

Brenna’s eyes narrowed into slits. A wide, powerful jaw set her features into an expression permanently intimidating, made all the more striking by the faint curve of tusks that peeked past her lower lip. One side of her dark hair was shaved close to the scalp, the other falling loose and framing a face marked by old scars and hard-earned survival. Leather and metal clung to her like a second skin, the bones and studs worked into it speaking to battles long finished and debts long paid.

If looks alone could kill, Ren would already be a corpse on the floorboards.

“Ren Harper,” Brenna hissed through clenched teeth. “You’d better have a damn good reason to show your face here. Otherwise, you’re leaving in pieces.”

Ren felt Talen’s stare burning into her back.

In Ren’s experience, Orcs didn’t posture or bluff in battle or in business. Orcs had never been a people of courts or pleasantries. Problems were met head-on, and respect was earned through strength and follow-through. Brenna was no exception.

Ren lifted her hands in surrender. “Brenna! It’s been ages. I’ve been dreaming about your apple pies, and—Saints above—your hair looks amazing. Have you tried a new oil? Let’s—”

Brenna’s fist came flying.

Ren ducked, but Brenna still clipped her shoulder, sending both of them stumbling through the doorway and crashing onto the ice-covered porch. Ren scrambled on a patch of ice and grabbed onto the railing of the steps to keep herself from falling headfirst.

“Let’s talk this out!” Ren wheezed as Brenna grabbed her tunic and hauled her up for another swing.

Behind them, steel rasped as Talen drew his sword.

“STAY BACK!” Ren barked, shoving Brenna away. “This is between me and her!”

“You are a walking catastrophe!” Brenna seethed, winding up for another punch. “Breaking my furniture, brawling with my patrons—”

“I only fought *one* patron!” Ren protested, dodging another swing. “And he started it. Look, can we please—”

Brenna fisted the front of Ren’s shirt, their noses nearly touching. “You broke the bedframe in half, scorched my floorboards, and then tried to pay me back with discontinued currency, you *rat*.”

Ren winced. “I didn’t know those coins were discontinued, but I can pay you back now. Actually, that’s why we’re—”

Brenna looked past her and froze as her eyes found the massive shadow hulking several paces away. Fryphessyrth lifted her head, smoke curling from her nostrils. A guttural warning growl rumbled through the frigid night air.

Brenna went deathly pale. Her voice came out as a whisper.

“…Is that a fucking *dragon*?”

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2



Brenna’s hand trembled as she raised her mug. The ale sloshed against the rim before she forced down another swallow.

Despite Brenna’s shock, she’d pressed wool blankets into their arms the moment they stepped into the hall before hurrying to the hearth. Within moments, Brenna fed kindling into the flames until the fire crackled to life.

Tables and mismatched wooden chairs circled the hearth in uneven clusters, their surfaces scarred from years of use. Off to the side sat the kitchen, dark and abandoned at this hour, with iron pots hanging above empty counters. To the left stretched the long bar where drinks were usually served, though tonight not a single patron lingered there. The entire tavern felt hushed, as if the cold outside had seeped into its bones.

Kaelin perched at a nearby table, while Lucan hunched near the fire. Talen sat close beside Ren.

Ren told Brenna everything. From the moment Ren had been imprisoned and on her way to the butcher’s block, and then being commissioned to Pyraelia to fight creatures plaguing the realm. Ren told of the undead swarms, bred directly from those who fell victim to the Witherblight. She spoke of Zakhar’s betrayal and of Sylven’s treachery. With every distant shift of Fryphessyrth’s massive body outside, the color drained more from Brenna’s face, her posture bracing as if the winged beast might burst through the tavern wall and tear her head off her broad shoulders.

“By all the high hells,” Brenna breathed when Ren finally fell silent. “So that’s it, then. Pyraelia is gone, and Sylven Dreath sits upon the throne as a usurper.”

“It’s almost impressive how quickly the world can go to hell,” Ren reached beneath her cloak to withdraw a heavy coin purse. She tossed it onto the table, where it landed with a solid *thud*. “This is repayment for everything I owe you and then some.”

Brenna didn’t bother opening it. “I can’t let you stay here.”

Ren glanced around at the empty hall. “Come on, Brenna. You must have a spare room.”

“Sylven’s soldiers will come sniffing soon enough. If they find you under my roof, my business is finished. Worse, they’ll lock me up as a traitor, and I don't plan on rotting for you.”

“None of us saw Sylven leave. He could be dead.”

Lucan shook his head. “Not likely. Sylven’s cheated death more times than I can count on my fingers. When the tide turned during battles, Sylven would tear open portals, and we would slip through. He’s alive–that much is certain.”

“He won’t look for us,” Kaelin rasped, the first words she’d spoken in hours.

All eyes snapped to her.

Kaelin’s gaze didn’t waver. “No one saw us flee. For all he knows, we were buried beneath the rubble.”

“Which gives us an advantage,” Talen added thoughtfully.

Ren turned back to Brenna. “That purse covers two weeks of stay.” When Brenna parted her lips to protest, Ren cut in, “With *generous* tips.” She let the words settle, then softened. “You’ve helped me more times than I deserved. If you’d rather not risk it, we’ll leave at first light. Just… let us have this night. We’ve been through more than I can explain. Please.”

Something in Brenna’s face cracked–wariness melting into reluctant compassion. She gathered the coin purse with shaking fingers.

“I’ll think about the rest,” she said quietly. “But tonight, you may stay.”



The small room Brenna gave Kaelin and Ren was tucked beneath the rafters. A single candle flickered on the bedside table, casting soft gold over the narrow bed and the thick wool blankets piled atop it. Above, Ren heard the low thumping of Brenna's footsteps and Lucan's voice as she led him to his room upstairs.

Kaelin followed Ren like a shadow. The wool blanket clung to her shoulders.

"Let me help you," Ren murmured.

Kaelin stared forward, as if her mind hovered somewhere far beyond the walls of the tavern. Back in Pyraelia, perhaps. Ren reached for the clasp of Kaelin's cloak and loosened it carefully. The heavy fabric slid from Kaelin's shoulders and whispered to the floor.

"Lift your arms?"

Kaelin raised her arms. Ren tugged the fae princess' outer tunic upward, easing it past Kaelin's head. Beneath the linen, Kaelin's skin looked too pale, too fragile–like the slightest touch might shatter her. Ren set the tunic aside and reached for the nightdress Brenna had placed folded on the bed made of soft cotton, faded from years of washing. Ren guided it over Kaelin's lifted arms, letting the fabric fall down her body, where it hung gently at her knees.

Retrieving a comb from the bedside table, Ren lifted the first section of Kaelin's hair. It hung loose and tangled down her back. Ren combed through each section, untangling knots, brushing until each stroke moved freely. Her fingers slid into Kaelin's hair, smoothing it as she worked.

"Kaelin," she whispered. "I'm right here."

Kaelin's shoulders trembled. Ren discarded the brush and wrapped her arms around Kaelin's waist from behind, resting her cheek between Kaelin's shoulder blades. A single, sharp breath tore from Kaelin's lungs, followed by another.

And then the dam broke.

Kaelin's knees gave. Ren dropped with her, gathering Kaelin into her arms as the first sob ripped through her. The fae princess buried her face in Ren's shoulder, and her hands curled into Ren's tunic. Ren tightened her arms around her.

"I've got you. Let it out."

Kaelin's cries grew into guttural wails. Ren held her through every shudder and every broken breath until Kaelin's wails softened into quiet

sobs that soaked into Ren's shoulder, and Kaelin sagged against her. Ren stroked Kaelin's hair, her lips brushing the fae princess' temple.

"You're not alone. I won't let go. You're safe."

Kaelin leaned into Ren's touch. Ren pressed a kiss to Kaelin's forehead and gathered her closer, arms locking around her as if she could shield her from the memory of it all. Chaos still burned behind Ren's eyes, and she recalled the instant she'd realized Sylven had touched Kaelin–the way the world had narrowed to red, reason be damned. Ren held Kaelin tighter, grounding herself in the steady proof of her warmth, her breath.

They were, indeed, alive.

But the war was only beginning.

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3

Ren sat under a large willow tree with a pond in front of her.

The water was smooth, disturbed only by the faintest ripple. Two black-and-white fish circled in a hypnotic rhythm. Ren knew this was a dream. Everything was ethereal and startlingly white, untouched–nothing in the world had ever looked so pure.

A crunch sounded above her.

“Really?” an all too familiar voice drawled. “Not even a *hello*?”

Ren kept her gaze on the fish, refusing to lift her head. Their tails brushed as they wheeled around each other–steadily circling, never touching, and never stopping.

Zakhar sighed dramatically. Once, he had been the court mage who brewed the Verdant Elixir that saved many lives from the Witherblight. But he’d also been the one who created the Witherblight, before revealing his true nature–the notorious god of madness wearing a fae’s skin.

What kind of god would trade divinity for bone and blood?

“Mortals,” Zakhar huffed. Ren’s gaze flickered upwards, catching his form lounging across one of the willow’s low branches. “You’d think after everything we’ve been through, you’d at least *pretend* to miss me.”

Crunch.

“You know, people are always so quick to blame me. I never meant for things to go so badly, so I figured I’d come make sure there’s no tension

between us.” Zakhar flicked a sliver of apple skin onto the water. The fish darted apart at the disturbance, ripples fracturing their perfect pattern.

Zakhar clicked his tongue. “Everyone is so eager to blame someone when their fortunes turn. ‘Zakhar made them do it.’ ‘Zakhar whispered in their ear.’ The truth is far more boring. See, people turn on each other just fine without *my* help. They don’t need a push to do what they've done for generations. Sylven has a thousand years of history behind him. He acted on a cruel belief passed down from his father: that the Fae built the world and humans are just dust on the floor. I didn't give him that cruelty; he was *born* with it.”

Ren pressed her palm into the cool grass. She had to physically bite her tongue from snapping back at him. Heat crawled up her throat, and for one reckless moment, she considered driving the heel of her boot straight into his smirking mouth just to wipe that amused look from his face that she knew he had.

“That’s the truth mortals never want to face. They look at the bloodshed and the heartwrenching betrayals, and they prefer the lie that someone *made* them do it.” He took another bite and spoke around it. “But I merely watch. I’m a spectator, if you will.”

Ren’s jaw tightened.

“Chaos is the only honest thing in this world. It doesn’t pretend to be noble or fair. It doesn’t hide behind crowns or gods or courts.” He stretched out along the branch, one arm dangling lazily. “Chaos is the only truth–the rest are rules mortals invent so they can pretend the world makes sense.”

An apple core hit the pond. The ripples distorted their dance, warping them into ghostly smears of black and white.

“Look how quickly balance dissolves and how easily patterns are broken. Just one little nudge, and everything unravels.”

Ren still did not look at him.

“Come now, Flamebearer. You of all people should know what happens when the world tips.”

The fish found each other again in the water, circling as though they had no other choice.

Zakhar’s voice lowered, threading itself through the willow’s rustling branches. “You can pretend you don’t hear me. But chaos isn’t coming for you, Ren. It’s already *inside* you.”

The pond stilled, the fish froze, and even the willow's leaves hung in suspended silence.

Zakhar's final whisper curled against her ear, though he hadn't moved an inch. "Eventually, you'll stop pretending."

The dream quivered, the world peeling apart—

"*And I'll be here when you do*."

Ren jolted awake. The room was dim. When Ren reached to her left, her hand met only cool sheets. Kaelin must have pulled the entire blanket over Ren before slipping out. Ren pushed the covers away and left the room.

The hallway was dark, save for a sliver of orange glow spilling from the common room at the end of the hall. Ren padded toward it, heart tightening with every step until she saw Kaelin sitting on the floor before the inn's hearth, arms wrapped around her knees. She wore only her white nightdress, its hem pooling around her. The fire painted her in gold and shadow, but none of its warmth reached her face. She stared into the flames with a hollow stillness that made Ren's breath falter.

"You should be resting."

Kaelin didn't turn. She only shook her head stiffly.

Ren sat next to the fae princess. "You're exhausted."

"I don't deserve rest."

The words were so soft that Ren almost missed them.

"Kaelin…" Ren reached out. Kaelin finally looked at her, and Ren's hand froze midair. Kaelin's eyes were dark and empty in a way Ren had never seen.

"I couldn't save a single person. I watched them convulse from poison or lose their heads while Sylven's soldiers laughed and cheered. My people died because of *me*."

The fae princess' voice cracked on the last word.

Ren flinched like the words themselves had struck her. Suddenly the firelight, the room, all of it blurred at the edges beneath the sting gathering in Ren's eyes. For a terrible moment, she could only stare at Kaelin in silence as the full weight of what Kaelin had endured in Pyraelia finally crashed into her chest.

"I spent my whole life believing political treaties and diplomacy would keep my people safe," Kaelin seethed. "If I had honed my magic, maybe I could have stopped Sylven. Maybe my people wouldn't have died."

Ren’s jaw tightened hard enough to ache. Anger and grief twisted together beneath her ribs as she watched Kaelin tear herself apart over wounds Sylven had carved.

“He deceived us all,” Ren rasped. “You were forced to survive something no one should have to endure.”

But Kaelin was already looking back into the flames. “And now he sits on my family’s throne and wears my family’s crown. I swear upon my blood and crown, he will answer for this. But before that reckoning comes…”

She exhaled a ragged, shaking breath.

“I have to become someone who could have saved them–someone who will *never* be powerless again.”

The fire crackled. Ren reached out and took the fae princess’ ice-cold hands in hers. Ren placed a kiss against Kaelin’s knuckles.

“I’m with you,” Ren whispered. “Through vengeance, through rebuilding, through whatever comes next.” Her grip tightened, steady and sure. “You and Talen will rule justly. I believe that with everything I am, and the world needs that kind of change. And I’ll fight for that future–tooth and nail, fire and blood if I have to. I love you with everything I am, Kaelin Vaelaran.”

Kaelin met Ren’s gaze, and in the wreckage of grief and fury, Ren saw a small spark of warmth–fragile as an ember.

But undeniably alive.

Ren squeezed Kaelin’s hand. “We’ll reclaim your throne, your people, your home. You won’t walk that path alone. I’ll be with you every step of the way, so long as you’ll have me.”

Kaelin’s fingers curled around Ren’s palm. “To the end of the road, and whatever lies beyond it.”

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4

That night, Kaelin lay rigid under the blankets as Ren held her firmly from behind. Though Kaelin's breathing remained steady, Ren felt her shift restlessly. Ren forced her own breath to stay even, masking the fury simmering inside her.

Kaelin loved Pyraelia more than anything, and that love had twisted into a grief she would carry forever.

Ren stayed awake for hours, feeling the heavy burden the fae princess carried. When exhaustion finally claimed Kaelin, it took another hour for Ren to finally fall asleep.

Ren dreamed she stood over Sylven, watching dragonfire burn him to ash. The dream felt so good, until the actual smell of smoke jolted her awake.

Ren bolted upright to see a small flame was eating the edge of the blanket near her hand. Quickly, she scrambled to smother it with her trembling fingers.

Deep in her chest, Vortharax purred in approval.

Yes, that fury is worthy of fire. Let me loose upon him, mortal, and I will turn your enemy into cinders.

Ren swallowed hard, pressing a hand against her chest as if she could force Vortharax back into silence. *You are not burning the world to the ground just to satisfy yourself.*

The world would be better without Sylven in it, Vortharax growled. *With his death, Pyraelia's usurper would trouble no soul again.*

Do you think I was born yesterday? Ren shot back. *You don't care about justice. You just want to use me for power.*

Power belongs to those who can wield it, Vortharax sneered, his heat flaring beneath her skin. *And you are clearly too weak to do what needs to be done.*

Call me whatever you want. I would never trust you with that much power.

Yet you wield my *flame. You watch the princess wither from grief, and you choose to do nothing with my power at your fingertips.*

Your power is a sickness. Ren clenched her fists, her blood boiling. *I haven't forgotten what happened when I lost control. Mount Solfira erupted because of you–it was a massacre. I don't need your help to save her. I have my own strength.*

He pressed harder against her consciousness, his voice dripping with disdain. *Your own strength? You are weak, mortal. You will never achieve anything if you limit yourself to petty rules while your enemies desecrate your world. A true protector does whatever is necessary to retake what is theirs.*

Ren heaved a sigh. Realizing she was once again arguing with an ancient dragon that viewed destruction as a solution to most things, she forcibly shoved him toward the back of her consciousness and slammed the soul-bond shut as best she could.

Vortharax let out one final rumble before the silence returned.



When Ren woke again, she carefully untangled herself from Kaelin and crossed the room, peering through the wooden shutters. The earliest light of dawn filtered through the trees outside–just beginning to chase the night away.

Kaelin lay on her side, golden hair spilled across the pillow, her features finally at peace in sleep. The storm that had lived behind her eyes the night before had quieted.

At least for now.

Ren studied her for a moment longer before turning back to the window. Outside, the forest pressed thick and quiet around the Splintered Tavern. Somewhere, the dull thud of pans clanged faintly. Someone was already awake. Ren dressed quietly, buckling on her boots with careful movements so the leather wouldn’t creak. She took one last look at Kaelin—still sleeping, still safe—before slipping out the door.

Though the tavern remained silent, the front door was unlocked. Stepping out into the cool morning air, Ren watched the dew cling to the grass, where it sparkled in the early light. The world smelled of damp earth, pine, and wood smoke. A soft rustle stirred the grass to her right, and out of the brush emerged a small grey rabbit, its nose twitching as it nibbled at the blades.

The rabbit lifted its head, long ears angling toward Ren. The two of them simply stared at one another. Then, as if deciding she was far too large and strange to linger near, the rabbit flicked its ears and bounded into the tall grass.

Near the edge of the clearing, an axe leaned against the trunk of a tree, its blade dulled from long use. Ren tested the weight in her hands. She set a log on the chopping block, took aim, and swung. The axe struck clean through the wood.

Ren swung again.

The rhythm came quickly after that. Each strike rang out through the quiet clearing. The chill of the morning air bit at Ren’s fingers, but the motion warmed her. Muscles tightened, loosened, tightened again as she worked through the growing stack of logs beside the chopping block.

Lift.

Swing.

Crack.

Soon, a pile of split wood had begun to form at her feet. Ren wiped the back of her wrist across her brow and bent to gather the pieces, stacking them into an old wheelbarrow waiting nearby. The wood *thudded* as it landed inside, filling the rusted basin piece by piece.

Another few swings, another armful of logs.

By the time the wheelbarrow was full, the forest around her had begun to wake. Birds stirred and chirped in the branches overhead. Somewhere deeper in the woods, a distant crow called out. Ren grasped the handles of

the wheelbarrow and lifted. The old thing groaned in protest but held steady as she pushed it across the damp grass toward the tavern.

Ren nudged the heavy door open with her shoulder, its creak breaking the stillness of the hall. Inside, a few early risers were already at the long tables preparing breakfast, the air thick with the scent of oats and simmering broth. From her spot at the hearth, Brenna caught Ren's eye. She gave a small grunt—her version of a greeting.

Ren steered the wheelbarrow toward the great stone hearth that dominated the far wall. The fire from the night before had burned low, leaving behind only a bed of dark coals. She loaded the split wood into the casing beside the hearth, stacking it carefully so it would dry and catch quickly when someone came to stir the flames.

When the last log was set into place, Ren straightened and dusted her hands against her trousers. Outside, the sun had begun to climb higher, pale gold light creeping through the tall windows of the hall.

Ren's arms throbbed from hours of chopping wood as she wandered back to her room. The door creaked shut behind her, and she barely had time to take her boots off before Kaelin's voice rang out.

"Where were you?"

Kaelin was still in bed, but her eyes were too bright, breath too shallow– fear and panic barely contained beneath a brittle edge of fury.

"Chopping wood. I figured it could convince Brenna to give us more time."

Kaelin shot up, blankets flying, bare feet hitting the floor. "You should have woken me."

"You needed sleep."

Kaelin paced in front of the bed. "I thought Sylven's men had found us. I thought they *took* you."

"Hey, eyes on me," Ren murmured. Kaelin stopped dead. The panicked energy vanished from her posture, replaced by a rigid, dangerous calm as she locked her gaze onto Ren's. "I am right here. You were exhausted, Kaelin. I wasn't going to wake you."

Kaelin bared her teeth. "If I woke up to find that they took you, I would rip the world apart piece by piece until there was nothing left standing between us."

An amused smirk tugged at the corner of Ren's mouth. "Flattering, truly. But let's leave the world intact if you can help it—I quite like the clam

chowder here.”

“Do you find this funny?”

Ren crossed her arms and tilted her head. “I find you terrifying when you’re fiercely protective, if that’s what you mean. But watching you threaten the world for me is doing dangerous things to my self-control. It makes me want to do very wicked things to you.”

The dangerous, rigid calm that had settled over Kaelin weaponized as soon as her gaze locked onto Ren’s mouth. The joke about the clam chowder, the lighthearted deflection, the arrogance all dissolved into the background noise of a room that suddenly felt entirely too small to contain them.

Kaelin crossed the distance between them before Ren could even draw her next breath. There was no hesitation, no soft prelude. Kaelin lunged forward and fisted her hand into the front of Ren’s linen tunic. She gripped the fabric so violently, pulling Ren toward her with such unbridled force that the seams along the collar gave way.

Ren didn’t resist. She met the impact head-on as Kaelin brought her mouth to hers.

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The kiss was fueled by the lingering adrenaline of Kaelin’s panic, by the terrifying certainty that she had almost lost the only anchor she had left in a world that was actively trying to bleed her dry.

Kaelin bit down on Ren’s lower lip which drew a sharp gasp from Ren. Ren tasted like salt, like cold night air, and like a living, breathing reality that Kaelin refused to let go of.

Ren clutched at Kaelin’s waist as she matched the frantic, aggressive rhythm. They bared their teeth against each other, a wrestling match of tongues and breath. Kaelin swallowed Ren’s low groan, channeling every ounce of her fury, her fear, and her possessiveness into the pressure of Ren’s delightful mouth.

Driven by a sudden need to dominate the space, Kaelin drove her weight forward and shoved Ren backward until her back collided with the wall. The impact sent a violent shudder, rattling a framed portrait hanging just to the right of Ren’s shoulder.

The near-casual destruction broke through the heat for a split second. Ren let out a breathless laugh against Kaelin’s lips—a sudden, involuntary burst of amusement at the sheer, unhinged velocity of Kaelin’s wrath.

But the laugh died instantly in her throat.

Kaelin broke the kiss by a mere fraction of an inch, her breathing harsh and hot against Ren’s skin. She didn’t look amused or like she was playing. Her eyes had gone completely dark, the pupils dilated so wide that the iris

was nothing more than a thin, lethal ring of color. It was heavy with a dangerous promise that made the air in Ren’s lungs turn to ice and fire all at once.

“You think this is a game,” Kaelin whispered.

Kaelin released the torn linen of Ren’s tunic. Her hand slid down Ren’s ribs, over the sharp curve of her hip, leaving a trail of searing heat. Ren’s breath hitched, her body going completely rigid against the wall as Kaelin’s fingers found the waistband of her trousers.

Kaelin slipped her hand inside, easing past the barrier of linen, her knuckles brushing against the sensitive skin of Ren’s hip before venturing lower.

When Kaelin’s fingers slid between Ren’s thighs, she found Ren was already slick and soaking wet. Kaelin let out a low, guttural groan against Ren’s neck.

She knew she’d never tire of Ren’s contradiction.

Ren was always so fiercely guarded, so infuriatingly confident with her quick wit and her mocking smirks–acting as if nothing in this wretched world could ever shake her foundation. But beneath Kaelin's hands–all that armor melted away. There was an intoxicating power in knowing that Kaelin possessed the key to Ren's undoing—that with nothing but her own touch, she could strip away the clever remarks and the deadly exterior, unraveling Ren bit by bit until there was nothing left of her but surrender.

“Where did all that mouth go, hm?” Kaelin whispered against Ren’s jaw, deliberately stretching her inside. “Not so cocky now with my fingers shoved so deep inside of you.”

Ren’s head slammed back against the plaster wall, her jaw locking so tight the muscles in her neck strained. She gritted her teeth, her eyes snapping open to glare at Kaelin through a haze of heat.

“You’re just as undone as I am,” Ren hooked a leg around Kaelin's hip and brought her hips forward. She ground against Kaelin’s hand, seeking the fae princess’ fingers to go deeper. “You love how wet I am for you. Look at you—you’re shaking just watching me *take* it.”

Kaelin curled her fingers inside Ren that made Ren’s fingers knot convulsively into Kaelin’s shoulders. Kaelin leaned close and whispered into Ren’s ear, her voice low and possessive.

“I’m going to make you come so undone for me,” Kaelin’s thumb found the swollen center of Ren’s pleasure and pressed down with a cruel, steady

friction, “that the next time you think about leaving this room without me, your body is going to remember *to leave a damn note*.”

Ren whimpered–a sound of pure surrender that was so uncharacteristic of her, but entirely earned. Kaelin began to move her hand in earnest. She didn’t offer a gentle build-up; she drove Ren straight toward the edge, using the slick friction to punish and pleasure her in equal measure.

Ren may have thought this was just a game of control, but she didn’t understand the terror that had settled in Kaelin’s chest. Ever since that day with the snow wisp, Kaelin hated when Ren vanished without a trace. It brought back every dark, suffocating instinct Kaelin possessed, and the fae princess was getting thoroughly tired of reminding Ren where her boundaries lay. Kaelin truly was pissed. Her blood was screaming with genuine rage at the thought of Ren’s empty bed.

But admittedly, fucking Ren made it feel *so much* better.

It was the only way to quiet the noise in her head, the only way to prove to her own frantic heart that Ren was still breathing.

Still *here*.

Yet every stroke was a reminder of ownership. *She’s mine.* Every time Kaelin’s thumb swiped hard against her, Ren’s back arched off the wall, her breath hitching in broken, desperate gasps.

“Kaelin—please,” Ren choked out, her pride entirely incinerated by the relentless pace. She tried to lift her leg again and to wrap it around Kaelin’s hip to seek a deeper friction, but Kaelin used her free hand to pin Ren’s shoulder back against the wall, keeping her at her mercy.

Kaelin growled, her dark eyes tracking every expression of pleasure and desperation lighting Ren’s face.

“You wanted me to sleep? You wanted to watch over me? Well, watch this–keep your eyes on me. Don’t you *dare* close them.”

Kaelin increased the pressure. Ren’s breath turned into a frantic chant, her fingers clawing at Kaelin’s back, her head thrashing against the plaster as the pressure built into something unbearable.

When Ren’s climax hit, her body clamped down around Kaelin’s fingers, her hips shuddering in an uncontrolled release that had her crying out. She shook from head to toe–the pleasure so intense it bordered on agony as she clung to Kaelin.

Kaelin held Ren through the crest of it, her fingers deep inside the pulsing heat of her contraction, watching with a cool satisfaction as Ren

disintegrated in her arms. Only when the tremors began to fade into a slow, heavy ache did Kaelin withdraw her hand. She glanced down at her glistening fingers, then up at Ren’s flushed expression. Kaelin brought her fingers to her mouth, and her gaze never left Ren as she slid her tongue over her own fingers–licking them clean.

Ren didn't move, but the sudden, tight pull of her lower lip between her teeth spoke volumes. Even through the heavy haze of her release, Ren’s eyes darkened–already aching for more.

She had just realized how entirely she belonged to the hand that had wrecked her, and she *wanted more*.

Kaelin leaned in, pressing one last kiss to Ren’s swollen lips.

“Don’t make me look for you again without a note, because next time I’ll make you beg for it–and I may not be as generous to let you finish.”



Talen didn’t look up from his stew when Ren entered the great hall, but the deliberate slow slide of his spoon told her he’d already clocked her. He was leaning back, one elbow propped on the heavy oak table, looking infuriatingly well-rested while Ren’s thighs still trembled.

She slid into the heavy chair across from him, hoping the fire would mask the flush on her neck. Talen set his spoon down. His eyes traveled from her damp hair, down to the oversized collar of her tunic, and back up to her face. A slow, knowing smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“Nice of you to join the living,” he pushed a basket of cold bread toward her.

Ren caught the basket, her jaw tightening as she forced her hands to remain steady. “Don't start with me, Talen.”

Talen leaned back, the wooden chair creaking under his weight as he let out a low chuckle. He tapped his fingers rhythmically against the table.

“Oh, I’m not starting anything, but next time you two decide to settle your domestic disputes, you might want to remember how thin the walls are–I’m certain even the stable hands know exactly how active you two were this morning.”

Ren froze, a piece of bread halfway to her mouth.

“Eat up,” he added, gesturing to her bowl. “Sounds like you performed a full day’s labor before sunrise. Thanks for chopping the wood, by the way. Brenna mentioned it to me.”

“When did you wake up?”

Talen’s features dropped. “Too early.”

Kaelin arrived moments later. Talen didn’t miss a beat. He tilted his head, a knowing grin lighting across his face as he watched her approach.

“Good morning. We were just discussing the structural integrity of these walls. I was telling Ren that the plasterwork around here seems to take quite a beating—”

“One more word, Talen, and I will gladly recount the afternoon I had the distinct misfortune of tracking you to that beach in Windhaven with the–”

Talen, immediately knowing where she was going, cut in defensively. “It’s not my fault you came to a beach meant only for the uninhibited.”

Ren pressed her hand to her mouth, forcing a laugh down into a rough, unconvincing cough.

“Excuse me,” Ren smoothed down the front of her shirt, lips twitching at the corners. “There must have been something in the air that irritated my throat.”

Kaelin didn’t break Talen’s gaze. She seethed, “I am still trying to scrub the image from my mind of you tangled in the *surf* with that merman. I know it was a free cove, Talen, but *really*? There are some things a sister should never have to see.”

“Doing anything in the sand sounds uncomfortable. I can’t imagine the chafing,” Ren remarked with a wicked grin.

Talen’s grin snapped shut, his jaw clicking as he cleared his throat and looked down at his stew. Pleased, Kaelin smoothly slid into the seat right beside Ren.

A large orc from the kitchen stomped over, carrying a wooden tray. He set down more crusted loaves of bread alongside a small dish of black salt, followed by steaming bowls of stew. When Ren glanced up, he gave her a short grunt of greeting before lumbering back toward the kitchen.

The tavern doors swung open just then. Cold morning air rushed inside along with a cluster of fishermen and dockworkers. Their boots thudded heavily across the floorboards as they filed in, exchanging rough greetings with one another. The quiet hall filled quickly with the low murmur of voices. Orders were shouted toward the kitchen. Chairs scraped across the

floor. The smell of saltwater and wool coats mingled with the scent of broth and fresh bread.

Ren took a sip of the stew. It was the kind of meal sailors needed before long hours on the water—thick and hearty. Barley swirled through the broth, with chunks of cabbage and carrots.

Behind the counter, Brenna was already greeting a few familiar faces.

“Double or nothing on an arm wrestle, Brenna?” a dockworker called out, slamming his elbow onto the wood with a grin. “If I win, the next round is free. If you win, I’ll pay double.”

Brenna didn't even look up from wiping the bar.

“The last time you tried that, I pinned you with my left hand while pouring a pint with my right. And the sea will swallow you whole before you ever get a free drink again, Barnaby.”

The man laughed and slid onto a stool, anyway.

The people here weren't like the Pyraelian nobles. There were no polished smiles concealing ulterior motives, no careful pleasantries laced with hidden meanings. At court, every word was a test. Here, people simply said what they meant, right to your face.

It was a relief.

Ren’s gaze drifted briefly toward the tavern door, her thoughts turning darker. After Elira’s betrayal, Ren didn’t have the patience left for the games nobles liked to play.

Kaelin took a tentative sip of her stew. Her expression remained perfectly composed, betraying nothing of her thoughts. Talen, on the other hand, had nearly finished his entire bowl already.

A sudden shift across the table caught Ren’s eye as Lucan dropped heavily into the chair opposite her, yawning into his fist. He eyed the stew with deep suspicion. Taking a cautious sip, his face immediately twisted into a scowl. Ren swiftly kicked him pointedly under the table.

Let’s hope Brenna didn’t see that.

“Strong arms on you, Harper. You saved me from freezing my ass off splitting wood at dawn.” As the universe with its sadistic humor would have it, Brenna appeared beside the table, a towel slung over her shoulder. Her gaze slid immediately to Lucan, who was in the middle of desperately trying to smooth his expression into something polite.

Too late.

Brenna's eyes narrowed. Ren cleared her throat. "I'll gladly help out with things here and there if you'll allow us to stay a bit longer."

Brenna met Ren's eyes squarely across the table, weighing her for a long moment. "So long as your coin is worth something."

"I'd say it is."

Brenna's gaze drifted across the hall, toward the growing clusters of fishermen and dockworkers settling in for their breakfast.

Then Brenna leaned closer to their table, fixing Ren with a hard stare. "But your winged friend had better not scare off my customers or harm my animals," she warned, her tone sharp as a fishhook. "The beast wandered straight to the barn last night and nearly sent my horses into a frenzy."

Ren's throat went dry.

Brenna continued. "If that dragon touches so much as a single crate of my produce, you're out this time—*for good*."

Ren went to reply, but Talen spoke first. "We understand, and if she does happen to consume or damage any property of yours, we will gladly cover the cost." His voice carried that calm, polished authority Ren suspected he could summon without even trying.

Brenna's shoulders dropped and her expression softened.

But when her eyes returned to Ren, the warmth vanished. "I'm glad we understand each other, Harper."

Ren gave her a thumbs up. Grunting, Brenna returned to the kitchen. The orc disappeared through the swinging door with the same purposeful stride she had arrived with.

For a moment, the table was quiet. Then Lucan let out a long, low whistle. "Well, you certainly know how to leave a lasting impression."

Ren stabbed her spoon back into her stew. "Only the best," Ren muttered dryly. "Seems like I need to go have a conversation with Fryphessyrth."

Talen nodded. "That would be wise. It wouldn't do us much good for the wrong eyes to spot her." His gaze flicked toward the busy tavern hall. "Most people in this realm have never seen a dragon. Panic would spread quickly."

"We should also learn what her intentions are," Kaelin stated.

Lucan let out a low grunt of agreement. "Indeed, and why she was waiting beneath the palace for who knows how long." He nudged his bowl of stew away from him with a look of disdain.

Ren noticed immediately, tapping the rim of his bowl with a silent, questioning eyebrow. With a sigh of surrender, he slid the bowl across the table toward her.

“Have at it.”

Ren grinned and dug back into the bowl. It was a simple, hearty fare, and she found it absolutely delicious.

“Right then,” Ren muttered when she finished. “Time to go ask a dragon politely not to eat the locals. If I’m not back in an hour, assume Fryphessyrth disagreed with the conversation and send aid as soon as possible, or I’m haunting your asses as a ghost.”

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Ren wrenched open the barn door. The smell of hay, leather, and horses drifted out to greet her. And there, sprawled in the middle of it all like an oversized housecat that had claimed the place for itself, lay Fryphessyrth.

Fast asleep.

Her enormous wings were folded against her sides, the edges of them buried beneath piles of hay. One claw rested against a stack of feed sacks. Her tail curled through the aisle like a lazy serpent, knocking gently against a wooden stall door every time it twitched.

"Seriously?" Ren stepped inside, hands planted on her hips. "*This* is what you'd rather do all day? *Sleep*?"

One massive golden eye cracked open.

Then the other.

Fryphessyrth blinked slowly from the dimness of the barn. The dragon lifted her head with a soft rumble and stretched her wings, scales rasping against the wooden beams overhead. When she shifted, her tail gave an idle wag that sent a nearby barrel wobbling before it tipped–and carrots and potatoes spilled across the floor.

Ren pinched the bridge of her nose. "See, this right here," she said, gesturing wildly at the vegetable carnage, "is exactly why you can't *stay* here."

Fryphessyrth let out a deep, smoky huff that ruffled the hay like a sudden gust of wind.

Ren dragged a hand through her hair, trying to gather her thoughts while the dragon watched her. Eventually, Fryphessyrth lowered her head and rested her chin on her massive foretalons.

“I think you’re smart enough to know we can’t have you wandering around the countryside. If people see a dragon, they won’t assume you’re here for friendly conversation–they’ll run and grab their pitchforks and torches.”

Fryphessyrth’s nostrils flared. A ribbon of smoke curled into the air, making Ren cough.

Ren crossed her arms. “Which brings me to the real question. Why *are* you here?”

I came because I am able. Zakhar bound me beneath the palace long ago.

“You’re telling me that bastard buried a dragon under the castle himself?”

Fryphessyrth’s tail flicked through the hay again.

Indeed.

Ren let out a low whistle. “Well. There’s little that surprises me anymore.” She paced once through the barn aisle before stopping again in front of Fryphessyrth. “But that still doesn’t explain why you’re *with* us.”

Fryphessyrth studied her for a long moment.

Because I intend to help you.

“You… want to help me.”

Yes.

“Why?”

I have my reasons, as you have your reasons to fight.

“You told me the dragons would return with a vengeance–where exactly do you stand in all that?”

I stand in keeping the Flameborne alive.

Ren let out a slow breath and rubbed the back of her neck. “Well, that’s… interesting.”

She paused and glanced up again. Fryphessyrth filled nearly half the barn, her emerald scales catching the dim light that filtered through the wooden slats in the walls. Even sitting still, Fryphessyrth looked like a

creature that belonged on a mountain peak–not nestled among bales of hay and barrels of produce.

“But also extremely useful.” Ren slipped into the practical tone she used when trying to solve problems that felt much too large. “First thing first, people can’t see you–not until we know how they’ll react.”

Fryphessyrth’s tail swished through the hay behind her.

“So, until then, you have to stay hidden. That means no flying over the town, no perching on rooftops, no dramatic landings in the middle of the harbor–as tempting as that may be. Understood?”

Fryphessyrth blinked once, patiently.

“Second problem,” Ren added, glancing toward the barn doors, “it’s going to take some time before I convince Brenna to let a dragon live in her barn. In fact, it may never happen. We aren’t exactly on the greatest terms right now. So for now, you’ll have to find a burrow or cave somewhere deep in the woods.”

What am I to do if you are in harm’s way?

Ren’s shoulders stiffened as heat crept up the back of her neck. Was she… flattered about a dragon worrying about her safety?

Gods help her, she might be.

Ren cleared her throat and tried to look unimpressed. “Well, if things get ugly, I’ll call for you. But don’t forget, I can handle my own most of the time.” She tilted her head, offering the dragon a crooked grin. “Does that sound like a deal?”

Fryphessyrth’s eyes gleamed in the dim barn.

So be it, Flameborne. Call, and I will answer.



In the days that followed, life fell into a rhythm.

Ren swept the hall each morning, scrubbed tankards until her fingers pruned during the dinner shift, cleaned out the soot-choked chimney when regulars were long gone, hauled water from the well every morning and evening, and washed dishes after evening service.

It wasn’t glamorous, but the routine kept her steady.

Talen and Lucan had fallen into a more brutal rhythm, training from sunrise to long past dusk. But especially Talen. Ren heard the thud of his

fists against the practice post every morning before the tavern even stirred.

As she went to fetch more water from the well, she watched him wrap his torn knuckles himself and go again.

“You know,” Ren called, setting the bucket down, “resting once in a while gives your bruises time to catch up.”

“I don’t need rest,” Talen muttered without looking at her, striking the post again.

Ren watched the way his shoulders stayed rigid, the way his jaw locked as if he were bracing for something that never came. Training wasn’t about discipline anymore; it was about penance. He was bleeding off the fear and fury the only way he knew how.

And no amount of bruised knuckles was going to be enough to quiet it.

Every day, Kaelin wandered the woods alone, disappearing for hours at a time. She rarely ate more than a few bites during meals. Most nights, she jolted awake from nightmares with a scream that ripped Ren straight from sleep. Other nights, she bolted upright and vomited over the side of the bed. Ren always held her hair back, always rubbed circles between her shoulder blades–always whispered, *You’re safe. I’m here*.

As the nights slipped past, what had once felt like a pressing need to move, to plan, to do something, softened into a weary stasis.

Many nights, Ren woke to the emptiness beside her. The bed was cool where Kaelin should have been, the sheets barely disturbed. If Ren lingered long enough, she might catch sight of Kaelin later as a shadow slipping between the trees, vanishing into the woods with the rise of dawn. When Ren asked where she went, Kaelin offered half answers, vague reassurances–words carefully chosen to give nothing away.

Kaelin needed space. Healing wasn’t always something you could stand close to. Sometimes it demanded distance, quiet, room to breathe. Ren knew that hovering too much could feel more like a cage. Still, understanding didn’t quiet the instinct to reach out and ask Kaelin to let her in.

So, it killed her, but Ren let her go.

They existed in a strange in-between, caught between what had been lost and what had yet to take shape. Answers felt just out of reach, like handfuls of sand slipping through their fingers, no matter how tightly they grasped. Waiting became a habit, and silence, a steady companion.

Then the rumors came. Sylven lived. More than that, he had crowned himself King of House Vaelaran. Word said he had guided people to safety during the rupture of Mount Solfira–that he was brave and worthy of reverence. Even worse, that the nobles who died had simply been trapped behind the palace walls.

A bald-faced lie.

Sylven wore the mask of a hero now, a figure the people could cling to in their grief. But beneath it was a fae who had murdered his way to the throne.

Ren imagined driving him into the ground, making him beg for mercy, for forgiveness–for an ending he did not deserve. And when the image faded, the fury remained, burning quiet and steady in her chest.

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“You missed a spot.”

Ren shot Lucan a glare. “I did not.”

Lucan pointed toward the edge of the table. “Crumbs, all right there. Tragic oversight, really.”

Ren’s eyes narrowed as she wiped them away with perhaps a bit more force than necessary.

“It’s dark in here,” she muttered. “The storm’s blocking half the light.” As if eliciting a remark, thunder boomed overhead.

“Mm.” Lucan leaned back against the next table, clearly enjoying himself. “Those crumbs never stood a chance.”

Ren glowered at him hard enough that he finally barked out a laugh.

It was a rainy afternoon, and Ren and Lucan worked side by side in the common room of the Splintered Tavern, wiping tables. The space was mostly empty, the hush broken only by the creak of floorboards, the steady rhythm of rain, and the rattle of shutters in the breeze.

That, and their bantering, of course. The banter rolled easily between them—teasing comments traded back and forth between chores, neither willing to surrender the last word. Ren found, somewhat annoyingly, that she liked it. Most people either shrank from her temper or grew uncomfortable when she snapped back. Lucan never did. He threw every jab right back at her without hesitation, like he enjoyed the challenge as much as she did.

It surprised Ren how far Lucan had come from the polished, well-decorated fae soldier she had originally met in Pyraelia. At that time, he'd been all well-practiced smiles and arrogant words, taking pointed jabs at her as if she were a flaw to be corrected. Now, the arrogance worn down, as though loss had stripped him of everything ornamental and left only what mattered.

One family had lingered longer than the rest that evening—a pair of weary parents and three rambunctious children who seemed determined to leave their mark behind. Crumbs were ground into the wood, sticky smears clung to the edges of plates, and chairs sat askew as if the room itself had survived a small skirmish. By the time they departed, the table looked worse than when they'd arrived—evidence of chaos left in the wake of too much energy and too little restraint.

As the evening wore on, Lucan worked without complaint, but he moved slower than usual, his gaze unfocused. After a long stretch of silence, he spoke.

"I wonder how my father is doing–if he's even alive."

Ren paused, cloth in hand.

Lucan's thumb repeatedly traced the rough grain of the tabletop, his grip tightening until his knuckle turned white. "I wouldn't even know where to begin looking for the truth."

They couldn't exactly send a message. Lucan's father was one of the wealthiest council members of House Vaelaran and owned most of the land in the east. There, he rented fields to farmers who grew vineyards for Pyraelia's wine supply.

Ren set the cloth down. "For what it's worth, Sylven rarely saw you with us. You could check on your father–it's possible Sylven wouldn't even notice you or think you were worth the trouble."

Hope flickered across Lucan's face, but then it dimmed. He sighed. "My shadow is still tied to yours. If I fall into Sylven's grasp, he'd harvest my memories whether I offered them as a gift or had them torn from me through brutal interrogation. I know the limits of my flesh. I once saw him keep a courtier awake for three straight days," Lucan's voice grew quieter. "One by one, Sylven dragged in the man's friends and family and executed them in front of him until he finally broke. By the end, the courtier was thanking him for ending his life. Needless to say, given enough of Sylven's brutal interrogation methods, I would spill every truth I owe you just to

make the world go dark." His gaze lifted, weary but resolute. "And I will not have my last act on this earth be the betrayal of my sovereign."

Ren's gaze drifted back toward the table, though she no longer saw the scattered crumbs of bread.

If Sylven ever got his hands on Lucan…

Her stomach twisted at the thought.

She had no doubt that Lucan would endure it–he'd grit his teeth and take whatever torment came his way before betraying them. The sad part was that Lucan believed himself weaker than he truly was, even while surviving things that would break most fae.

Ren turned from the table, drawing in a slow breath through her nose. She forced her shoulders to relax, forcing the tight knot of rage and fear back down where it belonged. Images flickered through her mind—the kinds of things Sylven may have enjoyed doing to people who refused to bend to his will. Her fingers curled against the edge of the table.

No.

Her friends had already suffered enough. The thought of any of them ending up in Sylven's hands twisted something sharp inside her chest. Still, she knew how much Lucan's father still meant to him despite their rocky relationship. Ren had caught the signs of mistreatment before—she had glimpsed wounds left by a father who had not always been kind.

But whatever the fae had been, he was still Lucan's father. Lucan deserved to know whether he still walked this world.

If the man still lived, they would find out.

And if he wasn't still alive…

Then Lucan deserved to know that, too

When Ren finally looked back up, Lucan had already returned to his work, conversation fading back into the comfortable silence of shared tasks. As Lucan headed out the door to empty the mop bucket, Ren noticed something about the tavern felt… wrong.

Years ago, this place had been loud enough to shake its rafters, serving as a safe haven on the far north-western border, close to the northern road past Ironforge. Brenna had always kept a tight hand on her rules—no brawling, no stealing, no nonsense—but she never minded a busy night.

Now, Brenna was lucky to see two villagers come in before dusk. And as soon as the last sliver of sunlight vanished, the tavern emptied. This was

typical when the Witherblight plagued the lands, in fear of it spreading, but the illness vanished the day Pyraelia fell.

Just as Ren began sweeping, a woman draped in silk and jewelry settled herself near the hearth, the firelight catching in the folds of her gown and the heavy jewels adorning her throat and wrists. Rings flashed as she spoke to Brenna, her hands cutting through the air in exaggerated, practiced gestures. Every movement seemed designed to remind the room that she did not belong in places like this.

Ren swept near the hearth when Ren caught the woman's name in mid-conversation: *Lady Ysra Thornwick*.

"I'll have your finest soup and bread, madam," Ysra continued, chin tipped upward as she arranged herself on the tavern chair to get comfortable.

"You got it," Brenna confirmed, already sauntering toward the kitchen. Her voice faded as she disappeared through the doorway, swallowed by the clatter and low muttering of the cook.

Ren resumed sweeping, but the name tugged at her. It sounded strangely familiar. Where had she heard that name?

"This is a fine tavern," Lady Ysra remarked. "Very… quaint." The word lingered, heavy with judgment.

Ren turned the name over in her mind again. Lady Ysra Thornwick.

And then she stilled.

Corrin Fenwick.

The memory struck—the prison cart, the stink of fear and iron, the jolt of wheels on stone as they'd been hauled toward the butcher's block. Corrin had filled the silence with gossip no one had asked for.

Joss, one of the other survivors, had reminded Corrin of his third ex-wife, Lady Ysra Thornwick. Ren remembered the sneer in Corrin's voice when he'd mentioned her and said she'd left him for a bard.

Ren's grip tightened on the broom.

"Madam."

Ren turned at the sound of her voice, meeting Ysra's gaze and noting the deep emerald green of her eyes that assessed Ren with open curiosity.

"I'm getting a very strong aura from you tonight," Ysra folded her fingers together atop the table with practiced elegance.

"Must be the stench of my sweat," Ren retorted. "I've been working my ass off all day."

Ysra waved the comment away with a delicate flick of her wrist.

“No, no. I’m a palm reader.” She leaned closer, lowering her voice and casting a furtive glance toward the kitchen. “Brenna doesn’t care for loitering. But if you’re interested, I could give you a quick read?”

“Oh, yeah?” Ren planted a hand on her hip and arched a brow. “And what’s the cost of my impending doom?”

Ysra smiled then, and it was a warm, dimpled thing that softened the lines of her face. Ren could suddenly understand how Corrin had fallen for her. She was lovely.

Once, she reminded herself. Long ago. *Poor bastard.*

“It’s not much,” Ysra chimed sweetly. “Come. Sit.”

Ren sighed in resignation and dropped into the chair across from her, immediately assaulted by the heavy scent of floral oil. Ysra extended her hand. Despite the fine wrinkles lining her skin, her palm was soft. Ren placed her hand in Ysra’s.

Age had begun to trace itself along Ysra’s features in delicate lines, yet it had not stolen her beauty. Her dark hair was still thick and neatly kept, though streaks of grey had begun to appear near her temples. Her lips were thin and dainty, colored a careful ruby red, and a touch of blush warmed the gentle curve of her cheeks. She was the sort of woman who had grown more striking with time rather than diminished by it.

So this is her, Ren thought. *The woman Corrin once loved, married, then lost.*

“Hm,” Ysra murmured, tracing a slow line along Ren’s palm. “There is a great change coming for you. You’ve worked here quite a bit, I see.”

Ren bit the inside of her cheek to keep from grinning.

“You are restless–a traveler at heart. You will find great success in movement, seeing new places, new paths.” Her eyes widened suddenly. “Oh! And you will find love! You shall meet a man who is protective–someone who will look after you.”

Ren blinked. “Really?” she deadpanned.

“Yes, indeed. Now, madam —”

“Let’s not waste any more time,” Ren pulled her hand free. Her gaze flicked over Ysra’s glittering jewelry, her smooth curls, her perfectly darkened lashes. “I’ve only worked here for two weeks. I’ve been traveling my entire life and would like to finally settle somewhere worth staying.”

Ysra stilled.

“And,” Ren added with a wicked smirk, “I’ve already found my love. She’s *very* attentive.” Ren’s eyes gleamed. “Especially between the sheets.”

For the first time all evening, Ysra was left speechless. Ren leaned back in her chair, folding her arms across her chest.

“So,” Ren drawled, “how long have you been doing this?”

Ysra’s cheeks flushed a vivid scarlet. For a moment, she looked as though she might bolt. Then her shoulders sagged. “I’m… still learning,” she admitted.

“Clearly.”

Ysra winced, her posture folding in on itself. “Did I get anything right?”

Ren clicked her tongue. “Not a single thing.”

She watched the way Ysra’s fingers twisted together, stripping away the last of her haughty act.

“You need to spend some actual time practicing,” Ren suggested, her voice losing its mocking edge. “There has to be a real gift for this somewhere inside you, but you won't find it by rushing. And until you do, you need to be mindful of how much you're charging people. It’s a dangerous game, selling false hope.”

Ysra swallowed hard, looking down at the scarred wood of the table.

“I don’t have the luxury of time,” she whispered. The practiced, melodic lilt was entirely gone from her voice. “I left another husband and walked out with nothing but what I could carry. I have to start over again, and I need coin to do it.”

Ren’s gaze softened as she looked at the desperate woman across from her.

“I know exactly what that’s like.”

Before Ysra could respond, a shadow fell across the table.

“Ysra,” Brenna’s voice rumbled from Ren’s left as the Orc set down a bowl of steaming potato soup and a sliced roll. “I hope you’re not peddling any more of those palm readings.”

Ren kept her eyes on Ysra’s suddenly panicked expression. “She tried a quick one,” Ren answered smoothly. “But I encouraged her. What can I say? Curiosity got the better of me.”

Brenna shot Ren a glare. “No more of that, d’you hear, Harper? It’s superstition, all of it.”

“Understood,” Ren replied lightly, offering a wink.

Brenna snorted and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Ysra stared down at the table as if she might sink through it. The confidence she'd worn earlier had left her looking oddly fragile. Ren felt a flicker of pity before she reached into her pocket and tossed a few coins onto the table.

Ysra startled. "Madam?"

"For your time," Ren rose from her chair. She took a step away, then hesitated, something tugging at her. "Do you know a man by the name of Corrin Fenwick?"

Ysra's face twisted. "Why?" she snapped. "Has he come crawling back? I begged him to bathe, to brush his hair, and to drink less. But men never change." She scoffed bitterly.

Ren stilled. Quieter, she said, "I met him on the butcher's block nearly a year ago."

The color drained from Ysra's face. "The *butcher's block*?"

Ren nodded once. "We were scheduled for execution by the order of House Vaelaran."

Ysra leaned forward, fingers trembling. "By the gods," she whispered. "Did he…"

"We were attacked by a horde of ogres. Corrin fought until the end–he died an honorable death."

Silence stretched between them, broken only by the crackle of the hearth.

"I just thought you should know," Ren added softly. "He spoke of you."

Ysra's eyes shone, unshed tears gathering as she pressed her lips together. "Thank you," she managed. "For telling me."

Ren nodded and resumed sweeping. Ysra ate in silence, the clinking of her jewels the only sound in the room until the sun settled over the horizon. Brenna appeared over the barstools, counting out her coins from the day for inventory.

After Ysra slipped out, Ren asked, "Since when does this place have a curfew?"

Brenna didn't look up from counting her coins. "People stay indoors when dark comes."

Talen entered from the hall then, hair still damp and clinging to his temples from washing up after training. "What's keeping everyone inside?"

Brenna lifted her gaze at last, and there was something haunted in her eyes. "Vampyres."

Ren and Talen froze.

“They’re *real*?” Ren breathed.

“That’s the rumor, and you’d be smart to heed it.”

Seeking a distraction from the sudden tension, Talen reached across the counter, effortlessly hooking the handle of an amber jug to refill his horn. When he flipped a heavy silver coin toward Brenna, Brenna waved it off.

“Pyraelia held an entire wing of ancient tomes concerning vampyres,” Talen remarked idly. He swirled his ale, watching the foam rise with the casual detachment. “As a youngling, I used to steal away to the lower stacks and spend hours devouring them. I had a few years of nightmares as a result.”

“Why on earth would Pyraelia have literature about vampyres?” Ren asked.

“Blame my mother. She had a notorious, rather exhausting obsession with the supernatural. I suppose that is where I got my morbid curiosity from.”

He took a slow sip of his ale, a smirk playing at the edge of his lips.

“She particularly enjoyed the histories that leaned heavily into romantic melodrama. She fancied the idea of dark, brooding creatures doomed to eternal pining. Half of the restricted section in Pyraelia is just centuries of her hoarding dramatic poetry and scandalous forbidden-love chronicles. I went looking for wartime strategy and ended up reading about blood-bound soulmates.”

Ren couldn’t help but smile. “Your mother never ceases to surprise me.”

“Only Veylan truly knows the catalog’s origin. Pyraelia’s foundations were laid some two thousand years ago, Ren. Some of those texts were already ancient when the first stone was carved.”

Brenna dropped her rag down onto the wooden counter, the movement cutting through the brief moment of levity like a blade.

“They’ve taken three souls already,” She looked directly at the fae prince, her eyes hard and hollow. “Two of them, their bodies were never found–gone into the night without a trace.”

She paused.

“But the last one was found in her own bed. Her body was cold and completely drained—as if she were sucked dry.”

“Did they find puncture wounds?” Talen asked.

“Yes.” Brenna touched the side of her neck. “Right here.”

“By the gods…”

Ren thought back to the stories telling of monsters of the night, creatures of thirst. Childish tales, really—things children whispered to scare each other, or warnings woven into old fairytales meant to keep wandering kids from straying too far after dark. She had always believed them nothing more than myths.

But she also once thought undead armies and dragons were myths, too.

“Someone needs to find the creature’s resting place and drive a wooden stake through its heart,” Ren stated, leaning on her broom. It was the sort of thing she used to hear in those old tales as a child.

“They do slumber during the day,” Talen added thoughtfully.

“Feel like hunting down another creature together?”

Their gazes locked across the room. Ren knew they should be planning, mapping routes, weighing risks, deciding what came next. But information was its own kind of weapon. It wouldn’t hurt to linger a little longer, to listen, to gather what the streets knew about Sylven and his soldiers before choosing their next move.

Talen chuckled at the look in Ren's gaze. “Clearly you do, but let’s skip signing a contract this time.”

Ren broke into a pleased grin. “I trust you, Talen. No contract required.”

Hope flickered in Brenna’s eyes. “If you can find this bloodsucking bastard, you can stay here anytime you wish–free of charge. This tavern may not look like much anymore, but it’s been in my family for generations. I’ll be damned if I let it go under because of some nocturnal parasite.”

Ren let out a low whistle and held out her hand for Brenna to shake. “You have yourself a deal.”

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8

Night fell, and the Splintered Tavern's common room grew dim, lit only by the amber glow of a low fire. Ren walked in quietly, holding a steaming cup of tea. Kaelin was curled up on the rug by the hearth, and she didn't turn around.

Ren sat down. “Brenna says a vampyre is hunting the locals. Talen and I are going to hunt it before more people die.”

“How do you plan to hunt it?”

“We’ll find its lair. It has to sleep somewhere. When we do, we'll drive a stake through its heart.”

Kaelin didn't look up, but her posture went rigid.

“We’re in no position to fight a creature we know so little about.”

“I’ve done worse. This isn’t—”

“You don’t get to gamble your life every time danger appears,” Kaelin snapped, meeting Ren’s amber gaze.

Ren felt her own defenses snap into place. Through gritted teeth, she seethed, “And you don’t get to decide what risks I take.”

Kaelin held Ren’s glare. “Someone clearly has to.”

“I’m not helpless.”

“I never said you were, but you often throw yourself into the jaws of every monster we meet as if your life means nothing. Your life means *everything* to me.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No? Because it feels like you’re trying to get yourself killed.”

Heat flared in Ren’s chest. “Maybe I’m just tired of sitting around while people suffer.”

“And maybe I’m trying to keep you *alive*.”

“This thing is *killing* people. Someone has to stop it! It’s selfish to do nothing.”

The words hung between them like a physical blow.

Kaelin didn't flinch, but she met Ren’s gaze with an unyielding glare. Ren glared right back, her fists balled tightly at her sides–refusing to back down or to apologize for the ugly truth she’d just hurled between them.

The crackle of the dying hearth was the only sound in the room, but neither of them looked at the flames. They stayed locked together, eyes burning with a mixture of fury, stubbornness, and a desperate, aching fear that neither knew how to voice. The bridge between them had suddenly worn too thin to cross, leaving them stranded on opposite sides, completely at a loss for what to say next.

How could Ren show Kaelin that she cared and that she understood her grief? She would stand by her side no matter what, ready to protect her home.

No... *their* home.

Ren understood the fear, too, lurking inside Kaelin that pushed her further away with each passing day. Ren knew the trauma would linger and fester inside Kaelin like a rotting wound. No medicine and no healer could touch this kind of pain born from a sense of failure and self-loathing.

Just weeks ago, Kaelin had burned with fury. She’d sworn vengeance for her people and to reclaim her throne. Now, she seemed like she’d been hollowed out piece by piece, until only the outline of a fae princess remained.

Ren placed the tea on the floor beside Kaelin.

“It’s honey chamomile,” she grumbled. “Good for settling nightmares.”

Kaelin didn’t touch it; she didn’t even look at it.

Ren swallowed hard. “Kaelin,” she managed, her voice cracking, “you haven’t eaten today.” Ren shifted closer, brushing her fingers against Kaelin’s arm. “Tell me what you need. Anything. Just… don’t shut me out.”

A single tear slipped down Kaelin’s cheek. Ren wrapped an arm around Kaelin’s shoulders, pulling her gently into her side. Kaelin didn’t lean in, but she didn’t pull away, either.

“Please,” Kaelin whispered at last, the word barely more than a breath. “The risks are too great. We don’t know anything about vampyres.”

“I know, and you’re right to be afraid.” Ren brushed her thumb over Kaelin’s knuckles. “But I’ve fought monsters before. You used to trust me not to underestimate my own strength. Trust me now.”

The fire popped, sending sparks up the chimney—small, defiant points of light in the dark. Kaelin’s gaze drifted back to the fire.

“I could stop you,” the fae princess murmured. Her fingers twitched in her lap before violet eyes clashed with amber. “I could *make* you stay.” Kaelin leaned her chin on her hand thoughtfully as she looked Ren up and down slowly, as if weighing a possible opponent. “I could bind you to the room and keep you safe. Even if you hated me for it.”

Ren froze. She saw the flicker of darkness behind Kaelin’s eyes.

Fear sharpened into control.

Ren surged to her feet. “No. You don’t get to say that.”

She turned away, needing distance—air—space—

And stopped.

Her feet wouldn’t move.

Ren tried again.

The command fired through her body, sharp and instinctive, but her legs remained locked in place–as if her limbs had been frozen.

Her jaw clenched. She pushed harder.

Move, damn it!

Nothing.

Kaelin’s gaze was fixed on Ren with unsettling intensity. Magic hummed in the air, like pressure before a storm.

“Whatever bullshit magic you’re using, cut it out,” Ren snapped.

Kaelin’s eyes flicked downward instead, tracking Ren’s legs, as if Ren’s inability to escape were a variable to be assessed.

Ren’s breath came fast, fury and dread twisting together. No matter how many times she commanded her body to obey, it refused.

“Kaelin, stop this. *Now*.”

But Kaelin remained suspended in that trance-like stillness, caught somewhere between fear and control, between love and something far more dangerous.

Ren’s breath hitched. “Look at me. Look at what you’re doing.”

Nothing.

“This is how monsters justify it,” Ren snarled. “They say it’s for love, for protection, for my own good. You’re not a monster, Kaelin–so stop acting like one.”

That did it. Kaelin flinched as if struck. Her head jerked up, eyes finally locking onto Ren’s, the trance shattering in an instant. The hold around Ren’s legs vanished, and Ren staggered forward a step, catching herself on the edge of the table.

“If you ever bind me, if you *ever* take my will from me again, we’re done.” Ren’s voice shook, but the certainty in it did not. “Do you understand?”

The fire crackled between them, suddenly too loud. Without another word, Kaelin turned away. Her shoulders slumped, and the rigid line of her spine softened as the last traces of magic bled out of the room.

She nodded once.

Ren exhaled through clenched teeth, her hands still trembling at her sides. “Good. Now, drink your damn tea, *Your Highness*.”

The cup sat untouched beside Kaelin. But the silence didn't last. As Kaelin withdrew into herself, the sudden wall between them made Ren’s temper snap.

Seeing red, Ren grabbed a wool scarf from the bench beside her and hurled it. It flew across the space, a dark blur. Kaelin barely managed to duck, the fabric brushing her hair before thudding harmlessly against the hearth.

Kaelin spun around, her eyes flashing with fury. “Are you out of your *mind*?”

“Look at me!” Ren shouted. “Don't just shut down and shut *me* out!”

“I am trying to save your life!” Kaelin shoved Ren’s shoulder, catching Ren off guard.

Ren stumbled back a step but instantly surged forward, shoving Kaelin right back. “I don’t need saving! I need you to fight *with* me!”

They collided in a chaotic blur of hands, heat, and months of unsaid things. Ren grabbed Kaelin’s tunics to pull her close; Kaelin gripped Ren’s wrists to stop her. They wrestled for dominance, tripping over the edge of the rug, neither willing to back down until Kaelin twisted her grip, leveraged her weight, and slammed Ren back into the timber wall.

The impact knocked the breath from Ren's lungs.

Kaelin pressed her weight against her, pinning Ren’s wrists against the wood on either side of her head. Neither of them moved. They stayed locked there, chests heaving, their breath mingling in the dim space. The anger vanished as quickly as it had erupted, leaving only a raw, terrifying closeness. Kaelin’s gaze dropped to Ren’s lips, then traveled slowly back up to her eyes, her grip loosening until her fingers were merely resting against Ren's skin.

Leaning her forehead gently against Ren’s shoulder, Kaelin let out a ragged breath.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.” Ren felt the slight tremor in Kaelin's frame. “When I was a youngling, everyone feared my magic. To have control over someone's will is a terrifying thing. I swore I would never be what they whispered about.” She paused to take a deep, shuddering breath. “This was the first time I have ever misused it. I used my ability on *you*, Ren. I cannot believe I stooped to that level.”

Ren held her gaze, the sting of the magic still a fresh, static hum in the back of her mind.

“Yeah, well,” Ren muttered. “It was a prick move, for sure.”

Kaelin blinked, a breath catching in her throat as she stared at her, clearly expecting a speech, or a curse, or a declaration of hatred—not a casual tavern insult.

“Ren, I am trying to explain the gravity of—”

“And you’re a royal pain in the ass,” Ren cut her off, her eyes narrowing. “But if you think a little mind-trick is going to make me pack up and run away from you, you’re wrong.”

“I am trying to tell you that I violated your trust, that I am dangerous, and that you should be—”

Ren didn’t let her finish.

Frustrated by the guilt, the talking, and the agonizing distance between them, Ren grabbed Kaelin by the front of her tunic and yanked her down, slamming their lips together and effectively cutting Kaelin’s voice off into a sharp gasp.

The kiss was a bruising collision of teeth and built-up tension, a fierce, silent demand for Kaelin to realize Ren wasn't going anywhere. For a split second, Kaelin went rigid with shock. Then, her hands tangled into Ren's hair, pulling her closer as the anger between them melted into pure fire.

When Ren finally broke the kiss, she didn’t give Kaelin a second to recover, to overthink, or to offer another high-and-mighty royal apology. Instead, Ren dropped low, drove her shoulder straight into the fae princess’s abdomen, and hoisted her off the floor.

“Ren, what—” Kaelin gasped, the breath knocked right out of her as she hung over Ren’s shoulder. She kicked her legs, her fists thudding against Ren’s shoulder blades. “Put me down! This is absurd!”

“Shut up,” Ren growled, her grip tightening like a vice around the back of Kaelin’s thighs.

Ren charged down the narrow, dimly lit hallway of the tavern. She kicked the door to their shared room open with enough force to rattle the hinges, stepped inside, and threw Kaelin straight onto the mattress.

Kaelin hit the furs, her limbs sprawling, but she didn’t stay down. She was scrambling up onto her elbows, her eyes flashing with a dangerous, golden heat, when Ren lunged onto the bed after her. Ren pinned her down, her knees trapping Kaelin’s hips, her hands slamming into the mattress on either side of Kaelin’s head.

“You think you can just carry me off like a prize?” Kaelin hissed.

“I think you talk too damn much,” Ren snapped.

Then Ren slammed her mouth back down on Kaelin’s, and any remaining arguments died in their throats. This wasn’t a gentle reconciliation; it was an extension of the fight they’d been having all night. Ren bit down on Kaelin’s lower lip just hard enough to draw a sharp, needy gasp, using the moment to slide her tongue deep into Kaelin’s mouth–claiming her completely. Kaelin arched her back, her fingers clawing at Ren’s clothes, desperate to tear away the barriers between them.

“You’re such a royal pain in the ass,” Ren muttered against the fae princess’ lips, breaking away for a fraction of a second to trail a line of harsh, biting kisses down the elegant curve of Kaelin’s throat. “Telling me what I can and can’t fight. Telling *me* what to do.”

Kaelin’s head tilted back to give Ren better access, even as her hands tangled furiously in Ren’s hair, pulling her close enough to hurt.

“Because you’re reckless,” Kaelin retorted. “Because you don’t care if you get hurt, apparently.”

“I care about this,” Ren growled. “Look at me, *Your Highness*. I’m right here. And I’m not going anywhere.”

Ren reached down and tore at the laces of Kaelin’s tunic. The fine fabric gave way, pooling around Kaelin’s shoulders and exposing the pale, flawless expanse of her skin to the cool night air. Ren cupped Kaelin’s breast, her thumb rubbing hard over the aching peak until Kaelin cried out, her hips jerking upward in an involuntary plea.

“Please, Ren. No more talking.”

“Oh, *now* you want me to be quiet?” Ren teased as she bit down on the sensitive skin right where Kaelin’s neck met her shoulder. “Too bad. You wanted to control my will earlier, didn’t you? Well, look at you now. You’re completely at *my* mercy.”

Kaelin’s breath hitched, a flush creeping up her chest. The reminder of her magic should have dampened the mood, but spoken in Ren’s rough, unforgiving dirty talk, it turned into pure liquid heat. “Ren, please...”

Ren didn’t waste any more time. She reached down, overriding Kaelin’s trousers, her hand sliding past the damp linen of her undergarments. When her fingers made contact with Kaelin’s center, she found her completely soaked, slick and burning hot.

“Gods, look at you,” Ren whispered, a fierce, possessive satisfaction flooding her chest. She slipped one long, calloused finger inside, testing Kaelin’s tight depth, and Kaelin immediately choked on a sob, her eyes flying open, completely and utterly unraveled. “Look how wet you are for me–all that royal pride, and you’re begging for *my* fingers.”

“Shut up, just—ah!” Kaelin cut herself off, her back arching completely off the bed as Ren drove a second finger inside her.

Ren established a hard, unyielding rhythm, her fingers curling upward to find the exact spot that made Kaelin lose her mind. With her other hand, Ren pinned Kaelin’s wrists above her head, locking her down and forcing her to take every single bit of the pleasure.

“You want to keep me safe?” Ren murmured, leaning down so her lips were brushing Kaelin’s pointed fae ear, where she gave a quick nip. “You want to keep me alive? Then you better hold on tight, because I’m going to *ruin* you tonight. You’re going to take every single touch until you forget about everything else.”

Kaelin was completely helpless under her. She thrashed against Ren’s grip, her hips rolling desperately against Ren’s hand, trying to chase the friction. Ren’s fingers moved at a steady, maddening pace that drove Kaelin closer and closer to the edge.

“Ren, I can’t—it’s too much,” Kaelin gasped, her eyes clouded with pure, unadulterated lust–her golden gaze fractured.

“It’s not enough,” Ren corrected, increasing the speed, her thumb finding the swollen bundle of nerves at the apex of Kaelin’s thighs and pressing down firmly. “Tell me how much you need it. Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” Kaelin cried out, completely shattered, her royal dignity entirely stripped away. “I’m yours, Ren, please, *now*!”

Pleased, Ren pressed her thumb down hard, circling relentlessly while her fingers drove deep and fast inside Kaelin’s tight, pulsing heat. Kaelin’s breath caught in a sharp, ragged gasp. Her entire body went rigid, her toes curling into the furs as the orgasm slammed into her like a physical wave. She cried out Ren’s name into the empty room–a beautiful, ruined sound, her internal muscles contracting violently around Ren’s fingers and clamping down in tight, rhythmic spasms.

Ren watched the fae princess’ face through it all—the flush on her cheeks, the parted lips, the tears squeezing from the corners of her eyes. Ren kept her fingers moving through the crest of the climax, drawing out every single shuddering vibration until Kaelin finally collapsed back into the mattress, her breathing shallow and wrecked.

Slowly, Ren slipped her fingers free, slick with Kaelin’s release. She let go of Kaelin’s wrists, crawling up to lie fully on top of her, burying her face in the hollow of Kaelin’s neck as the adrenaline slowly began to recede.

Ren shifted her weight, pulling the heavy fur blanket up over Kaelin’s shivering shoulders before wrapping her arms around her, drawing the fae princess tight against her chest. She kissed the crown of Kaelin’s head, her voice losing every bit of its rough edge as she spoke into the quiet dark.

“I’m not looking for a grave, Kaelin,” Ren murmured. “I’m looking for a future–with you. So don't you dare think for a second that I'm ever letting you go. Gods know we both have our flaws, but I am in this with you through every single dark moment.”

Kaelin’s gaze searched Ren’s face, the fierce tension in her shoulders finally melting away. She reached up, her thumb gently tracing Ren’s jawline.

“Through the dark, then,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. “I'm holding onto you, too. Flaws and all.”



At first, Ren thought the dreams with Zakhar meant something.

Now they simply felt inevitable. Every night she was dragged back into the white grove beneath the willow tree, where the pond rippled softly and two fish circled. Their endless spiral had become her only constant. And though Ren was quick to give sharp retorts and unfiltered words, she knew the best way to deal with Zakhar was to keep silent and to listen.

Zakhar, however, had never mastered the art of silence.

“Sylven is settling right in at Greymoore,” he sing-songed from above, lounging along a willow branch. “You know, the place where you and Talen nearly gave your lives fighting the undead. If Kaelin hadn’t brought those precious reinforcements there, you’d be corpses.”

He took a bite of his apple.

“Sylven is building a new palace, bigger than the one in Pyraelia. He’s smarter than Maelion, too. He’s not putting it anywhere near a lava-spewing mountain.”

Something twisted in Ren’s chest.

Mount Solfira.

For a brief, horrible moment, she could almost picture the ash choking the sky, the molten destruction swallowing Pyraelia whole. A flicker of guilt crawled beneath her ribs before she could stop it. What if *her* magic had somehow awakened the mountain and destroyed all of Pyraelia?

There was a pause. When Zakhar spoke again, his voice softened.

“It’s nonsense that volcanoes erupt because gods are angry. Mountains break and fire rises to drown out the sun in those events. Such things have happened long before you, and they will happen long after.”

The tight, suffocating knot in Ren’s chest loosened, replaced with a sudden wave of relief. And then she realized…

Zakhar had *consoled* her.

Of all the people in the world to offer comfort–the last person she ever expected to quiet the storms in her head was him. Yet, in his own gruff, pragmatic way, he had given her exactly what she needed to hear.

“Chance, my dear Ren, is the hinge upon which chaos swings.”

Ren’s nails dug crescents into her palms. She kept her eyes fixed on the fish, willing herself not to rise to his bait.

“Speaking of chaos… look at poor Kaelin.”

Ren’s breath stilled.

“I expected feral devotion, perhaps even righteous fury. Instead, she’s withering like a fragile blossom. She may as well have handed Sylven her crown.”

Ren’s jaw locked.

Zakhar dropped from the branch, landing before her with feline grace. He crouched to eye level. It took everything in Ren not to meet his gaze–not to give him the satisfaction of her attention.

“People break in fascinating ways. But Kaelin is proving particularly delicate.”

Zakhar’s smile sharpened.

“Next time you go into town, listen to those around you, for there will be news from House Tharowen.” His tongue swept across his lower lip. “Something *deliciously* awful.”

He leaned closer, voice dropping to a purr.

“I cannot wait to see the aftermath.”

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9



The kitchen glowed with the light of the hearth. Embry wafted her flushed cheeks as she lifted the lid of the iron pot. Inside, the loaf had turned a golden brown.

Good, she thought, allowing herself a weary smile. *Just three more loaves before dawn.*

Outside, wind moaned against the shutters. The air that seeped through the cracks was cool, carrying with it the faint smell of the river beyond the fields.

Embry dusted her hands in flour again and pressed her palms into the pliant dough. Her muscles ached, but it was the kind of ache that meant there would be coin for a new pair of boots for Shepard before the frost came, and perhaps even a ribbon for Sasha's hair. Her hands paused briefly over the ample curve of her womb, wondering if there might even be enough left for more clothes for the baby, too.

They still needed to think of names. An old saying went that craving sweets, fruits, juices, and desserts pointed to bearing a girl, whereas craving salty or savory foods pointed to bearing a boy. Early on, Embry remembered having a viscous craving for anything with strawberries, which they–

"Mama?"

Embry glanced over her shoulder. Sasha stood in the doorway, a small silhouette wrapped in a nightdress that swallowed her frame. After the

hardship brought from the drought last year, most of the clothes they bought at market were intentionally too large, meant to last through growth spurts and lean seasons alike.

“What are you doing out of bed? It’s late.”

“I had another dream.”

Embry brushed a stray curl from her face, retrieving the bread lame to score the dough.

“Did you say your prayers?”

“Yes,” Sasha whispered. “I’m scared, Mommy. I want Daddy.”

Wiping her hands on her apron, Embry knelt before her daughter. It felt impossible that Sasha was already seven years old, her limbs stretching lean and tall in an exact mirror of her father. Tears shimmered in the girl’s amber eyes.

“He’s keeping everyone safe tonight,” Embry murmured, smoothing a thumb over Sasha’s cheek. “And he’ll be home before sunrise. I promise.”

A low rumble trembled through the floorboards. The glass jars above the counter rattled.

“What was that?” Sasha asked.

The rumble came again. Then came a roar. Living on the outskirts of their small village, Embry often heard beasts from the lands beyond.

But this wasn’t the sound of any beast Embry recognized.

“Get down!” she cried, sweeping Sasha into her arms.

A moment later, the wall behind the hearth split open in a blast of fire, the sheer force hurling them to the floor. Embers showered over the counter, igniting flour sacks in sudden bursts of gold and orange. Then, through the choking smoke, came the heavy, rhythmic beating of wings as a shadow passed over the shattered rafters. The roof groaned, then splintered.

The beast *landed*.

The impact sent cracks spidering through the stone walls. Embry clutched Sasha beneath her, her back pressed to the ground as debris rained from above. Embry dared a glance upward. The creature’s scales shimmered like molten glass, its eyes twin furnaces burning with hunger as it looked directly at them.

“Sasha,” Embry whispered, voice shaking. “Go wake your brother and run for the cellar, *now*.”

But Sasha only clung tighter, sobbing into her neck. Embry pushed her behind her, planting herself between her daughter and the beast. The

dragon. Her legs trembled, and her throat burned from the smoke.

But she stood.

If this was the end, then let it come through *her* first.

Embry dove for a nearby kitchen knife. She lunged for the dragon and drove the blade into its leg.

The blade broke in half.

Aghast, Embry backed up, her knees turning wobbly. The dragon lowered its head, nostrils flaring. Its golden eyes fixed on the small form trembling behind her. Embry's blood went cold.

Sasha is still here.

"Please," Embry choked. "She's just a *child*."

The creature's jaws opened.

"Sasha!" Embry shouted. "Go! *Run*! Get your brother!"

"No! I won't leave you!"

Tears streamed down Embry's face. The dragon's eyes glowed in the smoke and carnage, and in its eyes was some sort of intelligence, as if it sensed her fear.

And enjoyed it.

A light formed between the dragon's jaws. Embry whirled around and threw her arms wide to shield Sasha as best she could. For one breathless instant, the firelight reflected in Sasha's eyes—bright, terrified, and so heartbreakingly *alive*.

With as much strength as she could muster, Embry shoved Sasha's small frame across the floorboard. Embry gave one last final command to her daughter:

"Go get your brother and *find your father*!"

She couldn't see if Sasha succeeded. She saw a glimpse of cloth vanishing around the corner and heard Sasha's scream, but when Embry turned—

The air turned to molten flame.

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Years ago, Ren had entered Driftwood Bay's gates seeking coin and opportunity. The town sat with its back to the northern sea, hemmed in on the other side by a towering stone wall that separated it from the rest of House Vaelaran territory. Soldiers kept watch along it day and night, guarding against whatever prowled the northern ranges stretching towards Ironforge–far from Pyraelia's reach.

The town was just as Ren remembered. The cobbled streets were streaked with grime, and the people moving through them had the look of exhaustion carved into their bones. Merchants haggled in a dozen clashing languages, their voices frayed from long weeks at sea. Sailors trudged toward the docks to unload their morning catch.

By noon, most boats had already been winched back into place along the harbor. Wooden tables lined the market square, but only a handful of vendors remained, packing crates, shuttering boxes, hauling sacks toward wagons.

The once-lively marketplace felt like a half-finished thought.

"The last time I visited here was as a youngling," Talen reflected as they strolled the streets. "A merchant gifted me a ship in a bottle. I obsessed over it for days, unable to fathom how the vessel had been made to fit within the glass, until I learned to change my thinking." His lips curved faintly. "The true marvel was not getting the ship inside, but the patience required afterward. Delicate tools, steady hands, endless precision of raising the

masts, securing the rigging, arranging every detail within such a confined space. Some things only come together through painstaking care."

Ren and Talen wore their hoods low as they entered the square, shadows masking their features in case any of Sylven's men were in town. When they confirmed that only local soldiers patrolled the streets, Ren pushed her hood back, letting sunlight warm her face. It was a fair day in the port, which was rare.

A moment later, Ren instinctively tugged the fabric forward again as a burly woman barreled past, arms full of fish longer than her own torso. She tossed them carelessly into the arms of a man with a crooked grin, the pair laughing as they hefted the monstrous catch toward a cart chilled with blocks of ice.

"Nothing rivals a child's curiosity," Ren murmured.

Talen grunted in agreement as they navigated the crowded thoroughfare. The air here was thick with the scent of salt, brine, and the metallic tang of gutted fish.

They turned a corner where the cobblestones transitioned from rough-hewn rock to polished slate, signaling their entry into the town's seat of power. Looming over the square was The Salt-Keep, a grim, timber-and-stone hall built directly in the middle of Driftwood Bay. It was the residence of Jarl Harek, a man whose reputation for a hot temper burned as fiercely as the Northern Sea bit with cold.

Jarl Harek came from a line of hardy men, some even whispered pirates, and ruled his people as one would command a ship. Here, grievances were aired, taxes were tallied, and the law was dispensed with a heavy hand.

Just as they drew parallel to the heavy iron-bound doors of the Salt-Keep, a muffled roar of anger echoed from within, followed by heavy boots on floorboards. The massive oak doors swung wide, and a young man barely twenty burst out with two burly men scowling behind him.

The man skidded down the stars, quickly losing his footing, his hands scrambling for purchase before he collided with a stack of empty pots. A moment later, a heavy leather satchel was hurled after him, striking him square in the chest.

Talen hesitated, thinking to intervene, and Ren grasped his elbow and shoved him along.

"Later," Ren hissed in a whisper.

A house guard framed the doorway as Ren and Talen walked further away. He spat into the gutter.

“And stay out, scribbler!” the guard bellowed, his voice echoing off the surrounding shops. “The Jarl’s Hall is for legitimate grievances, not for the ramblings of a panicked sheep! If you want to rage about legends and nonsense, then go find a tavern, you rambling oaf.”

Talen caught Ren by the sleeve, pulling her back into the deep, soot-stained shadow of an overhang.

“You’re right. We should keep a low profile,” Talen grumbled. “It’s better for everyone if no official figures recognize us today.”

Ren leaned her back against the cold stone. “Discretion is the only thing keeping our heads attached to our necks.”

She pressed a finger to her lips. With the fluid grace of a cat, she leaned forward, peering around the corner of the masonry. A few yards away, the young man groaned and shoved a lock of damp, straw-colored hair out of his eyes with a trembling hand, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Though his legs shook, there was a frantic energy in his movements as he hauled himself up. He clutched his leather satchel to his chest.

Ren watched the young man stumble down an alleyway, his frantic footsteps fading. She stepped back into the shadows.

“Clam chowder,” she announced. “I know a place two streets over called The Broken Anchor,” Ren continued, already stepping out of the alcove with an effortless gait. “They serve a bowl of chowder so good that it makes you forget the cold. It would be a crime to pass through and not have a taste.”

Talen opened his mouth to protest, but Ren was already moving, her hands tucked idly into her sleeves. To any passing guard, she looked like nothing more than a hungry traveler looking for a warm hearth.

Minutes later, they were tucked into a corner booth of The Broken Anchor, where the low ceilings and heavy timbers were deliberately crafted to evoke the private, enclosed hull of a seafaring vessel. A multitude of candles burned throughout the room, yet their flames did little to pierce the dimness, keeping the booth shielded in shadow. Between them, a heavy ceramic tureen of steaming white chowder sat flanked by a crusty loaf of black bread. Tearing off a hunk with practiced ease, Ren dipped it deep into the thick soup and leaned back, chewing slowly with a look of pure contentment.

“Ren,” Talen hissed, leaning over the table. He hadn't touched his spoon. “The day is getting along. We need to keep moving.”

Ren took a sip of the broth. “Patience, Talen. A hungry mind is a dull mind. Besides, the best way to blend in is to do exactly what everyone else is doing: eating, complaining about the weather, and staying out of the Jarl’s way. Now, try the chowder. You’re going to love the broth.”

Talen’s jaw tightened. He looked at the sun filtering through the grime-streaked windows. He took a quick bite of the chowder, then leaned in closer.

“Fine. We’ve eaten. Now, where exactly do we go next to find what we’re looking for?”

Ren’s casual mask slipped for a fraction of a second, replaced by a wicked grin that promised nothing but trouble.

“Somewhere where they sell plenty of booze,” she quipped, her eyes dancing with mischief. “It’s time we found a *real dive*, Talen.” She got to her feet and shot him a withering glare over her shoulder when he didn’t follow. “Come along now, we're wasting daylight! Oh, and don’t forget to leave a tip.”

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11

The Weary Sea Maiden’s sign swayed in the ocean breeze. Ren had been inside twice, once for a northern squall, and once after a string of bad decisions she usually refused to think too hard about—specifically, the night she had overindulged in high-proof rum and somehow wound up fast asleep on the sacred floors of a priestess temple.

Which cost her an entire afternoon of agonizing hangover spent scrubbing the altars clean by an extremely pissed off priestess.

“Out of the way, lass,” a man shot past Ren with a basket of bread held over his burly shoulder.

Just the year before, when a terrified boy had stolen a loaf of bread, Ren had broken a fae soldier’s nose for raising a blade to the boy and had earned herself a place on the butcher’s block for her intervention. Even now, the memory simmered like coals in her gut because it had been orchestrated by Zakhar.

The bastard always played the long game.

The tavern door creaked open under Ren’s hand, releasing a wave of warm air thick with the scents of brine, ale, and old wood. Inside, walls were draped with fishing nets, knotted ropes, and rusted anchors—memorials to vessels long retired. Lanterns swung from beams overhead.

Talen’s gaze drifted toward a table of broad-shouldered, loud, young sailors, already halfway drunk by the sound of their slurred words. Ren saw the gleam in Talen’s eye before he even opened his mouth.

Ren seized his elbow. “Don’t even think about it. Follow my lead.”

“I know how to talk to people,” Talen whispered.

“No, you know how to charm people like a prince. No offense.”

Talen grumbled something under his breath but relented. They settled on two stools at the far end of the bar. Ren ordered the cheapest ale available; it was thin and bitter, but it kept them inconspicuous. They chatted, letting the hour melt until the room shifted around them—sailors coming and going and sunlight fading from the windows.

All the while, Ren kept her attention anchored on the lone man seated across the bar. Sitting virtually motionless, he had neither spoken to anyone nor once looked up. Yet, in a remarkably short span of time, four full glasses of pure rum had vanished down his throat like water. Ren watched as that fourth glass disappeared in one long, uninterrupted gulp.

He’s going to have one hell of a hangover tomorrow.

Talen noticed Ren’s gaze. “What is it?”

“Does he look familiar?”

Talen followed her gaze, and his eyes widened in recognition. “The man thrown out at The Salt-Keep.”

“A bit less frantic than when he was skidding across the slate, but yes. It’s him.”

Talen watched the young man. He was slumped over the table littered with empty mugs, his frantic energy from earlier having dissolved into a sullen, glassy-eyed stare. Talen shifted his gaze back to Ren, his brow furrowing as the realization clicked into place.

“You weren’t just wasting time,” he murmured, his voice thick with a mix of irritation and grudging respect. “The chowder, the casual stroll... You knew he’d come straight to a place like this to drink himself into a stupor after being tossed out of the Salt-Keep.”

Ren shrugged. “Don’t give me too much credit. I really did want the chowder. Life is about multitasking, Talen. Now, stay alert.”

Talen let out a weary sigh, his shoulders dropping just a fraction as he finally understood the geography of her plan. “You’ve been tracking his trajectory since he hit the cobbles outside the Salt-Keep.”

Ren didn’t look away from her target, but she allowed a sweet smile to curve her lips.

“I’ve spent years living this kind of life, Talen. While you were learning the proper way to hold a shield, I was learning where a man goes when his

world falls apart."

Talen stared down into the depths of his ale.

"I loathe it when you're right. It's that look you get, like you've already read the last page of the book while I'm still struggling with the introduction."

Ren's smile softened, and she patted his hand.

"There's always a reason someone downs pure rum," She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes, studying the man's rigid posture, his blank expression, the way his fingers tapped the rim of his empty glass with a tension that spoke of fear.

Or guilt.

"Either he's trying to forget something," Ren whispered, "or he's trying to build the courage to tell someone something." Her chin lifted. "And we are going to find out which."

"Go on then," Talen grumbled. "I'll sit here and try to look like someone who isn't contemplating how many ways there are to exit through that back window if this turns ugly."

Ren dusted a few crumbs from her tunic and stood up, the wicked glint returning to her eyes.

"If a guard happens to wander in for an evening pint, give me a signal. I'd hate for our friend's second eviction of the day to involve us."

The bartender slid a fresh glass of rum toward the man, but before it reached his hand, Ren leaned across the bar and covered the glass with her palm.

The bartender froze mid-sentence. The man did, too. He lifted his head slowly, and his bloodshot gaze locked with Ren's.

Ren didn't break eye contact with the man.

"He's had enough," she stated flatly.

For a long, tense moment, the man just stared at her hand over his glass… then at her face… as if trying to decide whether to snarl or bolt.

Ren made the decision for him.

She slipped onto the empty stool beside him, her posture almost lazy, but her eyes sharp as a blade. Talen stayed back to mind his drink.

"Mind if I sit?"

The man swallowed, throat bobbing. "You already are."

"Good. Then we can skip the formalities." She tapped the rim of his covered glass with one finger. "Rum that strong is for sailors with no taste

buds… or someone with secrets. So, which one are you?”

The man’s jaw clenched, and he grumbled, “Just thirsty.”

“Thirsty,” she echoed. “I’ve traveled the length of Lytherien, and given that it’s a massive continent boasting dozens of distinct dialects and regional languages—particularly along the coastlines—it takes a lot to surprise me. But in all my traveling, your accent is one I’d recognize anywhere.” She let her eyes sweep over him deliberately. “And I pay attention to things like accents.”

He stiffened.

Ren went on before he could recover.

“You’re not from here. Your shirt’s wrinkled like you slept in it for at least several nights. Your boots are coated in dried mud, and you smell like piss and sea salt. Which means you’ve recently traveled by ship.” She paused. “You’re from House Tharowen.”

The man’s fingers twitched against the bar, his eyes darting toward the exit as if calculating whether he could make it there before she caught him.

Ren cocked an eyebrow. “I saw you get thrown out earlier. Look, I’m not working for the Jarl. I’m someone who just came up from the south, and I am very interested in what you were trying to report. Thirst alone doesn’t put fear in a man’s eyes.”

For a long, brittle moment, the man didn’t move. The tavern hummed around them—clattering dishes, distant laughter, the groan of timber beneath shifting bodies.

Then, as if something inside him finally cracked, his shoulders sagged.

“Aye, I’m from a small village in House Tharowen. My people have mined gold for generations.”

“That’s admirable. My father mined coal in Ironforge when I was a child. He had long shifts, and it takes a certain kind of strength to do that line of work.”

“A month ago, my village was razed to the ground.”

“Who burned it?”

The man stared into the bar as if trying to see through it, into some memory lodged deep inside.

“A dragon,” he whispered.



Ren swiftly ordered whiskey and swallowed the burn as the man recanted his story.

“The beast was black as night. It came out of nowhere. We heard the screams first, then the fire.”

His breath hitched. He scrubbed at his face with both hands, leaving streaks of grime across his cheeks.

“Nobody *believes* me. Not a damn soul will even look at me without laughing. They say dragons don’t exist–that I’m delusional because of the fumes in the mines. But I *saw* it–I swear it on every ancestor’s grave. And once it razed my village to the ground, it flew right over the sky this way.”

Ren’s blood iced over.

The man’s eyes darted around.

“I’ve seen glimpses of it since, at night–a shadow crossing the moon, a wing cutting through the fog.” He shuddered. “It’s hunting, I know it. I don’t know how to explain it, but they’re intelligent. They’re not like wolves hunting to feed. Dragons take their time to know where to strike.”

“How did you get out?”

“I hid. When it left, I ran until my legs gave out and traveled with a fishing vessel heading north. They hunted seal blubber and went farther north than I’d ever been. I didn’t know cold like that existed–it seeped into your bones, your teeth, your thoughts. When the ice finally gave way, they turned west, skirting the edge of the continent before cutting inland to Driftwood Bay for supplies.” His lips trembled. “I kissed the ground when we made landfall, and the moment we docked, I went straight to the Jarl to warn him. But, he refused to grant me an audience–said I was wasting his time.”

“If you saw a dragon heading this way, why come here? A fishing town won’t save you.”

The man let out a bitter laugh. “I didn’t come here because I thought it was safe.”

“Then why did you come here?”

“Because back home, I got thrown in prison for pocketing a few gold pieces and selling them on the side.” He said quieter. “I’ve always been

prone to temptations. Greed, mostly. A stupid habit that finally caught up to me."

Ren didn't speak. People made mistakes. People paid for them. But surviving your own punishment while the world around you burned… that was something else.

"I was in jail when the earth shook–deep in our village's underground cells. The guards thought it was a cave-in at first." He shut his eyes hard, as if trying physically to force the memory back behind them. "The dragon's fire tore through the mines. Soldiers caught on fire. Whole tunnels collapsed."

Ren imagined the dark, the shaking earth, the boiling air. Her jaw tightened.

"One of the guards had been in charge of my block for years. His name was Garrick Vane. He was a fair man who always talked about his children. He had a girl learning to braid her own hair and a boy who loved carving wooden animals." His voice cracked at the edges. "Garrick opened my cell the moment the attack hit the lower tunnels and told me to get out while he fought beside the others. I begged him to come with me, but he wasn't going to leave them."

He dragged a hand down his face.

"I made it topside just long enough to see houses bursting into flame, people's bodies littering the streets. The sky…" He shook his head. "There were maybe… maybe half a dozen of us who survived. Garrick wasn't one of them. His whole family was gone." His eyes glistened, though no tears fell. "It isn't right that a man like Garrick died while someone like me lived. So I decided that if I was going to keep breathing, it had to mean something–I had to make it right somehow. If spreading the truth about the dragon could save even one village…or one soul… then maybe I'd deserve the life that Garrick gave me."

He looked up at Ren, his gaze a mixture of exhaustion, anger, and pleading.

"I came here because a dragon is coming this way, and these people need to know. Someone needs to *listen*."

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Zakhar lounged on his usual branch above Ren, dangling one leg lazily as he took a bite of his apple.

“Isn’t the universe hilarious? You have one brave guard, loyal to a fault, with a beautiful and plump wife. They had two children waiting for their father and a third along the way. And yet they all burned.”

He licked a bead of juice from his wrist.

“It’s a tragic story, really. A courageous man dies in flames, while the greedy thief who pocketed gold runs free.” He clicked his tongue. “The world has a wicked sense of humor–and, oh, you should’ve seen the sky.” He sighed dreamily. “I’ve never witnessed such color. Orange hues… streaked with raven-black smoke. It was—”

“That’s enough,” Ren whispered.

The dream darkened around the edges.

“Almost beautiful, really, the way destruction paints a landscape. The screams, the destruction, the—”

Ren snapped. With a snarl, she lunged forward and yanked his dangling ankle. Zakhar gasped as his apple flew into the pond. Ren dragged him up by his collar until they were inches apart.

Zakhar blinked at her.

Ren hissed through her teeth, “What do you *want*?”

A few strands of Zakhar’s hair fell across his cheek as he studied her.

“Oh, Ren,” he murmured. His voice dropped to a purr. “You’re finally starting to ask the right questions. I’ve missed that voice–the way it roughens when you’re angry. The way it trembles when you—”

Before he could finish speaking, she threw him backward into the pond. Zakhar hit the water with a loud splash, scattering the fish and ruining the dream's quiet peace.

“Get out of my head,” Ren snarled.

Zakhar’s laughter bubbled up through the water as he sank beneath it–

Ren woke with a gasp. The bedsheets clung to her damp skin, and her breath was fast and ragged. She sat up so fast her head spun.

What the hell does he want with me?

He clearly seeks to rattle you, Vortharax responded. *Do not give him the satisfaction of looking shaken. A mind unraveled is exactly what an entity like him preys upon.*

Ren scoffed. *Yeah, like I’m taking any advice from you. I’m juggling a dragon bonded to my soul and a mad god who has too much time on his hands.*

And there is that blinding mortal arrogance, Vortharax rumbled. *You mortals are all exactly the same. You burn so hot and bright for such a brief flash of time, yet you genuinely believe you are the center of the realm. I have watched empires turn to dust while you were a mere glint in the universe's eye. If I offer you counsel on how to guard your mind, it is not an insult to your capability—it is an act of self-preservation. Your survival is tethered to mine. I have no desire to be dragged into oblivion because of your stubbornness.*

I can handle this without your counsel, so go back to the dark corner of my mind and stay there! Ren retaliated. *Nobody invited you to comment.*

Vortharax let out a deep, dangerous growl that vibrated violently through her skull, but before the ancient dragon could unleash a retort, Ren slammed a heavy, invisible door shut in her consciousness.

The link snapped.

The suffocating heat of his presence vanished instantly–locking his rumbling voice away in the deep, silent dark of her mind.

For a few long moments, she just sat there, waiting for the room to stop spinning as she forced herself back into reality. She blinked against the dim light, focusing on the rise and fall of her own chest, demanding her senses to return to the physical world.

Gods, she hated the soul bond.

It was a constant reminder that her body didn’t truly feel like hers anymore. Clearly, Vortharax disliked the predicament just as much as she did—he wasn't thrilled about being trapped in a fragile human as he would say—but at least she had figured out a way to shut his voice off.

For now, the silence was hers.

Satisfied, she braced her hands on the mattress and crossed the creaking floor to the washbasin to splash water on her face.

She stopped in the doorway.

Kaelin stood before the mirror. She touched the mirror, as if her touch could ripple the glass. Her reflection stared back with eyes that were shadowed in a way that made Ren’s pulse spike. Yet, Kaelin wasn’t looking at her own face–she wasn’t looking at anything. The fae princess was somewhere far, far away.

“Kaelin?” Ren whispered.

No response.

Ren took a step closer. “Kaelin…?”

Still, nothing.

Ren’s voice broke on the third try. “Kaelin.”

Not a flinch. Not even a blink.

Ren reached out and gently wrapped her fingers around Kaelin’s upper arm. Kaelin jerked, a sharp inhale ripping through her like she’d been plunged into ice water. Her gaze snapped to Ren, wild for a heartbeat before recognition flooded in.

“Ren,” Kaelin breathed, hand flying to her chest as though to keep her heart from leaping out. “I didn’t hear you.”

“Come. I’ll fix us a pot of tea.”

They returned to the great hall, where only faint embers glowed in the hearth. Ren waved her hand to light the logs, bringing a steady fire to life that pushed back the biting chill. Kaelin sank to the floor by the hearth and pulled her knees close. Ren watched her for a moment—noticing how small and breakable she looked—before forcing herself to step away.

Ren desperately wanted to tell Kaelin about Zakhar and how he had cornered her in her dreams yet again. But Ren swallowed the words. Kaelin was already balanced on a razor's edge, her spirit worn thin by everything they had endured.

Ren held back the truth, forcing herself to step away.

Minutes later, Ren returned bearing two steaming mugs of chamomile tea. Kneeling, Ren offered Kaelin her mug. Kaelin accepted it gingerly. As the fae princess stared into the rising steam, the reflection of the firelight flickered in her eyes.

“I miss the warmth of my greenhouse… the way the glass fogged when I watered the lilies. I used to kneel in the soil for hours, just breathing… just tending without needing to think about anything except what would bloom next. I miss the softness of the earth beneath my hands.”

Kaelin’s gaze drifted to the fire.

“And I miss my balls. The music, the chandeliers. I used to spend all afternoon curling my hair, fussing with ribbons, wearing dresses so heavy with jewels I could barely breathe.” She laughed once. “I used to think those things actually mattered–like appearances made a difference in the world of politics.”

The fire crackled, and shadows danced across her darkened expression.

“But what I miss most…” Her voice cracked. She lifted a hand to her mouth, but it couldn’t hold back the tremor in her chin. “What I miss most are my parents. My mother’s scented oil. My father’s humming in the mornings when he thought no one was listening.” A sob cut through her. “I miss my kingdom. I miss my people. I miss home.”

Tears spilled down her cheeks.

“My kingdom is gone–everyone is gone. There is nothing left. What am I without my crown?”

Ren cupped Kaelin’s jaw, lifting her face until their foreheads touched.

“Your mother’s strength, your father’s courage—those things didn’t die with your kingdom.” Ren’s fingers curled at the back of Kaelin’s neck, steady and warm. Her voice dropped to a vow carved in iron. “You are Kaelin Vaelaran, the rightful queen of House Vaelaran. When the world shatters you, you don’t stay broken. You gather every piece, sharpen them into weapons, and rise again. And if you don’t know who you are right now, let me hold you until you remember.”

Kaelin closed her eyes as fresh tears spilled over. Ren wrapped her tightly, one hand stroking soothingly through Kaelin’s hair, the other holding her steady as the fae princess wept into her shoulder. Ren’s heart splintered with each sob, yet she held the fae princess steady.

Ren pressed her cheek to Kaelin’s temple. “One day, when all of this is behind us… we’re going to build you the biggest greenhouse anyone’s ever

seen.”

Kaelin’s breath hitched mid-sob.

“It will have glass walls so high they’ll catch the clouds,” Ren murmured, brushing her thumb across Kaelin’s tear-wet cheek. “And shelves overflowing with herbs and lilies and every plant you can imagine. And you’ll teach me everything. Even if I sneeze every five minutes.”

A quiet, shaky laugh escaped Kaelin.

Ren’s heart swelled so fiercely it almost hurt. She leaned back just enough to see Kaelin’s face–to watch that fragile curve of her lips, the smallest hint of light breaking through the grief.

Gods, how she’d missed that smile.

Ren beamed, brushing a tear from Kaelin’s cheek with her thumb. “There it is. I’ve missed you,” Ren closed her eyes, whispering the fae phrase, “*Veyra’thiel, shaen draveth*. Heart-bound one, you have fought fiercely. But the stars have not yet set, Kaelin. The dawn is still ours to win. We still have a kingdom to reclaim, and by the gods, what a beautiful kingdom it will be.”

Kaelin’s trembling fingers lifted from Ren’s shoulders, sliding up to cradle her cheeks. Her touch was light at first, almost uncertain, but then she drew Ren closer–holding her as though anchoring herself.

Her breath brushed Ren’s lips.

“I love you,” Kaelin whispered so quietly, it was almost a prayer or a confession torn from a soul too tired to hide anymore.

Ren’s heart stuttered. Ren’s hands rose to cover Kaelin’s where they cupped her face. She leaned in slowly, giving Kaelin every second to pull away if she needed, but Kaelin only closed her eyes and leaned in further.

Ren kissed her softly–a kiss that wasn’t hunger or desperation but a promise that Kaelin would never have to face the ashes of her world alone again.

And that Ren, too, loved Kaelin more than words could ever explain.

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One more conversation. That was all Ren needed before she, Talen, and Lucan walked out into whatever waited for them.

Two weeks ago, they had arrived at the Splintered Siren battered and seeking refuge. But now, they were preparing to leave it behind.

As she yanked the buckles of her boots tight, Ren's eyes locked onto Kaelin lingering near the threshold of the dining area. Ignoring the steady rhythm of Lucan and Talen adjusting their gear around her, Ren strode forward.

Kaelin watched Ren’s movement as she sipped on a cup of tea.

“Where are you going?” Kaelin asked.

Ren buckled a leather strap at her forearm that came loose. “I’m going to speak with a family near the harbor. I shouldn’t be long.”

“So, you’re investigating the disappearances.”

“Yeah,” Ren muttered, pulling the knot tight. “Someone has to.”

Kaelin took another sip, her lips pursed in deep thought. Then she sighed. “Keep your head down, Ren. If the Jarl’s guards catch you poking around the docks, that would mean trouble.”

Ren breathed a laugh. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Want to tag along?”

“No. I’ll stay.”

“Off to the forest again?”

Kaelin lowered her gaze, a rare touch of hesitation softening her regal posture. “I’ve found ways to pass the time in this place.”

Ren crossed her arms, her eyes narrowing as she assessed the fae princess. “Meaning what, exactly? You’ve barely touched your breakfast today, and you haven't slept well in days.”

“I have been seeking the true parameters of my magic.”

Ren’s voice dropped. “What exactly are you doing out there?”

Kaelin smoothed a wrinkle from the silk of her cuff before fixing Ren with a cool stare.

“I’m not out there prancing through the woods like a wood nymph, Ren. I’m *training*.”

Ren paused, caught off guard by the sudden fire in the fae princess's tone. She stared at Kaelin for a beat before a slow, amused smirk spread across her face.

“Is that so?” Ren murmured, stepping closer. “Maybe I should join you next time. I could show you some true wrestling moves I learned during my time in the pit–see how that magic of yours holds up when you're pinned to the dirt.”

Kaelin’s eyes narrowed at the challenge but seemed to be holding back an amused smile.

“Actually, I think that would be an excellent idea—we are going to need every advantage for what is coming.”

“Deal. I even know a move that would take Commander Ulric down.”

“She’s not wrong about the training, Ren,” Talen chimed in.

Ren glanced over her shoulder to find the fae prince steps away, his cloak finally secured but his expression grim.

“We need to stay on our toes,” Talen continued. “Sylven has legions of trained fae soldiers at his beck and call, and they won't fight with the honor of a sparring ring. We’re going to need every ounce of power we have just to survive.” To Kaelin, he asked, “What progress have you made?”

“I am able to command the minds of most creatures within the forest line. My focus now is on holding dominion over dozens at once while expanding my reservoir so I do not burn out as quickly during conflict.”

“Impressive. Pace yourself. If you snap a thread by pulling too hard, it takes days for the mind to recover.” He shifted his weight. “I’ve been working on mind barriers myself. I’m hoping to one day be able to push past them and to communicate directly into someone else's mind.”

Ren let out a low whistle. “Is that so? Come on then, Prince–break through my barriers.” She raised her chin. “Send me a thought.”

Talen raised an eyebrow, accepting the challenge. His posture stilled, and his eyes locked onto hers, darkening as he focused.

A heartbeat later, Ren felt a strange, physical sensation—like invisible fingers shuffling through her head. Her mental walls rippled. She braced herself for a voice, a word, or a command.

But nothing concrete came through.

Instead, a chaotic rush of vivid images flooded her mind's eye.

It was Lucan standing on top of a tavern table with his arm swung carelessly around a wide-eyed bard, bellowing out a song with a sloshing mug of ale in his hand.

Ren broke the connection and fixed Talen with a deadpan stare. “A drunk, singing Lucan? Really? That’s your grand message?”

Talen burst out laughing, the heavy tension that had hung over the room finally fracturing. “Hey, it was a strong memory! It’s easier to project the loud ones.”

“And I regret absolutely none of them,” Lucan chimed in, adjusting the heavy leather strap across his chest with a smirk. “To be fair, we had several of those nights before I left Pyraelia for the first time. When you’re working for the Crown, you learn to take your revelry wherever—and whenever—you can find it.”

His smirk faded as his gaze swept over the three of them. He tossed a heavy travel pack over his shoulder.

“As entertaining as my past transgressions are, it’s time to move,” Lucan reminded them softly. “The horses are ready, and we don't want to waste what’s left of the daylight.”

Agreeing, Ren decided there was one thing left to do before she went to town. She swiftly grabbed Kaelin by the tunic and pulled her into a hard, sudden kiss.

When Ren finally broke away, Kaelin blinked, her composure completely and thoroughly rattled. A soft flush crept up her neck as she touched her lips, whispering, “You should kiss me like that more often.”

From the shadow of the doorway, a low, irritated groan cut through the quiet of the hall.

“Get a room, you two,” Talen muttered, leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed.

Instead of breaking apart, Kaelin leaned into the embrace, her fingers tangling in Ren's hair as she kissed her back even harder–deliberately

ignoring the intrusion.

Beside Talen, Lucan ran a hand over his face. “Please do,” he added, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Some of us are trying to plan a revolution without having to witness a royal courtship right on the dining tables. It wouldn’t be good for the wood, you know.”

Kaelin finally pulled away, her eyes snapping toward the doorway. She sent a sharp glare Talen's way that could have frozen the hearth itself.

“Watch your tongue,” Kaelin said, her regal composure snapping back into place. She looked from Talen back to Ren. “And look out for Ren. As you know, she can be dangerously impulsive.”

Talen offered a mocking bow, a sarcastic smirk playing on his lips. “Absolutely, dear sister. I’ll make sure to hold her hand while I’m at it.”

Ren’s eyes narrowed into dangerous slits.

“I don't need a babysitter, and I sure as hell don't need you talking about me like I’m not standing right here,” Ren snapped, throwing an irritated look between the two of them. “I'm not impulsive, I get things *done*. So both of you can worry about your own damn heads.”

A heavy, lingering silence fell over the great hall. Talen let the quiet stretch just long enough to make it agonizing, his smirk widening.

“*Not* impulsive?” Talen asked, raising an eyebrow. "Is that what we're calling it now? Because I distinctly remember you slipping out of the palace gates to hunt down that second creature completely alone, all because you had a 'whim' that you knew where it was.”

“That was a calculated strategy,” Ren countered.

“And what about the time when you decided to–” Kaelin chimed in, a subtle, knowing smile touching her lips.

“Alright, that's enough!” Ren threw her hands up in exasperation.

Before either of them could pull up another piece of her tactical history, Ren turned on her heel and strode purposefully toward the exit. She grabbed the iron handle, swinging the massive door wide open to let in a sudden gust of biting harbor air.

“I'm leaving,” Ren declared, looking back over her shoulder with a glare. “Whether anyone else is actually ready or not.”

Ren's gaze narrowed in resolve as she, Lucan, and Talen left for town.

Once they entered the eastern gate, Ren split off from Lucan and Talen, each of them taking a different family. Ren’s path took her along the harbor. The morning market below was just stirring awake – vendors rattling their cart wheels across cobblestone, gulls screeching overhead, the scent of brine and day-old fish woven thick in the air.

The house Ren approached was small but well-kept, perched on a rise overlooking the harbor. Its shutters trembled in the sea breeze, and flowers wilted in pots along the railing–flowers Ren suspected the missing woman named Mara once tended. On the end, a cracked pot bore a child’s handiwork: a sun with a wide, painted grin that seemed to mock the grey sea mist.

Ren knocked.

The door creaked open to reveal a portly man with a wild, bushy beard and eyebrows to match. His dark eyes swelled with sleepless grief.

“I’m here to ask about Mara.”

“No.” He stepped forward, blocking her view inside the house, gripping the frame with knuckles white as bone. “I’ve said all I need to say. Go away.”

“I want to help.”

“You outsiders come in, ask your questions, and then you leave. That’s all you people ever do,” His voice cracked on the last word, but he masked it with a bark of anger.

A gust of wind pushed between them, lifting strands of Ren’s hair. She opened her mouth to try again.

But then a soft hand touched his arm.

“Papa,” a woman murmured from behind him. She looked older than her years, with skin pale, eyes shadowed, hair tied back in a messy knot that spoke of little sleep. “Let me speak with her.”

“Lina, no. You shouldn’t have to.”

“It’s necessary,” she whispered, squeezing his arm. Her gaze lifted to Ren, steady despite the sheen of tears gathering at the edges. “If someone is taking women from Driftwood Bay and if there’s a chance Mama is still alive… then we need every bit of help we can get.”

The man lowered his head, shoulders curling inward. Lina stepped past him into the threshold, folding her hands in front of her.

“You can speak with me,” she told Ren. “I’ll tell you everything I know.”



Lina moved through the small kitchen with the practiced motions of someone who had done the same routine every morning of her life, even when grief hollowed her out.

A pot simmered quietly over the hearth of fish broth, thin but fragrant, enriched with herbs and sea salt, potatoes bobbing near the surface. Lina ladled some into a wooden bowl and set it gently on the table. Then she added a plate of dry, salty crackers.

The broth was simple, almost bare, but it heated Ren’s belly like a small sun. She took another spoonful, savoring the warmth and saltiness.

“Thank you."

Lina only gave a faint smile and folded herself into a chair opposite. Her hands trembled slightly as she laced her fingers together.

“Map out your mother’s day for me. I need to know her exact movements from the second she wakes up to the moment she goes to sleep.”

“Mama wasn’t… adventurous,” Lina answered softly, a wisp of a smile ghosting across her lips. “But she had a good life here.”

“How did she spend her days?”

“She sewed,” Lina whispered, recalling. “Our clothes, mostly. She made my father’s shirts, and she embroidered flowers on my skirts when I was little. When my brothers outgrew their tunics, she’d let the neighbor boys wear them.” Her eyes grew glassy. “When she got older and we didn’t need as much, she started sewing for the orphanage children. Blankets, mittens… anything. As you know, the orphanage is one of the largest here, so they’re always in need of extra clothing and supplies.”

“Where was she headed the last time you saw her?”

Lina hesitated.

“That's the most important part, Lina. Please.”

Lina swallowed. Her voice came out thin. “She… she went to the cliffs.”

“The cliffs?”

“There’s an old lighthouse there. No one’s tended it in decades. Mama used to go sometimes–she said the sea air helped her think, and she liked

watching the waves crash against the rocks. We used to go there often when I was a child."

Ren's brows drew together. "Did she ever go at night?"

"No," Lina whispered. "Never. She didn't like the dark."

"Then why did she go that morning?"

A tremor ran through Lina's shoulders. "She said she needed to clear her head. Many go to the cliffs when they're troubled. They leave seashell offerings to Myrassa."

Ren's eyes softened with recognition. Myrassa Tidewhisper, the maternal goddess of the sea. She was a deity beloved by coastal families; one who was said to cradle lost souls in her warm currents and carry whispered prayers out over the waves. Women in seaside towns often visited her chosen places when grief or worry pressed too heavily on their hearts.

"Mama always left her shells there. She said Myrassa listened better near the old lighthouse, where the wind has no walls to cage it. She kissed my father's cheek, wrapped her shawl around her shoulders…" Her lip trembled. "She never came back. We searched for her for days. My father almost fell climbing the rocks. Some of the fishermen also helped look, but…" She shook her head. "No sign. Not even her shawl."

Ren set her empty bowl aside, leaning forward as the warmth of the broth faded from her hands.

"Around the lighthouse, have you ever seen anything else? Old structures, abandoned buildings?"

Lina shook her head slowly. "No. Not that I know of."

Ren stilled. *Not even her shawl.*

If a woman threw herself from the cliffs, the jagged rocks or the brutal surf usually claimed the body, but cloth snagged on briars. It tangled in the brush or washed up on the shingle. For an entire search party of local fishermen—men who knew every crack and crevice of those rocks—to find absolutely nothing meant she hadn't just vanished into the sea.

Something may have happened to her there, and if Mara believed the goddess listened better near that abandoned lighthouse–it was the perfect excuse for a deadly creature to lure her into a secluded spot.

There was something at that lighthouse, and it was exactly where Ren needed to go next.

Ren rose to her feet. "Thank you. You've given me more than you realize. I'll visit when I have more information."

“Why are you asking all this? We told the guards everything. They said they’re questioning people in town. They think the culprit is one of us.”

Ren’s jaw flexed. “Whatever is doing this isn’t hiding in town squares or crowded markets. It’s a wolf among sheep.”

Lina paled, breath catching. “You mean… the rumors are true? The reason no one leaves their homes after nightfall?”

Ren nodded grimly. “Vampyres.”

The word sucked all the warmth from the room.

Lina clutched her elbows, grief and fear twining in her eyes. “Gods… then the guards will never stop it. They don’t even believe—”

“I know,” Ren cut in gently, but firmly. She turned toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Lina called after her. “If it is a vampyre, what can you do?”

Ren paused at the threshold, the wind catching her cloak as she looked back over her shoulder. Her eyes burned with a quiet fury.

“I’m going to the cliffs. Because if a monster took your mother, then I’m going to drag that bastard into the light…”

She paused for a beat, trying to maintain composure, but she couldn’t help the growl seeping past her lips.

“…and rip its gods-damned heart out myself.”

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“One can’t help but wonder how many lives these cliffs have claimed,” Lucan’s voice was nearly swallowed by the roar of the sea. “The sea has a ravenous history here, has it not?”

Ren glanced over the edge. “Considering how sharp those rocks down there are, I think that’s a safe assumption.”

Talen studied the waves below, nodding in agreement.

The three of them stood before the lighthouse. It was an ancient, skeletal tower of gray stone. Its windows stared down at them like hollow, unblinking eyes. Ren craned her neck, studying the structure. In another life, she could picture its lantern blazing on fog-choked nights, guiding sailors home with unwavering light.

Now it was little more than a tombstone.

“Why do you think they stopped using this?” Ren asked, stepping over a patch of wild grass flattened by the wind.

“Too much maintenance and too much cost. They built a smaller one closer to shore, which is easier to manage,” Talen answered.

“Of course, it always ends with money,” Ren muttered.

Talen gave a shrug. Then his gaze drifted toward the beach far below the cliffs.

“When we visited Driftwood Bay as younglings, my family used to come here. Our mother always insisted on stopping at the lighthouse first. She’d leave flowers as an offering for safe passage.” A faint smile touched

his mouth. “Kaelin and I would run straight to the beach and spend hours in the sand while my mother spoke with the keeper.”

Lucan scanned the cliffs. “Did Kaelin take it upon herself to wander again today?”

Ren bristled from the question, then slowly circled the base of the lighthouse, inspecting its shadowed windows.

“Yes,” she answered curtly. “She needed space.”

Lucan’s expression softened. “She’s been through a lot.”

“She has,” Ren agreed.

“She needs time,” Talen added gently.

“Of course,” Lucan echoed. He stepped closer to the edge, letting the fierce wind whip his hair back. Below them, waves hurled themselves against jagged boulders. “I wish we knew how to help her.”

Ren did, too.

Ren should be with Kaelin–not standing on a windswept cliff hunting a vampyre that might not have even exist.

Yet Ren knew hovering too closely could become its own kind of suffocation. Kaelin deserved room to breathe, to grieve, and to unravel if she needed to.

Still, it felt wrong.

What was Kaelin doing now?

Ren loathed monsters she could not fight and wounds she could not see. But watching someone she loved hurt while standing helplessly at the edge of it felt far crueler than any battle she had survived.

But, there were people who needed someone to end the nightmare stalking their nights.

Ren clenched her jaw and let the wind bite. She couldn’t choose one without abandoning the other.

Not Kaelin.

Not them.

And not the people who would suffer if they walked away now.

Ren approached the lighthouse door. It was swollen with moisture, its paint peeled to flakes like old scabs. She knocked firmly, half expecting something to knock back.

Lucan’s voice carried over the wind. “I found their offerings!”

Ren turned and immediately jogged toward him. Lucan crouched near a weathered outcrop where dozens of seashells—some white, some pink,

some broken—had been placed along the cliffside. Some were arranged in carefully arranged lines, others gathered in piles.

“There’s so many,” he murmured.

Talen crossed his arms. “At least the creature didn’t take those.”

They had come during daylight for one reason: vampyres were weakest in the sun. Whether sunlight burned their skin, blinded their senses, or merely made them sluggish, Ren wasn’t sure. But everything she’d ever read in tomes declared daylight the safest time to hunt the creatures.

And Ren wanted nothing more than to catch this one off guard.

The thought of what it had done twisted her stomach into knots. After comparing notes with Lucan and Talen, a grim pattern had emerged: all three missing women had raised children, built families, and lived quiet lives of sacrifice and tenderness.

Ren stared at the seashell offerings glinting in the sun.

“What kind of monster hunts mothers?” Ren whispered.

Talen let out a quiet sigh. “It has to be male. It’s developed a pattern of coming for women and keeps returning to the same profile.” His expression darkened. “Something about that satisfies whatever need is driving him.”

Ren considered that. Whatever the answer was… she intended to drag the creature kicking and screaming into the light.

“There has to be a reason all the missing women were last known to be here,” Talen mulled, eyes sweeping the crumbling stones and windswept grass. “Something is hiding on these cliffs. Something we’re not seeing.”

“There is,” Ren seethed, voice razor-sharp with certainty. “And we’re not leaving until we find it.”

Before either fae male could object, Ren returned to the lighthouse, strode back to the lighthouse door, and kicked it in with one fluid motion. The hinges shrieked and gave way.

Darkness swallowed her as she stepped inside.

The air smelled of damp stone. Shadows clung to the walls. Cobwebs draped the ceiling in sagging nets. The dust on the windows was so thick the sunlight couldn’t pierce it; the whole room felt suffocated and untouched by human hands for years.

There was nothing to indicate anyone had lived here recently.

Frustration burning in her chest, Ren reluctantly stepped back outside, letting the wind rake through her hair as she made her way toward the cliffs. Far below, Lucan wandered along the beach, his figure small against the

stretch of sand and crashing waves as he examined something near the shoreline. Talen crouched near the seashell offerings, tracing one with the tip of his finger.

Then Lucan called out. “I see something!”

Ren’s head snapped up. She and Talen hurried toward him, boots skidding on slick stone as they descended the jagged, uneven rocks. Sea spray misted their faces as the wind howled around them.

Ren hopped down the last ledge, landing on the soft, damp sand of the surf. Lucan stood tense beside her, his gaze fixed on a dark opening carved into the cliffside.

Lucan cast a dubious glance ahead. “You wouldn’t happen to be suggesting we enter that, would you?”

Ren’s lips curved into a wicked smirk. “Oh, we’re going in.”

She lifted her hand, letting a flame burst to life in her palm. Its glow reflected in her eyes, turning them molten.

“Because I fully intend to find this bastard…” she stepped toward the cave, fire lighting her path, “…and remind it why monsters should fear the living.”



“A small but relevant reminder that our previous venture underground nearly proved fatal,” Lucan muttered while descending into the cave.

Talen led the way, with Ren close behind and Lucan bringing up the rear.

Talen stiffened, and Ren shot Lucan a wary look over her shoulder.

Lucan winced. “Too soon?”

Ren arched a brow. “What do you think?”

Lucan opened his mouth and wisely shut it.

“Speaking of that, how did you manage to survive that collapse?” Talen asked.

“There was another passage across the cavern. I found it once most of the undead were eliminated. Fryphessyrth’s scales proved impervious; dragonhide does not yield to teeth or steel.”

“Makes sense,” Talen mulled thoughtfully.

Lucan snorted. “All that danger, and not even a poetic sacrifice to show for it.”

Ren nudged his elbow. “And there you were, ready to die with honor like some tragic hero.”

Ren was certain she saw Lucan’s cheeks tint a faint shade of pink.

Lucan huffed. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t diminish what was, in fact, a pivotal moment for me.”

Ren reached over to pinch his cheek. “I know. I’m *so* proud of you.”

He swatted her hand away. “Spare me the condescension.”

Their boots slogged deeper into mud and water. Droplets rained rhythmically from the ceiling, echoing like clock ticks in the dark. If not for the bright flame flickering in Ren’s palm, they would’ve been swallowed whole by the shadows. But beneath the dampness, something else metallic seeped through the air.

Ren slowed. “You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d say it smelled like __”

Talen stopped cold. “Blood.”

Ren’s flame flared instinctively as all three lifted their heads.

And froze.

The cavern walls were lined with hundreds of skulls woven into grotesque mosaics along the stone. Empty eye sockets stared back at them, hollow and eternal.

Lucan shifted on his feet. “Well. I hadn’t realized vampyres concerned themselves with chamber adornments.”

Ren’s flame flickered violently, and she felt that ancient thrum in her chest.

Vortharax stirring, like a beast pacing behind an iron door.

Let me free, Vortharax whispered from the darkest corner of her mind. *Let me burn. Let me feast. Let me conquer.*

Ren’s jaw clenched so tight it ached. *To hell with you.*

But Vortharax only pressed harder, sensing the edges of a coming fight. He and Zakhar had history, one Ren barely understood, and a story she refused to become part of again.

Not after Pyraelia. Vortharax was known in legends as the dragon forged for conquest, and a shard of his soul became embedded with hers.

And she was done being his puppet.

Ren forced the flame in her hand to steady, even as Vortharax snarled against the inside of her ribcage. She narrowed her gaze at the cavern’s far end where the darkness thickened.

“Stay sharp,” she murmured. “We’re close.”

Then the passage gradually opened into a cavernous chamber. Off in the distance, Ren caught sight of light flickering.



Candles lined the walls in unnerving symmetry. Their flames flickered, casting a warm golden glow over a sprawling lair. At the far end of the cavern sat a coffin carved from dark oak.

Lucan whispered, voice cracking, “Since when did vampyres become arbiters of good taste?”

Ren didn’t answer because she heard a soft sound carrying through the chamber–humming in a voice belonging to a woman. It was beautiful in a way that made Ren’s stomach knot.

Across the chamber, a figure was seated before a vintage vanity table adorned with roses. The mirror was tall yet reflected only the flickering candles.

The woman herself had no reflection in the mirror.

She sat gracefully on an upholstered chair, one leg crossed over the other, humming a tune as she brushed long, dark hair with a golden brush. Her gown was midnight velvet, clinging to her figure. She didn’t turn when they entered, nor did she stop humming or even startle.

She simply spoke, her tone silken, amused, dripping with a wicked purr. “Look what washed up in my home. I dropped the glamour on my dwelling to lead you right to me... and how sweet of you to deliver yourselves.”

Talen froze. Lucan’s mouth dropped open. Even the flame pulsing in Ren’s hand dimmed with surprise.

Ren took a step forward, blade already sliding free of its sheath with her other hand. “You’re a vampyre.”

“But you're a *woman*!” Lucan exclaimed. They had all expected the perpetrator to be male, given that he had targeted women so specifically.

“Mm. So, you three came in here expecting a man. How *boring*. Did you truly believe only men are capable of monstrosity?”

Her hand stilled on the brush, fingers sliding gracefully off the carved handle as she finally set it down beside her. Only then did the vampyre lift her chin toward them.

Ren’s breath caught.

The woman’s hair spilled down her back in a shimmering cascade; it was so long, it draped past her knees…

And her face—*gods*.

Every feature was carved with almost inhuman symmetry: high cheekbones, a refined jaw, a cupid’s-bow mouth. But her eyes were what rooted Ren to the spot. They were a deep crimson and glinted, like garnets.

A predator’s gaze wearing the mask of a goddess.

She leaned back in her chair, lips curving.

Lucan made a strangled sound beside Ren. “Oh gods… she’s beautiful.”

The vampyre’s lips parted in a purr. “Such delicious options… but I think I’ll start with whoever screams the prettiest.”

Ren tilted her head, flame curling around her fingers. “Funny. I was wondering how pretty *you* scream. The only one begging tonight will be *you*.”

With a sharp thrust of her arm, Ren hurled her flames straight at the vampyre.

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Before Ren's flames met their target, the vampyre's body dissolved into a black mist. The mist whipped through the room like a living shadow, curling around pillars and swallowing the light.

The vampyre reformed close behind them with a soft *hiss*. "Wrong move. And far, far too slow. But I think I'll choose… you."

Lucan barely had time to blink before a clawed hand snapped around his ankle.

"Shit!" he yelped.

In one dizzying motion, the vampyre glided straight up the wall until she stood upside down on the ceiling, elegant as a dancer. Lucan dangled by the ankle like a caught hare. His sword clattered to the floor below.

She licked her ruby-red lips, eyes glittering with hungry amusement, and sent Ren a wink.

"What's wrong? Don't tell me you've never fought my kind before."

Ren gritted her teeth, summoning a fresh surge of fire between her palms. Heat roared through the air, dancing across her skin like a second heartbeat.

The vampyre clicked her tongue in theatrical disappointment.

"You mean to tell me you marched into my lair without preparing yourselves?" Her beautiful face twisted into a sneer. "I'm offended. Truly."

Ren hurled a bolt of flame upward.

The vampyre dodged with lazy grace while swinging Lucan directly into the line of fire.

Ren froze, fire dying in her hand.

“Ren, don’t!” Lucan rasped. “She’s using me as a shield!”

“That much is obvious,” the vampyre snarled, baring her fangs. “You mortals are so easy to toy with.” She ran the tip of her tongue along Lucan’s ankle, savoring the taste like fine wine. He jerked, face draining of color.

“Mmm. I think I’ll chain you all up here in my lair and add you to my collection. I’ll drain you slowly until you’re begging.” She curled her lips, fangs gleaming.

“*This* is what you call a lair?” Talen asked as he drifted toward the vampyre’s vanity, hands clasped behind his back.

The vampyre fell silent.

Talen trailed a finger across the vanity’s surface, brushing dust from the carved wood, then tapped the edge of her jeweled hairbrush.

“I’ve seen pirate lords with more treasure, and they weren’t immortal like yourself.”

The vampyre’s lips peeled back in offense. “That brush predates your lineage by centuries.”

Talen picked it up delicately between two fingers.

“This?” he asked, turning it over. “It feels…cheaply made.”

A low growl rumbled from the vampyre’s throat. The vampyre lunged a fraction closer, dragging Lucan with her. “Unhand that, or I’ll rip your tongue from your—”

Talen cut her off by lifting a ruby necklace, letting it swing from his fingertips. “This old thing?”

“Put that down.” Her voice trembled with barely restrained fury.

“Talen, mate,” Lucan croaked from her grip, “you might want to heed her word.”

But Talen only tilted his head to examine the necklace more closely. Ren saw his other hand drift along the vanity’s edge until his fingers brushed the wooden frame of the towering mirror. He tapped it twice, then a third time, subtle, yet calculated.

“It must be maddening,” Talen mused aloud, leaning in to stare into the glass, “to never see your reflection again. But for a creature so proud, I’d expected… I don’t know. Beauty.” He chuckled. “It’s a shame you can’t admire yourself. I suppose you’d only crack the glass.”

The vampyre shrieked. Lucan dropped to the ground with a painful *thud* as she propelled herself toward Talen, sharp nails outstretched.

The moment she crossed the mirror's threshold, the glass shivered, the runes Talen whispered flared, and the surface warped like melted silver. Ren saw the opening for the perfect moment. Talen stepped aside with a flourish, hand pressed to the mirror's edge.

The vampyre didn't have time to register the trap.

The mirror's surface twisted upward, grabbing her form and yanking her inward. She screamed as her claws scraped across the glass.

Then—

SLAM.

The mirror went still. Only her furious, muffled shrieks echoed from the other side.

Lucan groaned on the floor. "Gods… you could have *warned* me."

Talen dusted off his sleeves. "You all right? I'm sorry. I had to make it look convincing if I wanted to fool her."

Lucan huffed as he pushed himself upright. "More than convincing," he grumbled, rubbing at his shoulder. "You had *me* fooled, too."

The glass shimmered violently, warping with dark ripples as the vampyre's silhouette thrashed behind the surface, her shriek muffled.

Lucan eyed the vampyre warily. "Tell me she's actually trapped. I'm not above admitting I nearly pissed myself."

"For now," Talen tapped the corner of the mirror, and the runes along its frame glowed faintly.

Ren asked, "What in all the hells was that?"

"A Mirror Snare. It's an old rune meant to bind creatures that thrive in shadows but can't cast reflections. It anchors them to their own absence."

Lucan asked, "Did you read that from somewhere?"

"Years ago," Talen said with a shrug. "Didn't think I'd ever actually use it. But you know—" he shot the mirror an unimpressed look as the vampyre slammed against the glass from inside, her features distorted in rage, "—it felt like the right time."

Ren asked, "And you remembered the entire rune?"

"It helps to have a good memory."

Ren stalked toward the mirror, meeting the trapped vampyre's glowing crimson glare with her own unwavering one.

"Not so confident now, are you?" Ren murmured.

The vampyre hissed, palms slamming against the glass.

"How did you know she'd react like that?" Ren asked, glancing toward the shattered remnants of the room. "Are vampyres really that vain?"

Talen sat on her chair, crossing his leg over the other. "It isn't exactly vanity," he said after a moment.

"Then what is it?"

"Vampyres don't age. Time passes around them, but it does not claim them the way it does mortals. They keep their immortality by feeding on the life essence within blood."

He paused, a faint, almost sheepish look crossing his face.

"I read quite a bit about them growing up. They were one of my favorite creatures to study–they always intrigued me."

Lucan made a quiet sound from the floor. "Lovely."

"When you live that long," Talen continued, "centuries begin to blur together. Faces fade, places change, and entire kingdoms rise and fall while you remain the same."

Ren crossed her arms. "So, they collect things?"

"In a manner of speaking." Talen gestured toward the chamber. "Did you notice what she chose to keep?"

"A mirror," Ren answered slowly. "A brush. Those velvet chairs."

Talen nodded. "Objects that matter to her. They remind her who she was, or who she believes herself to be."

Lucan wandered near Talen. "So, we basically just destroyed her sentimental shrine."

Talen's mouth twitched slightly. "Yes."

Ren snorted. "Well," she said, dusting her hands together, "that explains why she looked ready to skin us alive."

Talen gave a quiet shrug. "For a creature that has lived centuries, losing the few things that still hold meaning can feel like losing an entire lifetime."

If Ren lived that long, what would she keep? Perhaps she'd keep the box of ribbons Kaelin gifted her in Pyraelia, but those were no doubt covered in ash from the eruption.

Nonetheless, Ren turned back to the mirror and smirked.

"You best get comfortable," she told the thrashing reflection in the mirror. "Because we're not done with you yet."

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For an immortal vampyre, her name was shockingly simple.

Vex.

Ren found it to be a deceptively soft word for a creature who radiated hunger and arrogance and who, even trapped inside a mirror realm, remained viciously possessive.

“Remove your hand,” Vex hissed through the glass, pressing her sharp nails against its surface. Her voice reverberated with an echo, as if spoken from the bottom of a cavern.

Lucan ignored her and dragged her ornate brush through his hair with a languid sigh. “Such soft bristles.”

Vex snarled, her lips peeling back to reveal her fangs. “When I get out of here, I’m going to—”

Ren tapped the glass with her knuckle–a small, innocent sound. But inside the mirror, Vex recoiled.

“In case it wasn’t clear, you’re not in charge here. *We* are. You’re our captive now,” Ren stated.

Vex’s crimson eyes gleamed with venom. “Human and fae alike are nothing but prey to us. You forget your place.”

Talen’s smooth voice chimed in. “You're new here, aren't you? The disappearances only started a month ago, and a creature with your lack of restraint would have left a trail of bodies long before now.”

Vex studied him with interest.

“You,” she murmured, tilting her head, “are the only one here with any sense. And yes, I am far from my prior dwelling, indeed.”

Lucan’s gaze drifted along the wall as he examined rows of skulls stacked along the ceiling.

“And where is home?” Talen asked, pacing before the mirror.

Without hesitation, Vex answered, “Castle Sangravos.”

Ren crossed her arms. “Never heard of it.”

“I would not expect you to. Any human who enters its borders is prey.”

Talen clicked his tongue thoughtfully. “Vampyres usually live in a coven. You aren’t part of one?”

“I was,” Vex said sharply. “Before I left.”

“Why?”

Vex avoided his eyes. Her posture stiffened, and she retreated deeper into the mirrored space, shadows warping around her elegant form.

“Come on,” Talen coaxed gently. “Indulge us. We’re curious.”

Vex paused. Her eyes narrowed. “On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“If you release me,” she purred, “I will give you three facts about Castle Sangravos.”

Ren barked a laugh. “Try again. You get out of there alive only if you give us *at least* five facts.”

Vex didn’t even look at her. Her piercing gaze settled instead on Talen with an unnervingly stillness. “Do we have a deal?”

Talen didn’t answer right away.

He went still, fingers hovering near the edge of the mirror frame, eyes narrowed in calculation. Ren’s pulse kicked up. She knew Talen loved information, loved puzzles, loved being the cleverest one in the room… but even he wouldn’t be so naive.

“Talen,” Ren muttered under her breath. “She’s playing you.”

He didn’t look at her. He simply slid his hands beneath the mirror, testing its weight, tilting it ever so slightly.

“Here’s my counteroffer. If I’m even remotely inclined to humor you, Vex… it’ll be after I carry this mirror right out of this cave, lift it into the open air, and watch with my own eyes what sunlight does to a creature of the night.” Talen studied Vex with unsettling calm. “In the books I’ve read, the sun does horrific things to a vampyre’s skin.” His fingers traced the

mirror’s wooden frame. “It blisters slowly at first, like a boil rising under the flesh.”

Vex hissed, fangs bared, eyes flashing.

“Then the skin cracks, splitting open until the skin peels away.” Talen paused, letting the horror settle.

Vex’s pupils thinned to razor slits. True, primal fear flickered across her features for the first time. “Enough,” she snarled, voice trembling despite her best attempt to hide it. “Fine. I will grant you five facts if you promise to release me.”

Talen smiled. “That’s more like it.”

Vex snarled, but Ren could still see the trembling in her jaw. She’d been *terrified*.

And now, they finally had leverage.

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“Tick tock,” Ren drawled, drumming her fingers against her elbows. “I’d very much like to make it home before supper.”

Vex sneered. “Foolish human needs.”

Talen stepped closer. “Who is the sovereign of the castle?”

“Countess Carmilla Draegora.”

“And the location of Castle Sangravos?”

“All that is certain is that it lies beyond the northern sea.”

“Off the coast, then,” Talen murmured, more to himself. “Did your coven keep to yourselves, or did you have ties with any kingdoms?”

“We kept to ourselves for centuries, until the Countess discovered the prophecy.”

Lucan clicked his tongue. “Plenty of daylight left,” he sing-songed.

Vex scowled. “They’re hunting for an ancient artifact, and the Countess has let the obsession consume her entirely.”

“Tell us about this artifact,” Talen said.

At that, Vex hesitated.

Lucan raised a brow. “Come on. You’re down to your last truths.”

Vex’s throat bobbed. “They want to use it to shroud the world in endless darkness.”

Ren let out a low whistle. “By the Veil…”

Lucan’s voice cracked on a whisper. “Is there truly something that can do that?”

Vex did not break from Talen's stare.

Talen's next question came softly. "Why didn't you stay with them?"

A shadow crossed Vex's features. "Because I prefer the silence of my own shadow to the noise of blind devotion." She exhaled sharply. "I gave you more than five facts. Now, free me." She raised her chin. "A deal is a deal. Surely you mortals still honor those."

Something in Talen shifted.

"Let's start with a correction. You will address me as *Prince*."

"What?" Vex whispered.

Talen stepped closer to the mirror, tilting his head. "Go on," he murmured. "Say my name again, properly this time."

Vex's jaw clenched. "Very well. *Prince* Talen."

A smile ghosted over Talen's mouth. "There's my obedient little fiend."

"I told you the truths—"

"Oh, you did," he said softly. "But you think truth buys mercy." His fingers brushed the mirror's surface. Talen leaned in, voice dropping. "You've said your truths. Here's *my* truth, Vex," he murmured, brushing a thumb over the mirror's surface. "I will not free a creature whose hunger demands the ruin of others."

Vex's breath stuttered. She tried to retreat, but the boundaries of the mirror trapped her.

Like a coffin.

Talen's eyes hardened to molten shadow. "And because of that," he breathed, "*I'll* be the last thing you ever see."

He unsheathed his blade.

Vex's face twisted in fear. "Wait—no!"

Talen drew his blade back.

Vex screamed, her voice cracking, frantic, raw:

"I KNOW WHERE THE ARTIFACT IS!"

Talen paused.

Vex pressed trembling palms against the mirror, wild-eyed. "It is hidden where no vampyre can tread–where even the Countess fears to go."

Talen's voice dropped to a whisper. "Where?"

Vex's voice lowered to a trembling confession. "In the tomb of Vortharax, the Godslayer."

Ren's blood iced. "Of all the godsdamned places, it had to be *that* one?"

“It waits there… the key to eternal night–the one thing they need. I can take you there. You can’t do this without me, and you must move before the Countess because if the prophecy comes to pass, then the world itself will not endure it.”

Talen stared at her as if seeing something new in her desperation. For a heartbeat, Ren thought he might spare her.

Then he slammed the hilt of his sword against the mirror. Glass detonated outward in a flurry of silver shards.

And the last thing Ren heard was Vex’s piercing, soul-ripping screams before they were cut clean off.

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“You fought a vampyre and *lived*.”

Zakhar dangled upside down from a low-hanging branch. He leapt, landing in front of Ren.

Ren pushed to her feet, blood roaring in her ears, and seized his elbow. In one swift motion, she slammed him back against the thick oak trunk. Bark shuddered. So did Zakhar.

Though not out of fear.

“*Look* at you,” he breathed, licking his lips as he stared at her with wide, luminous eyes. A wicked smirk curled at the corner of his mouth. “All fire and fury. It’s such a thrill to see you in action. I love it nearly as much as our dear Princess Kaelin. Although”—he clicked his tongue—“the princess heir isn’t quite the golden darling she once was. Am I right?”

“Say another word about her, and I’ll burn your tongue out of your skull.”

“Oh, I’d love—”

“What do you know about vampyres?”

That stopped him.

“I know enough,” he answered, scowling. “They are odorous, grotesque, and labor under the delusion of civility. Though even I have to admit that their taste in fashion is commendable. And their indulgences?” His mouth curved. “*Exquisitely* depraved.”

He laughed, and Ren released him with a disgusted shove. He collapsed at her feet, clutching his stomach as laughter rattled through him. Ren turned, letting her gaze rest on the pond where the fish spiraled in lazy circles.

“Blood is their life force,” Zakhar plucked a leaf from the ground and spun it between his fingers. Ren shot a glare over her shoulder. “Yes, yes, sunlight burns them. Yes, their fangs are delightful little knives. And without human blood?” He made a clawing gesture to his throat. “They crumble.”

The tension in the clearing thickened as Ren took a step closer to him.

“Do you know of a vampyre known as Carmilla Draegora?” Ren asked.

Zakhar went uncharacteristically quiet. The usual mockery bled from his face, replaced by a rigid, unsettling stillness. For a long moment, the only sound was the wind rustling through the canopy above.

When he finally spoke, his voice was devoid of its usual mirth.

“Yes, she is the first of her kind.”

“She’s the first vampyre?”

“Oh, indeed she *was*!” Zakhar suddenly perked up as he scrambled up to a seated position, crossing his legs. “It’s truly a masterpiece of cosmic comedy! She started out so delightfully mundane, you see–just a fragile little human girl who played her cards so *chaotically* well she managed to charm the Night Goddess in her favor.”

He leaned forward, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial, theatrical whisper, his grin stretching too wide.

“But here’s the twist, Flameborne. Our dear Lady of the Shadows is jealous, possessive, and horribly petty. If Carmilla ever loses that precious favor for even a second... *poof*!”

He snapped his fingers right in front of Ren’s face, his expression suddenly dropping into a deadpan, chillingly vacant stare.

“What the night gives, the night can take back. Isn't that just delicious?”

Ren crossed her arms, her gaze shifting from the swirling fish in the pond back to Zakhar’s manic grin.

“You say that like you’ve actually met her,” she said flatly. “Like you know the Night Goddess personally.”

“Of course I do. We’re both deities–we run in the same delightfully unhinged circles. She does the brooding; I do the entertaining.”

“If you know her so well, what’s her name?”

Zakhar leaned in, a sharp, conspiratorial glint in his eye and whispered, “Well... wouldn’t you like to know?”

Ren narrowed her eyes.

“Cut the games, Zakhar. Are these vampyres really something we need to worry about?”

Zakhar’s frantic energy suddenly stilled. The mockery drained from his face, replaced by a cold, razor-sharp clarity that was far more terrifying than his laughter.

“If they are able to uncover the prophecy?” He tilted his head, a malicious little spark dancing in his eyes. “Yes. Absolutely.”

As she watched him tilt his head back and begin to hum a tuneless, jarring melody, a wave of sheer disbelief washed over her.

I am officially losing my mind, she thought, pressing two fingers to the bridge of her nose. *Of all the creatures in this realm to rely on, I am asking the God of Madness for help. If this doesn't prove I've completely lost my own sanity, nothing will.*

“Don’t you have something better to do than haunt my dreams?” Ren sighed.

Zakhar preened. “I made a copy of myself. Magic is handy like that.” He winked. “Which means I can multitask *and* keep my eyes on the prize.”

Ren bristled. “I already told you, I won’t be your champion.”

“I recall, yes. But that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t keep my eye on you.”

She frowned. “Why would you want to keep your eye on me?”

Zakhar stilled. The leaf in his hand crumpled, crushed in his fist. His voice dropped to a murmur, something dark and oddly sincere threading through it.

“Because you’re far too much *fun* to ignore.”

Ren lunged, fist aimed squarely at his smirking face, but Zakhar dissolved into laughter, peeling away like smoke.

And the world around her tore apart as she jolted awake from the dream.

For a moment, she lay still. She was empty in bed again. With her heart pounding against her ribs, another sound threaded through the silence– voices echoing faintly from the Great Hall.

Ren slipped from her bed, tugging her nightgown straight as the cool stones kissed her bare feet. A faint draft swept in from beneath the door, carrying with it the clipped rise and fall of an argument. Down the corridor, torchlight flickered against the arched entryway of the Great Hall.

“You’re not thinking clearly,” Lucan snapped.

“I’m thinking exactly as I should,” Talen growled back. “The archives in Pyraelia might hold something that could point us toward Vortharax’s tomb. If they get their hands on that artifact, we’re in trouble.”

“Pyraelia is *ash*, Talen. The Great Library was burned to cinders. The kingdom is a graveyard.”

Ren stepped further into the hall. Both fae males froze when they saw her.

Lucan’s expression softened. “Ren,” he murmured, voice smoothing into gentleness as he reached for a decanter of red wine. “You’re awake.” He poured a glass. “Come and sit. You should be a part of this conversation.”

“It’s about time we talk over everything and figure out our next move,” Ren agreed.

Ren accepted the glass, the cold metal of the stem chilling her fingers, but the words died on her tongue as the front door creaked open. Kaelin slipped inside, her loose hair cascading over her shoulders. There was a new sharpness to her tonight, a heightened awareness in her gaze that had been missing for days, yet dark clouds still smudged the skin beneath her eyes. Sensing the weight of the room, she froze as all three of them turned to look at her.

Lucan, ever the court-trained gentleman, lifted the wine bottle. “Evening, Princess. Would you care for a glass? After all, there’s truly nothing quite like drinking in the middle of the night.”

Kaelin’s gaze flickered to the wine. “No,” she murmured. Kaelin rolled her shoulders back, squaring them as she looked directly at Lucan, raising her chin. “I will gladly share a glass with you again, Lucan. But only when my people are safe, and this war is over.”

Lucan held her gaze for a long moment, the easy smile fading from his lips into an expression of respect. He tilted the bottle slightly toward her in a solemn toast.

“A fair point, and a promise I fully intend to hold you to.”

Talen exhaled a breath, dragging a hand through his hair. “Vortharax’s tomb isn’t going to reveal itself. We need answers. Either we find out, or the vampyres do.”

“And rushing into a graveyard kingdom can draw eyes we cannot afford on us,” Lucan countered. “What if Sylven’s soldiers are stationed there?”

Kaelin moved to Ren’s side, standing close enough that Ren could feel the faint warmth of her presence through the fur cloak draped over her shoulders.

Kaelin’s eyes lingered on Ren’s tight, strained expression. “What happened?”

Ren huffed a humorless laugh. “Oh, you know. We just confirmed that the killer in Driftwood Bay was a vampyre, and she let slip that the coven she left is hunting a relic that can snuff out the sun and plunge us all into endless night, which may foil our plans of retaking House Vaelaran.”

Kaelin’s eyes darkened. “This all happened this afternoon?”

Ren sighed. “One thing led to another.”

Lucan cleared his throat and lifted his glass. “However the details unfolded, the outcome was in our favor.”

Talen snorted, crossing his arms. “Please. The vampyre had you hanging by your ankle like a sacrificial lamb.”

Lucan swung toward him, incredulous. “Oh, don’t start.”

Ren chuckled. “And Talen had the wits to trick her into the mirror. You told her she’d be freed, and then you shattered the glass anyway.” She jabbed a finger at him. “That’s callous, by the way. I never thought I’d see that in you.”

Lucan had just taken a mouthful of wine when the words hit him. He choked, a cough bursting from his chest as he desperately tried—and failed—to swallow down the wine gracefully.

Kaelin’s gaze flicked to Talen, as if she were only now piecing together just how bad it had been.

Tale’s nostrils flared. “The vampyre wasn’t going to stop hunting if we let her go.”

“That’s not what you promised,” Ren shot back.

“That’s true,” Talen agreed dryly. “But I’ve learned that some promises are better not kept.”

Lucan lifted his wine again. “This feels like an excellent point at which to refill our glasses.”

Talen clinked his glass against Lucan’s, and they both drank.

There was one more thing she hadn’t said. One thing she’d been trying to ignore since Pyraelia. She cleared her throat, addressing everyone.

“I… need to tell you all something else.”

Kaelin’s attention snapped fully to her. Talen’s arms uncrossed. Even Lucan stilled.

“When we were in Pyraelia during the massacre, I wasn’t just unconscious.”

“You were out cold,” Talen confirmed.

“Right. Except I wasn’t just… gone.” Her hands trembled around the stem of her glass. “I saw some things.”

Lucan leaned forward. “What?"

“Vortharax was right there in front of me, but inside my head. It felt so real. I don't understand how, but he knew exactly who I was. Like he’d been waiting for me. It must be because we are soul-binded together.”

Talen’s eyes narrowed, studying her thoughtfully. “Dragons communicate through mind and spirit. If he reached you once, he may be able to again.”

Ren stared into the wine in her glass, watching the red ripple like blood in water. “What if I try talking to him?” she whispered. “Perhaps he knows where his tomb is buried.”

“Communing with a dragon isn’t a matter to be taken lightly,” Lucan muttered.

“I’m aware.”

Kaelin asked, “Do you think he’ll answer you?”

Ren hesitated. “I think there's a chance. He and I have communicated already, here and there. Usually during conflict.”

Talen said, “If you can get information on his burial tomb, this can turn the tide.”

Ren’s fingers tightened around the wineglass, her thoughts spinning faster than she could tame them. “Even if I can reach him, is the risk worth it?”

Lucan swirled the liquid in his own glass as he leaned back against the table and added, “Perhaps the prophecy is not real at all.”

“It may be real,” Ren countered softly.

She couldn't shake the terrifying weight of her recent nights, so she told them everything–that Zakhar had been slipping into her dreams with his chaotic presence and that he had spoken of the Night Goddess, confirming a divine reality that made the prophecy less like a fable and more like an impending storm.

“I don’t think we don't have the luxury of calling it a myth anymore,” Ren finished. “But even so, maybe instead of chasing dragons and tombs and prophecies, we should figure out what to do about Sylven’s men and his armies. His reach is spreading.”

Lucan took a long sip of his wine. “I can’t help but feel we’ve wandered into a side quest.”

Talen’s lips twitched in what might have been the ghost of a smile. “Sylven’s forces grow bolder, but if there is a chance this prophecy is true, this should not be taken lightly, either.”

Kaelin intercepted, her voice ringing with crisp authority. “Sylven’s forces are at our gates, and this prophecy demands a completely different set of blades. Look at our numbers—there is simply not enough of us to handle both of these issues at once. If we split our focus now, we fail at both.”

“And if we fail either of them, it won't matter where we put our blades,” Talen muttered. “If Sylven continues as usurper, or if that prophecy runs its course unchecked, their reach will spread like wildfire. We ignore one to fight the other, and we threaten the balance of the entire realm, anyway.”

Ren leaned her shoulder against the stone wall, her jaw tight as she looked between the two Fae royals. She wiped a streak of grime from her forearm, her sharp human eyes glinting with a dangerous pragmatism.

“You're both forgetting the one card we actually have left to play,” Ren chimed in. “Right now, Sylven still thinks we’re dead. That buys us time, and it gives us an advantage we'd be foolish to throw away. I can go talk to Vortharax tonight and see if I can pry some actual answers out of him. Once we know what we're actually dealing with, we make our decision from there.”

“Usually, I'd recommend we put this to a vote,” Kaelin said dryly, as she crossed her arms. “But considering there are only four of us here, it wouldn't be much of a vote. We may just end up staring at each other in a stalemate.”

“A majority vote has always been the Vaelaran way, sister,” Talen added, his gaze locking onto Kaelin’s. “Even if the odds are tight. We don’t stall when the realm is on the line.”

“Fine,” Kaelin decided. “Who is in favor of chasing this prophecy for now?”

Talen didn’t hesitate. His hand went up first, firm and decisive.

Beside him, Lucan brought his glass to his lips, taking a sip of the red wine before raising his free hand.

Ren stood still for a beat, looking at the two of them, before she reluctantly let her hand drift upward.

“After barely surviving a battle with a vampyre, I shudder to think about what would happen if we just sit on our hands and let this prophecy come true. I’d rather deal with answers tonight than whatever nightmare is waiting for us if we do nothing.”

“I still think it would be better to focus on Sylven,” Kaelin muttered. "But the majority has decided. Our path is set, then. We hunt the prophecy.”

Lucan sighed. “Stars above, I miss the days when our biggest worry was making it to training sessions with Ulfric on time.”

Ren swallowed hard. The humor didn’t ease the truth knotting in her stomach. Zakhar. The vampyre coven. Sylven. Vortharax. Every thread pulled tighter around her, and she wasn’t sure which one would strangle her first.

Kaelin muttered, “And we’re chasing shadows on top of it all. There haven’t even been signs of dragon attacks lately. Not since—”

“That’s not true,” Talen cut in. “Before we caught the vampyre, Ren and I met a man who claimed he escaped an attack from a small village from House Tharowen.”

Ren shuddered. “I’m surprised he managed a single coherent sentence.”

“He was one of the few survivors. He tried to warn the Jarl but was turned away. He claims he has seen the dragon making its way toward this area,” Talen explained.

Kaelin’s breath hitched. “Toward Driftwood Bay?”

“Toward us,” Talen confirmed.

Lucan uncorked the bottle again with a muttered, “Wonderful. Just wonderful. Add ‘incoming dragon’ to the list of things trying to kill us.”

Ren didn’t even try to glare at him this time. A dragon from House Tharowen–heading toward them. Everything inside her went cold and burning at the same time.

“Why wasn’t this the first thing you said?” Kaelin managed, her nostrils flaring.

“Because we were occupied with the vampyre,” Talen replied. “I chose the more immediate danger.”

“Someone else should try to gain an audience with the Jarl. If there's a dragon anywhere near these borders, his scouts need to be looking for it,” Ren mulled.

“I can do that,” a voice muttered from the doorway.

They all turned to see Brenna stepping into the room. The orc looked half-asleep, her dark hair a tangled mess and her heavy shoulders slumping with exhaustion, though her sharp eyes were focused.

“He knows my clan well enough to grant me an audience.”

“Better to be safe than sorry,” Ren said, giving Brenna a small, appreciative nod. “Thanks, Brenna. We need all the leverage we can get right now.”

Brenna didn't answer right away. Instead, her tired expression turned deeply solemn. She looked at each of them in turn—Ren, Lucan, and the two Fae royal siblings—before stepping fully into the center of the room.

To everyone's surprise, the formidable orc female sank down, kneeling low on the floor and bowing her head in a gesture of profound respect.

“Thank you all for destroying the vampyre that was hunting Driftwood Bay. My people have suffered under that shadow for too long. For that alone, I am in your debt, and I will do whatever I can to help in your efforts. I ask that you consider me a trusted ally from here on forward, and you are always welcome in my home Ren Harper, Lucan Brightbane, Princess Kaelin Vaelaran, and Prince Talen Vaelaran.”

Talen’s hardened features softened, the defensive edge of the fae prince melting away entirely.

Without a word of warning to the rest of the room, Talen crossed the floor and sank to his knees directly in front of Brenna, bringing himself down to her level.

“It is our duty, and our love for this kingdom, to protect its people—*all* of its people,” Talen murmured, his voice steady but layered with deep emotion. He reached out, offering a hand to help her rise. “You owe us no debts, Brenna Thornell. Indeed, you will be our close ally moving forward. But not only that...” He paused. “...our friend.”

Brenna’s head snapped up, her eyes wide as she looked from Talen’s offered hand to the sincere warmth in his expression. A genuine smile broke through her exhaustion, softening the rugged lines of her face.

She took his hand, gripping his forearm with a firm, steady strength as she rose to her feet.

“I am honored to call you all my friends, and to have this company at my back is a privilege I won't take lightly.”

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Fryphessyrth’s snores carried across the forest like distant thunder, reaching Ren long before she ever saw the beast. In the darkness, Fryphessyrth stretched long and vast, her wings folded tight along her sides. Ren crossed the clearing until she stood before Fryphessyrth’s snout, then lowered herself to the ground, sitting cross-legged on the earth.

Fryphessyrth.

Golden eyes snapped open, pupils narrowing as they locked onto the small figure seated before her. The snoring ceased, replaced by a low, rumbling growl that vibrated through Ren’s bones.

“*You have some nerve*,” Fryphessyrth lifted her massive head with a disgruntled huff, “*approaching me like this in my slumber again.*”

“Sorry. We don’t have much time, and I have questions.” Ren grabbed the roasted goat leg she’d brought, tossing it onto the earth between them. “A favor, if you will.”

Fryphessyrth’s gaze flicked briefly to the offering, then returned to Ren. *“I hunt my own prey. I have no use for what is laid at my feet by mortal hands.”*

“Consider it a gift.”

For a long moment, Fryphessyrth was silent. Then she lowered her head. *“Very well.”*

“How do you know Vortharax?”

"I have known him for most of my life.”

The simplicity of the answer sent a chill down Ren’s spine. “Do you want him to return?”

When Fryphessyrth spoke again, her voice had been roughened by something dangerously close to grief. *“I do, though I know it may not be for the betterment of the world.”*

Ren tilted her head, studying the ancient creature before her. “If you know that, then why would you want him returned?”

“Because he is my mate.”

The word struck Ren like a physical blow.

Mate.



Sitting in the Great Hall, Kaelin found comfort in the flames’ restless hunger, the way they sputtered and snapped, devouring whatever dared come too close. Fire was honest like that.

But every time she let her gaze soften, every time her eyelids fluttered closed, she was dragged back to the ballroom, back to the cold marble beneath her knees. To her left, the execution line stretched, with Sylven standing at its head–directing the slaughter with a tilt of his chin. One by one, the nobles of House Vaelaran—*her people*—were forced forward to their deaths.

All around her were familiar faces twisted in agony; she saw bodies crumpling, hands clawing at their chests, mouths open in silent pleas for mercy or death, she could not tell which.

Some begged for the pain to end. Others simply wept.

And Kaelin couldn’t save a single person.

If there was one regret that gnawed at her bones, it was leaving them. She had been their sovereign. The heir of House Vaelaran, born and trained to lead, to protect.

And she had lived while they suffered.

All her life, she had prided herself on foresight–on being able to read between the lines and anticipating threats five steps ahead. She had believed herself clever, prepared.

But that day had proven her wrong.

She had let the world blur at the edges until the only thing in focus was a human woman who made her forget the crown she wore. Now, her kingdom was scattered, with her people dead.

The soft scuff of a boot against stone broke the silence. Talen emerged from the shadows of the hallway, steam rising from the teacup gripped in his hand. He moved with ease, crossing the room to join her at the hearth.

“The weight of the world looks heavy on you tonight. Care to share the burden?”

Kaelin did not look at him.

She used to be a person–not this hollowed thing wearing her skin. She used to speak with ease, her words a weapon and a balm in equal measure, able to charm, manipulate, persuade any political adversary into submission. She used to wear silks and jewels, drink wine by candlelight, decorate her chambers with the turning of the seasons.

Now, she was…

“Kaelin,” Talen whispered, the plea unmistakable. He set his tea down. He moved into her line of sight, forcing her to see him, not as a prince. But as a man who had seen the same darkness.

Her brother.

“I know what happened that day. I know the horrors you faced. I was miles away while you were being forged in that hell, and for that, I will carry the shame until my last breath.”

He gave a pause.

“When a spirit is maimed like yours has been, it’s like a fresh burn on the skin. Every touch, every word, even the light itself, feels like an assault. It’s raw and sensitive now. But eventually, the spirit grows a different kind of skin—a tougher one. It won’t be the same as it was before, but it will be strong enough to keep the world from hurting you so easily. Let me help you reach that point.”

A hollow laugh escaped Kaelin. “You talk of tougher skin, of healing. But you’re assuming the princess you knew is still underneath. That princess died with her people. I don’t know who I am anymore–I don’t know if this kingdom is even worth the blood it takes to save it. Perhaps our people deserve a better sovereign.”

Talen flinched as if she’d struck him. “A better sovereign? Like Sylven? Is that who you think they deserve? He’s a menace to our people, Kaelin, and you would hand him the crown without a fight?”

The name hit her like a physical blow. The defiance in her chest collapsed all at once, the dam finally breaking. Her shoulders shook, and she dissolved into tears.

“Sometimes... sometimes I wish I had stayed with them,” she choked out, her hands flying to her face to hide the shame of it. “I wish I had died so I wouldn't have to stand here and figure out how to piece whatever husk I am back together. I don’t know what to do next. I don’t know how to be the person our kingdom needs me to be.”

“By giving up, you’re doing Sylven’s work for him. He wanted to break you. If you stop fighting, then you’re his greatest accomplishment. The hard part is being the one who has to live and make it mean something.”

Something in Kaelin snapped. She rose to her feet and crossed the hall like a wraith and burst into the night. The air was sharp, the sky endless above her as she descended into the forest deeper and deeper, past the beaten path, past the places others dared tread. Roots clawed at her bare feet, branches lashed at her skin.

But she did not slow.

Pain meant nothing.

She stopped at the edge of the cliff. Far below, waves shattered against stone. Kaelin lifted her face to the heavens. The full moon loomed overhead, pale and watchful.

She closed her eyes and felt everything.

The hum of insects vibrating through the trees. A fly buzzed past her ear, landing briefly on her elbow. Somewhere above, an owl perched, searching for its mate. Beneath the brush, a rabbit crouched protectively over her eight newborn kits, heart pounding with skittish fear.

So much life.

Kaelin inhaled, and then something dark and ancient answered her call. Magic surged through her veins. She reached out with her magic and seized the living thread that bound the forest together.

The world stopped.

A vice closed around every beating heart. Insects fell silent. The owl froze mid-breath. The rabbit’s pulse stuttered. Kaelin’s own heart seized in response. Her knees buckled as the magic threatened to tear her apart from the inside. Blood streamed from her nostrils as her vision blurred.

Hold.

She had been practicing this every day. In the beginning, she could barely seize a single living thing—a rabbit, a bird, or something small. Even then, it had left her weak and hollowed out.

Now, the forest writhed beneath her grasp.

Life itself resisted her iron will, but her dark talons—once fragile, flickering things—had grown sharper and stronger with every attempt. The power coiled through her veins, intoxicating and horrifying in equal measure, answering her call with a hunger that felt far too eager.

She gritted her teeth and held on. Just as darkness crept into the edges of her sight, Kaelin released her hold. The forest gasped. Life fled her presence in a rush, wings beating, hearts racing, creatures scrambling away as if death had brushed too close. The owl vanished into the night. The rabbit dragged her kits deeper into hiding.

Kaelin collapsed to her hands and knees, blood slicking her lips.

Never again, she vowed silently, the words carving themselves into her soul. *I will never be weak again.*

She wiped the blood from her mouth and lifted her head, eyes blazing with cold resolve. One day, she would stand before Sylven. And when she did, she would be the last thing he ever underestimated.



Ren stared at Fryphessyrth as the meaning settled. *Mate*.

In Ren's stunned silence, Fryphessyrth apparently decided the moment required sustenance. She opened her massive jaws and devoured the lamb leg in a single, efficient snap of teeth. She licked her lips before lowering herself once more, settling into the earth as she rested her snout against the ground.

"For my kind, we are given only one mate in our lifetime. I consider myself fortunate. I found mine early. We had many good years." A faint huff escaped her, resembling a laugh. *"We met before we ever learned to fly. Vortharax was the one who urged me forward when I hesitated at the cliff's edge. He was fearless."* Her eyes glinted. *"Too fearless. He never learned where bravery ended and recklessness began."*

Ren swallowed. "Interesting," she murmured, mind racing. Then she plunged ahead before doubt could stop her. "I spoke with him the day you

and I first met, when everything went to hell. His soul is embedded inside me.” The words tasted wrong in her mouth. “How do I do that again? I need to meet him again.”

“You must still your thoughts and set your intention with clarity. That is how a Flameborne reaches into the depths of her own mind and beyond.”

Ren’s stomach twisted. The memory of that place rose unbidden. Her skin prickled.

“Is there any chance you know where his resting tomb is?”

“I do not.”

“Damn it.” Ren scrubbed a hand through her hair. “There’s no time for trial and error. What am I supposed to do if he refuses to tell me where it is? For all I know, he doesn’t even remember.”

“He will,” Fryphessyrth said without hesitation. *“That tomb was the last place he stood before he was trapped.”*

Ren clenched her jaw and pushed herself to her feet. She turned to leave.

“I have one suggestion."

Ren paused, glancing back over her shoulder. “At this point, I’ll take anything.”

Fryphessyrth’s eyes gleamed. *“He loves conquest.”*

Ren snorted. “I gathered that.”

“He loves to win,” Fryphessyrth corrected, a dangerous note entering her voice. *“Challenge him to anything at all. Make it a gamble that if you win, he gives you what you seek. Just be sure that whatever you challenge him to is something you will win.”*

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Ren hated the way her skin prickled with awareness, the way her pulse skidded and stuttered whenever the truth pressed too close. She hated feeling exposed and stripped down to something fragile and breakable. Most of all, she hated feeling powerless. Especially where Vortharax was concerned. The name alone was enough to sour the air in her lungs.

Once, Vortharax had nearly driven the world to its knees until fae and human alike had clawed together a desperate salvation into a pact, a binding. Ren didn't know all the details of it, only the cost.

Soul Binding. An ancient art so reviled it had been erased from most records. The theft of a soul, siphoned and sealed away into something else —a gem, a blade… or a living body. *Her* body.

The memory slammed into her without mercy. Blood on the floor. The stench of smoke and iron. Her parents' screams cut short as the Embersworn tore through her home, not for gold or conquest, but for her. The murder of her parents was merely a step in a larger ritual.

Ren had been a child. She hadn't let herself think about that night since Pyraelia fell. Not since grief and duty and survival had kept her in relentless motion. If she kept moving, she didn't have to remember; she didn't have to feel.

But now, there was nowhere left to run.

Ren plucked a fallen leaf from the ground, fingers twirling at its stem until it snapped free. She twisted it apart piece by piece–a nervous habit

she’d never managed to break. She shifted restlessly, crossing and uncrossing her legs beneath the dense canopy of the forest, where the towering trees blocked out the night sky. Inhaling deeply, she tried to catch the scent of pine that usually cleared her nerves, but tonight it did little to ground her. Even the raucous noise of the Splintered Tavern was just a distant, muffled hum a few minutes' walk away.

Anything to delay the moment when she would have to face him.

A shadow stretched across her boots.

“I know, I know,” Ren muttered, not looking up. “I’m getting to it, Talen. No need to get your panties in a twist.”

Silence answered her. Then came the soft crunch of leaves behind her.

Ren stiffened. Her jaw tightened as she twisted around, irritation flaring hot and sharp. “I said—”

The words died on her tongue. Violet eyes met hers in the dark. Kaelin stood there, moonlight tracing the sharp lines of her face.

“I haven’t done it yet,” Ren said quickly, the words tumbling over one another. “I’m going to. I just needed a moment to clear my head.”

It was a lie, or close enough to one.

Ren dropped her gaze to the ground, to the crushed leaves at her knees. But Kaelin’s attention did not waver. It pressed into her like a weight–achingly impossible to ignore.

Then Kaelin knelt before Ren with deliberate grace. Ren’s breath hitched when cool fingers brushed her skin, a single fingertip lifting her chin until Ren had no choice but to meet the fae princess’ eyes.

“Admitting you’re nervous isn’t weakness. You are human, Ren. Even I feel it sometimes,” Kaelin added quietly.

Ren swallowed. Her mouth had gone dry. “Thank you for the reminder of my mortality,” she managed hoarsely.

A corner of Kaelin’s mouth curved. “You’re about to face Vortharax, the Godslayer, the beast that brought kings to their knees.”

Her fingers tightened beneath Ren’s chin.

“When you see him again, please tell him something for me.”

Her violet eyes burned now, bright and merciless.

“Tell him that kneeling is earned,” Her eyes never left Ren’s. “And you, Ren Harper, do not kneel for anybody.”

Ren’s breath shuddered out of her, and for the first time since the darkness had crept into her thoughts, fear was no longer the only thing

coiling in her chest. There was awe and fire. The air between them crackled with unspoken challenge. Ren felt something shift inside her chest from Kaelin's words and the look in the fae princess' eyes, spreading a dangerous heat through her veins.

"You're out of your mind," Ren breathed, but her voice lacked conviction.

Kaelin's answering smile was lethal. "And you're mine," she murmured, her fingers tracing a feather-light path along Ren's jawline. "I want you to remember who you belong to when you face him." Her thumb brushed higher, lightly pinching Ren's lower lip. Ren playfully nipped at the skin, but the playfulness vanished as Kaelin's grip tightened, trapping her jaw and pulling her close enough that their breaths mingled. "And that no matter what that beast says, you're coming back to me. You do not bend the knee, Ren Harper. You stand. Always. And anything monstrous enough to demand your submission will learn exactly why you never bow. You are not made to bend."

The lethal edge melted from Kaelin's expression, replaced by something fierce and desperately loyal. She dropped her gaze to Ren's lips and pressed a soft, lingering kiss there. When she pulled back, her thumb traced Ren's cheekbone with an aching tenderness.

"When this is over, I will place a crown on your head with my own hands."

Her violet eyes burned.

"And we will rule Vaelaran together."

She placed a kiss on Ren's forehead.

"Not as consorts. Not as symbols. But as queens. As *wives*."

Ren's breath stuttered. "A crown? Wives" she whispered unsteadily. "Kaelin, I—"

She didn't finish.

Kaelin closed the distance and kissed her as if she meant to savor every unspoken fear and every truth between them. Ren melted into it with a soft, broken sound, the kiss deepening as Kaelin claimed Ren's mouth. Time fractured. There was only heat, breath, the press of Kaelin's hand at her jaw as if anchoring her to the moment. Ren kissed her back with equal hunger, equal need, pouring every doubt and devotion into the space between them.

Kaelin drew back just enough to rest her forehead against Ren's, her smirk gone. Want burned openly in her eyes. "Soon," Kaelin murmured,

voice low. “But not yet.”

Ren shakily nodded. Kaelin’s eyes darkened, her voice dropping to a husky whisper that sent shivers down Ren's spine. “Tonight, I want you to remember before you face him, that you are meant to be worshipped.”

“I don’t—" Ren started, but Kaelin pressed a finger to her lips.

“I can see it in the way you tremble,” Kaelin's other hand slid down Ren’s arm, her touch deliberate and maddeningly slow. “The way your pulse races.” Her fingers found Ren’s wrist, pressing against the point where her heartbeat thundered beneath the skin. “Your body sings so sweetly to me, Ren darling.”

Pride warred with desire, but when Kaelin leaned in, her lips hovering just inches from Ren’s ear, her pride lost.

“You want me to touch you,” Kaelin whispered, her breath a hot, devastating friction against Ren’s skin. “You want me to make you forget your own name.” Her hand slid to Ren’s hip, gripping firmly, pulling their centers flush against one another. The sudden, overwhelming heat of Kaelin’s body—the promise of her thighs, her scent, the heavy ache radiating between them—drove the last of the air from Ren's lungs. It was an intoxicating, suffocating kind of need.

“But you're going to have to take your clothes off first,” Kaelin murmured, her fingers digging just a little deeper into Ren's hip, “so I can look upon you.”

“Kaelin…” Ren’s voice came out strangled.

“Tick, tock.” Kaelin pulled back, her eyes gleaming with amusement. “That’s just saying my name. Though I do love the way it sounds on your lips.”

She released Ren suddenly, easing back, and the abrupt loss of contact hit Ren like a physical ache—a sudden, freezing emptiness. Ren reached for her instinctively, blindly chasing the warmth, but Kaelin caught her wrist mid-air. Her grip wasn’t cruel, but it was absolute, holding Ren at bay just close enough to feel the phantom heat of her skin.

In the dappled shadows, Kaelin’s violet eyes gleamed with a predatory amusement. “Take off your clothes,” she commanded, the words a low, velvety friction. “Slowly.”

The sheer wildness of the request made Ren’s throat go dry. She glanced wildly at the dark canopy around them. “We're out in the woods. Anyone could—”

“Let them *watch*.”

Before Ren could process the dare, Kaelin’s fingers found the hem of her own nightgown. In one fluid, agonizingly deliberate motion, she pulled the silk up and over her head, casting it aside to let it pool like a shadow on the forest floor.

Ren’s breath hitched. Moonlight cut through the branches, painting Kaelin’s pale skin in liquid silver and stark shadows. It highlighted the elegant curve of her collarbones, the soft swell of her breasts, and the way her pert nipples immediately hardened in the crisp night air. She stood entirely unbothered by the chill.

“Your turn, darling,” Kaelin murmured, her gaze dropping to the collar of Ren's shirt, waiting.

Ren’s mouth went dry. Her hands moved to her own clothing, fumbling with buttons and laces, desperate to close the distance between them. Her hands stilled at her waist, trembling against the laces of her trousers. Kaelin’s gaze was a physical weight, scorching and possessive. The cool night air kissed Ren’s skin everywhere it was exposed, a stark contrast to the wildfire Kaelin had ignited within her.

Ren took a shuddering breath. Her fingers, clumsy with need, began the agonizingly slow process of undoing the leather cord. Each loop felt like a lifetime. The fabric, once a barrier, now felt like a traitorous veil hiding what she desperately wanted to offer.

Kaelin watched without a word; there was not a sound beyond the rustle of leaves and Ren’s own ragged breathing. She pushed her trousers over her hips, letting them pool at her ankles, stepping out with a grace she didn’t feel. Her tunic was next, lifted over her head, the cool air making her nipples tighten into aching points.

Finally, she stood bare before Kaelin, the forest floor cool beneath her feet, every inch of her skin singing with awareness.

Kaelin’s eyes devoured her. A low, appreciative hum vibrated in the air between them. “You’re perfect,” she breathed, the word a caress. “You truly never cease to take my breath away.”

Ren didn’t hesitate. She closed the distance, drawn by the magnetic pull of Kaelin’s naked form. But Kaelin moved quicker; in a fluid motion, she lowered herself to the soft bed of moss, leaning back on her elbows. Her legs parted slightly, an unspoken command.

“Straddle me, my love.”

Ren’s heart hammered against her ribs. She knelt, one knee on either side of Kaelin’s hips, her own heat hovering just above the other fae princess’ stomach. She felt the warmth radiating from Kaelin’s skin.

“Higher,” Kaelin instructed.

“But won’t it be difficult to breathe?”

Kaelin’s teeth bared. “I want your taste on my tongue. *Now*.”

Ren quickly obeyed, her knees moving up, body trembling as she positioned herself over Kaelin’s face. The intimacy was overwhelming. The view of Kaelin’s violet eyes gazing up at her from between her own thighs sent a jolt of pure, molten lust straight to her core. Then Kaelin’s hands were on her, strong and sure, gripping the curves of her hips. Her thumbs dug into the soft flesh, anchoring her.

“Don’t you dare shy away,” Kaelin murmured, her breath hot against Ren’s most intimate flesh.

Ren gasped, her head falling back. The first touch of Kaelin’s tongue was a slow lick from bottom to top. A groan tore from Ren’s throat. It was a tease, a mere hint of what was to come.

Then Kaelin’s mouth found her clit, and Ren cried out. It was a relentless, focused worship. Kaelin’s tongue swirled and flicked, her lips closing around the sensitive nub to suck gently, then harder. Her hands on Ren’s hips held her down, grounding her to accept every single stroke. Ren tried to arch, to move, but Kaelin’s grip was iron, locking her in place.

“Oh, gods—” Ren sobbed, arching her back.

Kaelin pulled away for a heartbeat, her voice a rough vibration against Ren’s flesh. “Sing for me, Ren darling. I love hearing you beg.” Then she dove back in, her tongue plunging deeper, lapping at her entrance before zeroing back in on Ren’s clit with ruthless precision.

The sensations were a storm. Every nerve ending was on fire. The lapping sounds of Kaelin’s mouth on her, the firm pressure of Kaelin’s hands, the dizzying scent of Ren’s own arousal mixed with forest earth—it was too much. Ren’s thighs shook violently. Pleasure coiled tight in her core, a spring wound to its breaking point.

“Kaelin, please, I can’t—”

Kaelin’s hands slid from her hips to her ass, spreading her wider. The new angle was devastating. Her tongue delved deeper, fucking her with shallow, rapid thrusts that made Ren see stars.

“That’s my girl,” Kaelin growled.

The praise speared through Ren’s chaos. *My girl*. It was the secret hunger she’d been too proud to name. Her hips jerked, but Kaelin held her steady, controlling the rhythm, the depth, everything.

“Ride my tongue,” Kaelin purred, her tongue painting torturous circles. “Show me how badly you need to come.”

Ren obeyed, a mindless thing of need. She rolled her hips, meeting each laving stroke, chasing the friction that was building into an inferno. The coil snapped tight, tighter, a scream building in her lungs.

Right at the precipice, Kaelin stopped. Ren whimpered, a sound of pure loss. She was dangling over a void, shaking.

So very close.

Kaelin looked up, her lips glistening, her eyes pitch black with desire. She released Ren’s ass with one hand and brought it between them, her fingers sliding through Ren’s slickness. She pressed two fingers against her entrance, not entering, just applying that exquisite pressure. Kaelin’s lips curled into a wicked smile. Then she leaned up, sealed her mouth over Ren’s clit again, and sucked hard, while her fingers finally, mercifully, pushed inside.

Ren shattered.

And through the roaring in her ears, she felt the vibration of Kaelin’s voice against her throbbing flesh, a guttural, possessive growl. “Come for me *now*, all over my fingers.”

A raw, broken scream was torn from Ren’s throat as the orgasm detonated through her. It was relentless, wave after wave of pure, white-hot ecstasy that shook her to her bones. Her vision whited out. Her body clenched around Kaelin’s fingers, her back bowing.

Ren’s body trembled in the aftermath, her thighs quivering around Kaelin’s head as the last spasms faded into a deep ache. She slumped forward, catching herself on shaky arms, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Sweat slicked her skin, and she could still feel Kaelin’s fingers buried inside her, pulsing gently as if to draw out every last quiver of her release.

Kaelin withdrew her hand slowly, letting her fingers trail through the mess she’d made of Ren. She licked them clean with a low hum of satisfaction, her pitch-black eyes locked on Ren’s flushed face. “You are so stunning when you come undone, the way your cheeks flush a gorgeous scarlet red. And you sang *so well* for me.”

But Ren wasn’t done. Not yet. The vulnerability of her release fueled a sudden, fierce hunger. She wanted to taste Kaelin, to make her unravel the way she’d just been undone. Pushing herself up, Ren’s hands found Kaelin’s shoulders, pressing her back against the earth with a surprising firmness.

Kaelin’s eyebrows arched, but she allowed it, her lips parting in a challenging smirk. Ren slid down Kaelin’s body inch by inch, her mouth mapping the path—kissing the curve of her neck, nipping at the swell of her breasts, tongue flicking over a hardened nipple until Kaelin hissed softly. Lower still, Ren’s lips brushed the taut plane of Kaelin’s stomach, feeling the muscles tense under her touch.

By the time Ren reached Kaelin’s hips, her own arousal reignited again so very quickly, a fresh slickness gathering between her legs. She hooked her fingers between Kaelin’s legs and tugged them apart, exposing the dark curls and the glistening folds beneath.

Ren paused, inhaling deeply. Kaelin’s scent hit her like a drug—sweet and musky, already heavy with need. Her cunt was juicy, lips swollen and parted just enough to reveal the wetness shining there.

Begging for her attention.

Ren gripped Kaelin’s thighs, easing them fully apart with gentle but insistent pressure. Kaelin resisted for a heartbeat, testing her, then yielded, spreading her legs wide to give Ren full access.

“Fuck, you’re already soaking wet for me,” Ren whispered, more to herself than anything, her voice husky with delight. She dove in without hesitation, her tongue flattening against Kaelin’s slit in a long, slow lick from entrance to clit. Kaelin bucked once, a sharp intake of breath escaping her.

Ren didn’t let up. She lapped at her steadily, circling the clit with the tip of her tongue before sucking it between her lips. Her hands kneaded Kaelin’s inner thighs, holding them open as she delved deeper, tongue thrusting into the wet heat of her cunt. Kaelin’s hips rolled up to meet her, a low groan rumbling from her chest.

Emboldened, Ren slid one finger along Kaelin’s folds, coating it in her arousal before pushing inside. The walls clenched around her immediately, hot and velvety. She added a second finger, curling them to stroke that sensitive spot within, while her mouth returned to the clit, sucking and flicking in rhythm.

Kaelin’s composure cracked. Her hands fisted in the leaves, knuckles white, as her body began to writhe. “Fuck, Ren,” she gasped, her voice losing its edge, turning breathy and desperate. Her pitch-black eyes fluttered half-shut, lips parted on a string of curses. Ren felt the way Kaelin’s pussy fluttered around her fingers, the flood of wetness coating her hand, the tremors starting in her thighs.

Ren pumped her fingers faster, twisting them on each thrust, her tongue relentless on the swollen nub. She could feel Kaelin’s pulse racing under her lips, the tension coiling tighter. Kaelin’s back arched, her breaths coming in sharp pants, hips grinding against Ren’s face.

It was then that Ren decided if she were to be smothered by Kaelin’s thighs, she would die a very happy woman.

“Don’t stop—*oh gods*—” Kaelin’s words dissolved into a moan, her body seizing. Ren kept licking through it, drawing out every shudder, every cry, until Kaelin was a writhing mess beneath her.

“Don’t call out for the gods when it’s me devouring your cunt,” Ren hissed. “Say *my* name. Or screaming will suffice. Fuck, whatever it is—I want to hear you.”

Kaelin audibly gasped, and Kaelin could have sworn Kaelin’s eyes glistened with unshed tears as she came hard, her walls clamping down on Ren’s fingers in rhythmic pulses, her thighs clamping shut tightly around Ren’s face. Kaelin collapsed back with a final, trembling sigh.

Ren pulled back slowly, her lips shiny with Kaelin’s release, a triumphant smile curving her mouth as she looked up to meet those dark, sated eyes.

Ren crawled back up Kaelin’s body, her skin flushed and sticky with sweat and the remnants of their shared release. She hovered over Kaelin for a moment, their breaths mingling in the heated space between them, before leaning down to capture Kaelin’s lips in a slow, lazy kiss. Kaelin’s mouth opened willingly, her tongue sliding against Ren’s in unhurried strokes, tasting herself on Ren’s lips with a soft hum.

They kissed like that for what felt like an eternity, bodies pressed close, limbs tangling as the urgency faded into something softer, more indulgent. Ren’s fingers traced idle patterns along Kaelin’s side, dipping into the curve of her hip, while Kaelin’s hand cupped the back of Ren’s neck, holding her steady. Their tongues danced, exploring without demand.

But the tenderness shifted when Kaelin’s fingers tightened suddenly at Ren’s nape, pulling her closer. She broke the kiss just enough to nip at Ren’s lower lip, then her hand wrapped around Ren’s throat in a firm grip, her thumb pressing into the pulse point and feeling the rapid thrum beneath the skin.

“This is what truly matters,” Kaelin growled low, her voice a seething rumble against Ren’s mouth, pitch-black eyes narrowing with fierce intensity. “Everyone else can go straight to hell–including the overgrown lizard. Understand?”

Ren could only offer a broken nod beneath the firm weight of Kaelin's hand. Then, a fierce laugh caught in her throat as she closed the distance between them again, stung by the sudden realization that she could devour every piece of this fae princess and still spend a lifetime starving for more.

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Shadows bled inward from the fringes of Ren’s mind, and the inner darkness spun with a dizzying pull that made the solid earth beneath her boots feel like shifting sand. For a terrifying second, her knees threatened to buckle.

But Ren forced her spine straight, burying her nails into the meat of her palms until the sharp sting anchored her.

She was done hiding.

Taking a ragged breath, she steeled herself to look directly into the abyss, more than ready to face the ancient, burning fury of the dragon bound to her soul.

Ren’s eyes adjusted slowly to the deep black, catching the moment the void began to ripple. The shadows folded inward, coiling and reshaping themselves before a pair of crimson eyes ignited in the dark.

Vortharax emerged. He towered over Ren, a living mountain of ancient scales catching faint glimmers of inner fire.

Ren’s breath hitched. She could only imagine what he must look like unbound.

“*The Flameborne returns*," Vortharax rumbled as his massive tail swept behind him.

Her knees threatened to give way again. Ren forced herself to still–forced herself to breathe.

Then, Ren lifted her chin, meeting the dragon's burning stare with a crooked smile. "Missed me? You've certainly been loud enough in my head. I was hoping you'd learned some manners by now."

Vortharax answered with a low, reverberating growl that rattled the very foundations of the darkness. Lowering his massive head, his ember-lit eyes narrowed as a punishing wave of heat rolled from his flaring nostrils, slamming into Ren like a physical blow that snapped her hair back and stole the air from her lungs.

Ren dug her boots into the shifting dark, curling her hands into tight fists at her sides, pain grounding her as she held his gaze. She refused to give him even the satisfaction of a flinch.

"*I will never yield to a mortal*," Vortharax seethed. "*You dare call yourself Flameborne, yet you do not even speak our tongue.*"

"I can understand well enough."

"*You have no right to bear the name Flameborne.*"

"Then perhaps your definition is outdated. A lot has changed since you were soul-binded to me. I don't need your tongue to wield your fire."

Vortharax surged forward, his head snapping down toward her with predatory speed. His jaws parted just enough to reveal rows of ember-lit teeth, a promise of annihilation hanging between them.

Ren did not retreat. Instead, she dropped a hand onto her hip and waved him off flippantly, turning her back on the rows of razor-sharp teeth as if he were nothing more than an annoying distraction.

"Save the teeth for later. I have a very important question for you, and we don't have much time."

Vortharax halted mid-lunge, his momentum shuddering to a stop.

"Where is your tomb?" Ren continued. "The place where they bound you."

Vortharax drew back slowly, his head lifting as if the words had struck him. His tail stilled. "*You dare speak of that place to me?*"

"Oh, spare me the theatrics. Don't go throwing a tantrum–your reputation precedes you."

Vortharax snarled.

"Tell me where it is," Ren commanded when his snarling died down. "Where you were betrayed. Where they *bound* you."

Vortharax's eyes flared. But instead of answering, he turned away into the endless dark.

Silence stretched.

Ren reached into her coat. Cards slid into her palm. Vortharax's head tilted at the sound. His tail swished once. Then again.

Ren held up the deck between them. "Let's make this interesting. Do you feel up to a challenge?"

Slowly, Vortharax turned back to her, crimson eyes narrowing.

"If I win, you tell me where it is."

Vortharax let out a quiet huff.

"And if *you* win, you may ask for something in return."

"*You speak far too boldly for something so weak,*" he growled.

Ren's lips tipped upward. "So, deal?" She shuffled the deck, sitting cross-legged. "The rules are simple enough that I'm sure even you can keep up." She received a growl in response. "We need to choose the queen of hearts." She held up two cards between her fingers. "Whoever chooses the right card wins. There's no trickery, no strategy. Just pure luck."

"*Fickle luck.*"

"Fickle, yes. Are you ready?"

Vortharax licked his lips. He exhaled through his nostrils.

"Shuffle the cards one more time, human."

Ren shrugged. She rolled the two cards between her fingers with deliberate slowness, the soft whisper of paper unnervingly loud in the vast dark. Once. Twice. Then she placed them face-down between them, spaced just far enough apart to feel like a choice that mattered.

Silence fell.

They stared at one another—dragon and Flameborne—neither blinking, neither yielding. The darkness seemed to press closer, as if it, too, were waiting. Ren's pulse pounded loudly in her ears; she wondered if he could hear it.

At last, Vortharax inclined his massive head toward the card on the left.

Ren arched a brow. "You sure you don't want to rethink that?"

He bared his teeth in a snarl. *"Flip it."*

Ren did.

The Joker stared up at them.

For a heartbeat, the world held still.

Then Ren's smirk bloomed as she turned over the remaining card. The Queen of Hearts gleamed against the dark. She looked up at him through her lashes.

“Well,” she murmured sweetly, “would you look at that.”

Vortharax went very still.

And in the silence that followed, Ren knew one thing with absolute certainty: Vortharax, indeed, did *not* like losing.

Vortharax lifted his head and roared. The furious sound tore through the darkness. It rolled through Ren’s mind with bone-rattling force, shaking the void as if the world were cracking open beneath it. The roar went on and on, so loud, so absolute, that pain lanced through her skull. When it finally ceased, a high, piercing ring lingered in Ren’s ears.

Ren staggered and then snarled. “Gods, damn it. I’ve heard toddlers throw quieter fits.”

Vortharax’s eyes flared. Ren straightened, planting her feet as she shoved herself upright, hands settling on her hips. She tipped her chin up at him. “We had a deal, and you lost,” she snapped. “So, tell me. Where is it?”

Vortharax’s massive form went unnervingly still. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, begrudging, edged with a bitterness that scraped raw.

“The mountain that bleeds fire.”

Ren’s breath caught.

“That is where they betrayed me. Where they bound me.”

The ringing in Ren’s ears faded. Her blood ran cold as the name surfaced unbidden in her mind.

Mount Solfira.

Of all the places in the realm—of all the godsdamned mountains—it had to be that one. Ren’s jaw tightened as she stared up at Vortharax, dread settling deep in her bones.

“Well, that’s… inconvenient.” Ren let off a sigh, already dreading having to share this with everyone else. Especially Kaelin. She already felt the darkness lifting as her consciousness began returning to the world.

But then she looked back at Vortharax.

His gaze drifted past Ren, into the endless dark. The fury that had crackled through the air moments before dimmed. He lowered his massive head, crimson eyes no longer burning but distant.

For the first time, Ren thought she saw disappointment.

And beneath it, something perilously close to grief.

Her irritation faltered, giving way to a curious tilt of her head. “So, if you’d won, what was your reward going to be? Let me guess. Razing villages to the ground?”

Vortharax snorted. He shot her an unimpressed sidelong glance just as the edges of Ren's form began to waver, her presence thinning as the darkness tugged her back toward wakefulness.

"How small your imagination is."

Ren frowned. "Hey."

Vortharax's gaze lifted as if tracing a sky that was no longer there. *"I would have taken to the skies, even if only for minutes."*

Ren stilled. Her form continued to dissipate, light fracturing around her edges. She watched him for a long moment longer, something heavy settling in her chest.

"…That's it?" she asked softly.

Vortharax did not answer. But as Ren faded from the darkness, she could have sworn his wings twitched.

As if remembering how it felt to be free.

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“Where do you think you’re going, Harper?” Brenna’s voice easily pierced the morning wind howling through Driftwood Bay.

Ren’s hand hovered at the hilt of her blade–halfway through sliding it back into its sheath. It was the very blade Brenna had given her just that morning; she had only unsheathed it to check its sharpness and felt relieved when she saw the edge was far from dull.

Fuck. Now what did we do?

She quickly ran through the past few days in her head, trying to recall any slight that might have angered the orc woman. Had they broken something in the tavern? Offended someone in the kitchens? Forgotten to pay for a meal?

Nothing came to mind.

Across from her, Talen had stopped as well. He had been checking the wax seals on their ration flasks, a half-packed satchel dangling from his shoulder. His brows lifted as his gaze met hers. To Ren’s left, Kaelin’s movement stilled, too. The fae princess had been folding a thick, fur-lined riding cloak into her travel pack.

Here goes nothing.

“Brenna,” Ren called back, turning with a wry smile. “Did I forget something?”

She hadn’t expected to find the orc woman planted squarely in the middle of the dirt path, hands braced firmly on her hips. As if daring them

to try leaving. Beside her stood the male orc who worked in the tavern kitchens.

Seeing them together, Ren found the resemblance striking. They shared more than just the broad bridge of their noses or the heavy brows that hooded their eyes; even their posture held the same quiet, stubborn presence, marking them as unmistakably kin.

Ren's gaze shifted to the massive bundle of leather cradled in the male orc's arms. It was a heap so large that it nearly swallowed his torso.

"This is thanks for putting an end to the vampyre's reign of terror." Brenna said, jerking her chin toward the bundle. "Consider it payment for a job well done."

Ren stepped closer. "What is it?"

"Ulag," Brenna said, nodding to the male orc. "Show her."

With a grunt, Ulag lowered the heavy bundle and unfolded the thick layers of leather. Straps tumbled loose, buckles clinked softly, until the shape slowly revealed itself.

Ren's brows lifted higher with each passing second. It was a saddle. A *gigantic* one–far too large for any horse Ren had ever seen.

"You mean to cut our journey short?" Talen realized first, surprise giving way to gratitude as understanding dawned across his face.

Kaelin studied the craftsmanship with quiet admiration, her pale fingers brushing one of the reinforced straps.

"You had this specially made," she murmured, glancing up at Brenna, "for our dragon companion." Her violet eyes flicked toward Ren. "For Fryphessyrth."

Ren stared at the massive saddle for a long moment, then lifted her gaze to Brenna. "You did this for us?"

Brenna's own grin spread just as easily, tusks flashing as she folded her thick arms across her chest. Pride gleamed openly in her dark eyes.

"Don't look so shocked," she snorted. "Ulag's been hammering and stitching since the day you all killed that vampyre and stopped half the town from sleeping with knives under their pillows. He built the saddle wide enough to fit all of you, complete with heavy leather harnesses to buckle around your waists so you don't fly off mid-flight."

Behind her, Ulag gave a small grunt of agreement.

Ren shook her head in disbelief, running a hand over the thick leather. The craftsmanship was unmistakable—reinforced straps, deep stitching,

clever pockets built along the sides.

It was perfect.

“Brenna…”

The orc woman waved a hand dismissively. “This makes us even.”

“Even?”

Brenna shrugged one broad shoulder, and her expression softened. “All the foolishness between us years ago. It’s all settled.”

For a moment, Ren didn’t know what to say. “Well, that’s the most generous way anyone’s ever decided to forgive me.”

Brenna barked out a laugh. “Don’t get used to it.”

The wind shifted again across the path, tugging at cloaks and sending a scatter of dust along the ground. For a heartbeat, the group simply stood there, the weight of departure settling quietly between them.

Then Brenna said, “Safe travels, Ren.”

Before Ren could respond, Brenna reached out and grasped her elbow firmly. The grip was solid and grounding. Ren instinctively returned it.

In one smooth motion, Brenna leaned forward, pressing her forehead against Ren’s. For a brief moment, they stood like that, two warriors sharing the quiet, wordless farewell of Brenna’s people.

A gesture of mutual respect and trust.

Then Brenna pulled back, giving Ren’s arm one last firm squeeze before releasing her.

“Try not to start any wars on the road.”

Ren winked. “I’ll make no such promises.”



A half-day’s flight on Fryphessyrth brought them to Pyraelia. Ren held Kaelin’s hand tightly as they cut through pale cloud banks. They flew in silence, watching the world shrink below them—villages turning to toys and rivers to silver threads. From this height, everything felt distant.

The open sky held an eerie peace that pressed against Ren’s chest. Ignoring Lucan's shouted protests, Fryphessyrth relished the air, diving suddenly and rumbling with a deep purr. Ren hadn’t known dragons purred. The sound lodged somewhere tender in her chest because all she could

remember was Vortharax’s gaze as he looked into the darkness–recalling what the sky was like.

Ren forced the thought down with a sigh, angry at herself for even letting it take root. She shouldn’t have felt pity for him. He was responsible for the destruction of so many lives, and for what? Conquest? Domination?

As they flew on, the air warmed and the clouds thinned into steady sunlight and a calmer wind. Ren felt their destination before she saw it when a prickle came along her spine.

They broke through the final cloud bank.

Grey stretched beneath them.

“Surely we aren’t far now,” Lucan murmured.

Ren squinted through the haze as Fryphessyrth descended. Ren searched for familiar landmarks, but there was nothing to recognize–no color and no shape.

Just a vast, sullen plain.

“Lucan, mate, you’re right,” Talen said at last, his voice low. “This *is* Pyraelia.”

Ren’s blood ran cold. Gripping Kaelin’s hand, she leaned forward, staring down at the ruins of House Vaelaran's capital. Pyraelia, once vibrant with color and architecture, now lay smothered beneath ash.

Mount Solfira loomed in the distance, smoke curling lazily from its jagged peaks as slow veins of magma bled into the land below. Fryphessyrth dipped lower, searching for a landing spot, just as the stench reached them. It must have been the scent of the fumes from Mount Solfira.

Lucan swore under his breath. Ren pulled the collar of her shirt over her nose.

“That’s home,” Kaelin murmured, her voice barely more than breath. “Or what’s left of it.”

Fryphessyrth landed. Ren dismounted first, quickly slipping through the saddle's intricate harness. The moment her boots hit the earth, she looked down; soot coated everything as far as she could see.

“What happened to the buildings?” Ren asked.

Talen stepped past Kaelin, Lucan following behind. Lucan shoved his blond hair back from his face, his mouth set in a grim line.

Talen knelt, brushing ash away to reveal the warped curve of a wagon wheel. His fingers lingered there.

“The ash flow from Mount Solfira swept through the capital and buried everything.” He glanced up at Ren, his face pale beneath the grey dust. “We’re *standing* on them.”

The words hit like a plunge into icy water. Ren remembered her first time entering Pyraelia—how the buildings had towered overhead, how the streets had buzzed with life and sound, how the city had seemed indestructible.

Now it was all beneath her feet.

She walked carefully, eyes scanning the ground. Fragments of life peeked through the ash: splintered wood, twisted metal, a child’s wooden doll. Ren picked it up. One of its painted eyes was missing, the other dulled by soot.

Kaelin stopped walking. Ren turned just in time to see her shoulders tremble. Then Kaelin began to sing. The words were soft and fractured. The wind seemed to still as her voice carried across the wasteland.

“By thorn and flame, by root and crown…

The earth sings, the stone remembers…”

Talen’s brow furrowed. “She’s not reciting it. She’s making it as she goes.”

His eyes darkened as Kaelin sang on, her voice threading grief into melody.

“In Vaelaran,” Talen explained quietly, “this is how warriors answer great ruin when there are no rites left.”

“Let ash take sky, let night devour,

Still Vaelaran endures the hour.

For though our halls to dust are torn,

From living will, we are reborn.”

Kaelin stood alone in the heart of the ruin, the wasteland yawning open at her back like a grave. Tears streamed freely down her face.

But her spine remained straight.

The words kept coming, dragged from a place deep in the fae princess’ soul. Then Talen’s baritone voice joined hers. The moment the first note left him, however, his composure shattered. He sank to his knees with grief, head bowed as he clung to the song. His voice cracked on the next line, grief ripping through the harmony. But he did not stop. He could not stop. He sang because there was nothing else to do with pain this heavy. Kaelin reached out, fingers threading into Talen’s hair to ground him.

The fae princess' voice never faltered. She sang on through the tears while Talen clung to the promise that House Vaelaran was not yet dust.

Not while they still stood.

The air shifted with a sudden chill. Ren stiffened, her eyes tracking the movement as a translucent figure drifted into view at her side, robes billowing as if caught in a wind only he could feel. His face was twisted in theatrical anguish, ghostly tears streaming down his cheeks as he clutched a long parchment in one semi-solid hand, a quill scratching furiously in the other.

"Oh—oh, this is tragic," Sir Pindlewhip sobbed, blotting at his eyes with the sleeve of his ethereal coat. "Utterly, *catastrophically* tragic."

Ren yelped, stumbling back as the others spun around.

"You're—you're *here*?" Ren shouted, stunned to see the all-too-familiar ghost who used to roam the palace's library in search of the last line to his limerick.

Talen lurched to his feet. Lucan swore. Fryphessyrth let out a startled huff, wings twitching. Sir Pindlewhip sniffed loudly and floated higher, peering down at Kaelin with unabashed reverence.

"Do continue," Sir Pindlewhip urged, voice wobbling. "Please. For the sake of history."

Kaelin faltered, staring at him in disbelief.

Sir Pindlewhip immediately dissolved into another bout of weeping. "And this song—*oh*, this song—"

He scribbled faster, quill scratching furiously.

"I vow to preserve this lament in ink. Future generations shall weep over it. Scholars will argue over it. Bards will ruin it in taverns." Sir Pindlewhip paused mid-scratch, tapping the quill against his chin. "Now, then, it must be given a title. Indeed, and it must be solemn, yet reverent. Oh! But also devastating." He brightened. "The Lament of House Vaelaran," he proclaimed. "Yes? No? Too obvious?" He squinted at the parchment. "Or perhaps…"

A flood of questions hit Ren, swallowed by a fierce urge to hug him—to hold onto something familiar and real. The pure relief of hearing Sir Pindlewhip's ridiculous cadence made her throat burn, ghost or not. Sir Pindlewhip hovered beside her, parchment unfurling and curling of its own accord as he scribbled furiously. He sniffed, blotting at his eyes, then peered at the page with renewed intensity.

“No, no, no. The Lament of House Vaelaran is serviceable, but it lacks poetry. Gravitas. Perhaps *Vengeful Oath of the Fallen Crown*. Or—oh!—*By Thorn and Flame, They Endured*. Mm. Or something subtler. *When Embers Still Sang*.” He gasped. “That one hurts.”

“Sir Pindlewhip,” Ren interjected softly. “Veylan. Is he…?”

Veylan, the dark elf librarian whose clothes never matched, but who ruled his chaotic library with meticulous care. He took the physical safety of his books deadly seriously, even the erotic literature he cataloged with alarming devotion. Hope fluttered in her chest, fragile and bright.

Sir Pindlewhip paused mid-scratch. “Oh, yes. He’s here.”

Ren sucked in a breath. “He *is*?”

“Indeed, he lives, my dear. Even now, he scours the remains of our grand capital for whatever survived the eruption.”

“Scavenging for what?”

Sir Pindlewhip gestured vaguely. “My ashes.”

“Your… ashes?”

“Yes, yes,” he said with a dismissive wave of his translucent hand. “A ghost is tethered to their remains, you see. Body, ashes—whatever’s left. It’s all dreadfully inconvenient. Until one’s ashes are recovered then, one is rather… stuck.”

Ren stared at him, the weight of his words settling. “So Veylan’s here,” she said carefully, “looking for your ashes so you can leave together.”

Sir Pindlewhip beamed. “Loyal fellow.”

But then Sir Pindlewhip’s quill slowed. He tilted his head, listening to something. “Oh, we should be very quiet now.”

“Why?”

Sir Pindlewhip leaned closer, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper despite the fact that he was already dead. “There’s a dragon.”

“Oh, her name is Fryphessyrth.”

“No, no, there’s another dragon. She seems rather shy, circling us about.”

The words hit like a blade between Ren’s ribs. “Why didn’t you mention that *sooner*?” Ren snapped.

“Mm-hm,” Sir Pindlewhip said, nodding solemnly. “Quite a large one, and I should think”—he glanced between them, then winced apologetically—“that you would stand absolutely no chance against an enemy dragon. She’s very angry.”

Ren’s gaze snapped to Lucan’s. At that exact moment, a deep, rolling growl thundered overhead.

Lucan gripped his bow while Fryphessyrth raised her head, wings twitching. High above them, a massive shape shifted behind the suddenly darkened sky.

Ren swallowed hard.

We are fucked.

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A purr rolled through Ren’s chest, vibrating down her spine with a deep resonance that belonged to Vortharax who sensed a fight on the horizon, and every phantom muscle in his coiled spirit was already primed to strike. She clenched her jaw to stifle it. “How do you think fire will do against it?”

A roar split the air, and the dragon plunged through the gray canopy above, its colossal form diving straight for them.

“Poorly,” a voice murmured near her ear.

Ren startled as she noticed Veylan standing beside her. He clutched a dark leather satchel to his chest, spectacles perched precariously on his nose as he peered skyward, already cataloging the beast with alarming calm.

“Elemental fire magic is not known to harm dragons,” Veylan continued. His gaze slid to Ren. “But you being Flameborne complicates matters.”

Lucan adjusted his aim, tracking the dragon’s quick descent.

Veylan clicked his tongue in disapproval. “Steel arrows won’t pierce dragon scales.”

Lucan lowered the bow an inch. “Then what does?”

Veylan rubbed thoughtfully at his chin. “Now that is a very good question.”

“We don’t have time,” Ren muttered. Flames flickered to life along her arms, coiling just beneath her skin. The purring inside her grew louder, deeper.

Vortharax.

“The old records mention a weapon, something experimental that may have pierced dragon scales. Unfortunately, the texts were destroyed.” Veylan sighed. “A tragic loss, really.”

“Maybe it’s just this one dragon,” Lucan said, forcing a thin laugh as he brushed ash from his blond hair. “Who’s to say there are more? Dragons were supposed to be legends.”

“Whatever they were before, they aren’t legends now,” Talen muttered.

Fryphessyrth stepped closer to Ren, her massive form shielding her without fully blocking her view. Their gazes met.

“It is strange she has not attacked. I think she senses Vortharax within you. Perhaps she can be reasoned with,” Fryphessyrth mulled.

“*You know her?”*

“I fought alongside her long ago.”

The dragon’s wings beat once more before she landed several paces away. Stones skittering as her head lowered, her eyes locking onto them.

Their weapons lifted instinctively.

“Wait,” Ren said.

Lucan glanced at her. “What?”

“Lower your weapons,” Ren insisted. “All of you.”

Kaelin turned on her, baring her teeth. “Absolutely not–it could kill you before you take two steps.”

“She hasn’t opened fire,” Ren said quietly. “Not yet.”

Talen hesitated. Lucan swore again under his breath.

“I can feel her,” Ren continued. “She’s listening.”

Kaelin stepped closer, hand curling around Ren’s arm. “Listening doesn’t mean civility.”

“Maybe,” Ren said, meeting her gaze. “But if I’m right, maybe I can talk to her.”

Kaelin’s eyes darkened. “You don’t gamble your life on a *maybe*, Ren. I’m not letting you walk into a slaughter just to see if you can chat with this dragon.”

“There are records,” Veylan said carefully, “that suggest dragons are deeply emotional, highly intelligent creatures. They read our intentions as clearly as scent. If she wanted us dead, she would have attacked already. The fact that she hasn't means there is a mind up there to appeal to.”

Finally, Talen lowered his sword. Lucan followed, reluctantly. Kaelin’s jaw clenched, but she gave a sharp nod.

“Fine. One chance.” Her arm tightened on Ren’s elbow. “But if it so much as bares its teeth, we make our move.”

Ren slipped out of Kaelin's grip, her posture squaring. Then, she stepped forward, boots crunching through ash as she closed the distance between herself and the dragon. The dragon’s massive head lowered, eyes narrowing as they tracked Ren’s approach. Heat radiated from her bronze scales.

“I am Azyrhael.”

Ren swallowed upon hearing the dragon’s guttural voice, forcing herself not to flinch. Azyrhael’s gaze sharpened, pupils narrowing to slits.

“And Vortharax lives within you. I have sensed you coming.”

A tremor rippled through Ren’s chest as the purring inside her swelled, answering the other dragon’s presence.

“We’re not here to fight,” Ren responded. *“What do you want?”*

Azyrhael’s lips peeled back, revealing rows of teeth.

“I want an end.”

“An end to what?”

“To his imprisonment.”

The purring inside Ren surged, a presence pressing against her ribs at being named.

“Vortharax was not meant to be caged. He was born of fire older than your kingdoms, older than your wars. To split his soul and bury it in flesh was cruel.”

“I didn’t choose this.”

“And yet the binding remains.” Azyrhael’s tail swished. *“If he lives within you, then you will one day reach the moment that decides his fate.”*

“What moment?”

“The moment you must decide whether he is freed… or finished.”

Ren’s jaw tightened. *“Why are you dragons always so furious? What did we ever do to merit this much rage?”*

Azyrhael let out a low, rumbling scoff, smoke curling from her nostrils. *“Mortals are so foolish. You walk upon the ashes of the past, yet you do not even know your own history.”*

“Last I checked, it wasn't humans who burn down innocent villages. It was dragons attacking towns for riches, or just to be cruel.”

The massive dragon narrowed her eyes, the golden slits gleaming with ancient malice. *“Of all the things I have preyed on, humans are the most cruel. Your kind will do anything if you think it will make you stronger.”*

Ren bared her teeth, a low growl rising in her throat that sounded dangerously like the beast caged inside her.

“You don’t know a damn thing about me,” she spat, refusing to back down from the dragon’s suffocating gaze. *“And don't act like your kind are the victims here. Lest you forget, Vortharax nearly brought the entire world to its knees when he unleashed himself upon the world. We didn't start this war—we ended it.”*

Azyrhael bared her teeth, tracking Ren like prey an inch away from a strike.

“If I kill you now…”

The purr inside Ren erupted into a roar. Fryphessyrth lunged with a furious bellow, her wings snapping open as the ground shook beneath them.

Azyrhael’s gaze never left Ren’s.

“...he will be freed.”

The words landed like a death knell.

Ren vaguely heard Kaelin scream her name. Azyrhael reared back, her massive chest expanding as blinding, white fire ignited behind her teeth. The air screamed as she opened her jaws.

Ren barely had time to react.

She threw her arms up, instinct screaming louder than thought, shielding her face.

And the world became flame.

Fire swallowed her whole, roaring with a sound like the end of everything. Heat slammed into her.

Ash, light, pain—

Then nothing.

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Fryphessyrth lunged.

She slammed into Azyrhael with terrifying speed. The impact shook the earth beneath Ren's feet. They were nearly the same height, twin titans of fire and fury, but Ren caught the cruel difference as they collided. Jagged obsidian spikes ran the length of Azyrhael's tail, serrated and deadly, forged for war.

But Fryphessyrth was faster.

Fryphessyrth clamped her jaws around Azyrhael's thinner neck. The sound was a bone-deep crack followed by Azyrhael's pained roar. Azyrhael thrashed, her wings beating desperately as she swung her tail in a wide arc, spikes whistling as she tried to rake Fryphessyrth's flank.

Ren sucked in a breath. Fire stirred within her. It curled along her arm, heat blooming beneath her skin as the low purr in her chest deepened into a guttural growl. Vortharax's fury echoed through her, ancient and instinctive, and Ren felt it coil with her own.

Rage answering rage.

She barely noticed Kaelin appear until strong arms wrapped around her. Ren startled. Kaelin's grip was firm, protective, her sharp gaze sweeping Ren's body in a heartbeat.

"Are you hurt?" Kaelin demanded.

"No, I—" Ren's words died as her eyes dropped. Bare feet pressed into scorched earth. Her gaze dragged upward, dread pooling in her stomach—

and *oh gods*.

She was naked.

Every scrap of clothing had been incinerated by Azyrhael's fire, yet her skin was untouched, bearing no burns.

Not even a mark.

Nearby, Lucan drew his bow, angling for a shot through thrashing wings. "*Damn*, I don't have a clean line," he muttered.

The ground buckled as Fryphessyrth heaved her weight forward, slamming Azyrhael onto her back. Azyrhael reared her head and unleashed a blazing torrent of fire that tore through the clouds. But Fryphessyrth held fast, shaking her prey, jaws locked, muscles straining as she asserted dominance with brutal certainty.

Azyrhael's roar came again.

Ren startled as Kaelin stepped in front of her, one hand gripping Ren's waist, the other braced against her ribs as if shielding her from an unseen blow. Kaelin's gaze swept her frantically, fingers tightening when they found bare skin.

"Ren," she said, voice low and urgent, "are you hurt? Tell me you're not hurt."

"No," Ren breathed, still staring ahead. "I-I think I'm fine. Naked as the day I was born, but still standing."

Kaelin didn't look convinced. Her hands traced Ren's arms, her shoulders, her sides—searching, refusing to trust the absence of blood. Only when she found none did she let out a breath, eyes flicking between Ren and the battle unfolding before them.

A shadow fell over them as Talen moved in. He snapped his heavy cloak free and draped it over Ren's bare shoulders, cocooning her in his scent and warmth.

Ren barely noticed. Her attention was fixed on the dragons. Fryphessyrth's muscles bunched, her claws digging deep into the earth as she wrenched her head sideways. There was an unmistakable sound. Azyrhael's struggles faltered. Scale and sinew gave way beneath her jaws as Fryphessyrth ripped through Azyrhael's neck, fire sputtering uselessly from Azyrhael's mouth as her roar cut off into a choking rasp. Blood spilled across Fryphessyrth's fangs and chest as Azyrhael's massive body collapsed, shuddered once, and went still.

Ren stood frozen, awe crashing through her in a dizzying wave. She had never seen power like that before. To see dragons fight…

Fryphessyrth lifted her head slowly. Blood slicked her scales, dripping from her jaws. She turned, massive eyes locking onto Ren and the others. Steam poured from her nostrils with a low, rumbling breath.

“It’s amazing,” Ren couldn’t stop herself from saying. “What dragons will do for their mates.”

“Mates?” Talen echoed sharply.

“Yes. Fryphessyrth and Vortharax are mates.”

“*She’s* Vortharax’s *mate*?” Lucan repeated. “I suppose every male has a type. His type just happens to be very protective.”

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Just an hour after the clash of teeth and scales, the adrenaline from the fight had barely faded into a dull ache. Approaching Mount Solfira's jagged cave, Fryphessyrth halted. She studied the dark maw with a low rumble, shaking her great horned head.

“I will remain outside.”

Ren glanced back over her shoulder at Fryphessyrth’s narrowed eyes and adjusted her fresh tunic, silently thanking whatever instinct had prompted her to pack several changes of clothes—even if she’d never anticipated her previous set being torched to ash.

She offered Fryphessyrth a crooked grin. *“Scared of the dark?”*

Fryphessyrth’s slit pupils thinned to narrow lines. *“Long have I endured the confinement of walls. I will remain here and await your return.”*

Ren held Fryphessyrth’s gaze for a moment before her teasing expression softened. *“I understand. Hopefully we’ll be in and out. But if we aren’t, let’s plan to meet back at Driftwood Bay. Okay?”*

“I shall guard the exit, but should that fail, I will plan on meeting you there.”

Satisfied, Ren faced the rest of the group. “Fryphessyrth isn't coming with us. She's keeping watch outside, so it’s just us from here on.”

“I, too, shall remain,” Veylan announced.

Ren blinked as the scholar adjusted his robes, Sir Pindlewhip already scratching furiously across a parchment scroll held tightly in his spectral

hand.

“To keep our dragon companion company, of course,” Veylan added.

Fryphessyrth released a low, disbelieving huff that sent a warm gust of air across the rocky ground.

“I have never met a dragon myself,” Veylan went on, unable to take his eyes off Fryphessyrth’s massive form. “To see one alive… breathing… moving.” His voice softened in wonder. “It’s remarkable.”

“Did you not just witness the fight earlier? I think we could do without being in close proximity to dragons,” Lucan pointed out.

“They’re magnificent creatures,” Veylan countered. “Quite inquisitive, according to historical accounts.”

Lucan opened his mouth, clearly ready with a retort.

“Come, let’s go,” Talen cut in before the argument could bloom.

Ren turned toward the cave mouth. The entrance yawned before them like the throat of the mountain itself, swallowing the light from the afternoon sky. Cooler air drifted outward from the depths.

Ren stepped inside first.

Darkness swallowed them almost immediately.

She lifted her hand, calling upon her magic. A flicker of warmth sparked in her palm before blooming into a small dancing flame. The light flared, casting molten gold across the tunnel walls.

“Stay close,” Ren murmured.

The passage sloped downward. The air grew cooler with each step, carrying the faint scent of damp stone. Behind her, boots scraped across uneven ground. The tunnel narrowed and twisted, forcing them to walk single file. Jagged rocks jutted from the walls, their shadows stretching.

The ground shifted beneath her boot, and suddenly her foot caught on something.

“Gods—”

Ren stumbled forward, barely catching herself on the wall as the flame in her hand flared violently.

“What was *that*?” Lucan asked behind her.

“Stairs,” Ren muttered. She lowered her flame, revealing worn stone steps carved into the mountain, descending deep into the darkness. “Who builds stairs in the *dark*?”

“Ancient civilizations,” Talen replied calmly behind her. “Usually for a reason.”

“Comforting,” Lucan said dryly.

They continued downward. Step after step carved into black stone. Some shallow, others uneven. Twice more, Ren nearly tripped as the stairs shifted without warning beneath her feet. The flame in her hand sputtered as a faint draft drifted through the passage.

Then, the tunnel opened.

Ren ventured forward and paused to let her flame illuminate empty space. The narrow passage spilled out into a cavern so enormous the ceiling vanished into shadow far above them.

“By the gods…” Lucan breathed.

The cavern stretched outward like the hollow heart of the mountain. Towering stone columns rose from the ground like the trunks of trees, supporting the ceiling above. Mineral veins shimmered faintly along the walls, catching Ren’s flame and scattering faint reflections of gold and amber across the cavern floor. Ren lifted the flame higher, its glow spreading across the cavern like the first sunrise after a long night.

And somewhere deep within the cavern, something shifted in the darkness.

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Magic hummed through the cavern. Ren glanced back to see Kaelin, Talen, and Lucan were statue-still in the dim light.

There was only one person who had the ability to freeze time.

Zakhar.

A slow clap echoed. Ren spun, searching the shadows.

“My, my, my, Flameborne,” Zakhar drawled, his voice floating from nowhere and everywhere at once. “You’ve done well for yourself. Keeping all your friends together, facing an enemy dragon without so much as a flinch. Honestly, I’m impressed.” A chuckle followed. “You stared chaos in the face and spat in it–not many manage that. It never ceases to amaze me how little aware you are of your mortality.”

“Where the hell are you?” Ren snarled. Flame bloomed instinctively in her palm, heat licking up her arm. “Show yourself.”

“Oh, Ren. I could be anywhere.”

His voice drifted from her left.

She whirled, fire flaring.

Then it came again, from her right.

“Or here–behind this pillar, perhaps.” There was a soft *tsk*. “What’s wrong? Are you frightened of *me*? But I thought we were friends.”

Ren’s teeth ground together. “Friends? Not a fucking chance.”

Silence fell.

Ren strained to hear anything—footsteps, breath, the scrape of boots against stone. The cavern seemed to hold its breath with her.

Then a warm breath brushed her ear.

“So harsh,” Zakhar murmured. “You flare your magic as if it could touch me here. Look around you. I control the very air you breathe right now.”

Ren spun, fire exploding from her hands. Zakhar stood close enough that she could see the manic gleam in his eyes before he effortlessly stepped back, the flames tearing past empty air.

He laughed. “Oh, I *love* this version of you,” he crooned, clapping his hands together. “All feisty and feral. That fire is absolutely radiant, Flameborne.”

She hurled another blast, then another. He dodged every single one, swaying and stepping aside as if performing a choreographed dance. Finally, Ren paused, chest heaving, fire crackling in her grasp.

Zakhar stopped a few paces away. He tilted his head, studying her. “I’ve missed our nightly chats. Haven’t you? I was having such terrible withdrawals that I had to visit you in person.” His eyes gleamed.

Ren glared at him, chest heaving. Vortharax’s presence thrummed in dark recognition. She wanted to finish this, right now.

But how do you smite a god?

“I can practically hear the gears grinding in that head of yours.” Zakhar sighed theatrically. “No offense, Flameborne, but you’ve never been the brightest torch in the blaze. And to answer that delicious thought you’re chewing on, no. You can’t kill me. I’m a *god*, remember?”

“What the hell even *is* a god?”

Zakhar tapped an invisible finger against his temple in consideration. “That depends, doesn’t it? Some people think gods are creators. Others think we’re saviors, perhaps even monsters. We thrive on belief but fear works just as well.”

“Can a god be killed?”

“Now why would I tell you that and spoil all the fun?”

Ren let out a groan. “You’re so damn crazy. Let’s cut to the chase—you’re here because you want Vortharax.”

Something in Zakhar’s expression shifted. The humor instantly curdled.

“Go on,” he said quietly, the levity draining from his tone.

“He’s bound to me so deeply there’s no separating us without killing one of us. So, what’s your plan? Tear him out of me so you can free him?”

Zakhar's smile returned. "Oh, I never like to spoil my surprises. Where's the joy in that? But for you, pet, I'd be willing to bare quite a lot."

Ren's eye twitched. "Call me *pet* one more time and see how fast I can rearrange your teeth."

He didn't even blink. Instead, he licked his lips. "I want him. Oh, yes. I want to crush his life between my fingers and listen as it ends. But," he added thoughtfully. "I don't want *you* dead. I just want him *out* of you. I have rather grown fond of you, Flameborne."

"Why?"

For a fleeting moment, his features sobered.

"You remind me of someone I once knew."

Someone he once knew? Ren lifted her chin. "How do you plan on extracting him from me?"

Zakhar straightened, the momentary softness evaporating as his familiar confidence snapped back into place. "All in due time, pet."

Ren snapped. She snarled and lunged for him, fire surging through her veins. She expected him to vanish, to sidestep, to mock her from the shadows like he always did.

But this time, Zakhar caught her wrists mid-charge and twisted, using her momentum against her. The world flipped violently as he slammed her into the stone floor with bone-jarring force. The impact knocked the breath from her lungs.

One heartbeat, she was airborne. The next, she was staring up into those icy blue eyes.

Zakhar hovered over her, his voice a whisper in her ear. "Isn't it exhilarating, standing on the brink of total chaos and having no idea which way the world will fall?"

Ren struggled, muscles screaming as she fought his grip. "Get the hell off of me!"

He didn't budge. For someone with a shorter frame, he was terrifyingly strong. Zakhar watched her thrash with fascination.

"To wake each day not knowing whether you'll live to see the next. To stare death in the face and realize how fragile everything truly is. That's where people become *very* fascinating."

Ren growled.

Zakhar leaned back just enough to look down at her, eyes gleaming. "Mark my words, Flameborne. One day, you'll be *mine* to unravel."

His smile widened.

“And I can’t wait to see who you become when everything that makes you *you* is stripped away.”

Ren did the only thing left to her. She spat. The glob struck Zakhar square in the cheek.

For a heartbeat, the cavern went still.

Zakhar froze, then threw his head back and laughed. He wiped his face with the back of his hand, eyes bright with feverish amusement.

“I’m not here to amuse you,” Ren snarled, the heat of her flame flaring hot against her teeth. “All you gods do is sit and watch us suffer—and for what? To stroke your own pathetic egos while claiming you hold the sky together?”

A sudden, vicious rush of adrenaline eclipsed the pain in her limbs. Channeling the muscle memory of the fighter-pits, Ren coiled and struck, slamming her forehead dead into his nose.

The impact cracked, sending a sickening spin through her own skull, but she weaponized the momentum. She threw her weight forward, driving him hard into the dirt. Before he could recalibrate, she straddled his waist, pinning his wrists into the earth and bringing her face inches from his.

“I used to believe in a deity,” Ren hissed. “I used to pray until my knees ached. I prayed every time a fist hit my jaw. I prayed every time I clawed through empty cupboards for a scrap of stale bread. I even prayed the night my parents were murdered.”

Beneath her, Zakhar went strangely still. The chaotic twitch of his fingers ceased.

“And nobody ever answered,” she whispered. “So, tell me. Why should I ever give a damn about a god?”

Zakhar lay beneath her, his head tilted back against the crushed earth, staring up at her through the dark fringe of his hair. A thin line of crimson was beginning to leak from his nose, painting his lips a stark, bright red.

Then, the corners of his mouth twitched.

The stillness shattered as a low, rumbling chuckle vibrated through his chest, escalating until he was laughing outright—a wild, breathless sound that echoed too loudly in the empty space.

Zakhar’s eyes flashed with a sudden, manic brilliance. He didn't even try to break her grip on his wrists, instead leaning into the pinning weight of

her body. “You ask why you should care? You shouldn't. That’s the grand, cosmic punchline joke, Flameborne.”

He tilted his head higher, ignoring the blood dripping down his chin, his gaze boring into hers with terrifying intensity.

"The others? The high-and-mighty bastards on their golden thrones? They want your knees bent. They want your quiet, pretty little hymns, your devotion, your total and utter submission. But I don't want any of that nonsense. No, I want your *rage*.”

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By the time Ren dragged herself upright, Zakhar was gone.

Talen ventured into the heart of the cavern. “That looks like a coffin.”

Ren ran trembling fingers through her hair, smoothing it back before following him. Zakhar had a way of making her mind feel unraveled.

But she’d need to revisit that conversation later.

They approached the lone coffin together. As Ren got close enough to see the thick dust on the coffin, she inhaled a mouthful and started coughing.

“There’s writing,” Lucan observed as he gingerly brushed the surface of the stone. Dust peeled away in pale ribbons, revealing elegant, looping script carved into the coffin’s surface.

Neither bone nor blood may hold me.

Bound, yet never seen.

I linger when flesh turns to dust.

What am I?

Ren heaved a sigh. “A damn riddle,” she muttered.

Talen frowned at the inscription, eyes tracking each line as if it might rearrange itself under scrutiny.

“All right,” he said slowly. “Bound, but never seen…perhaps something intangible? Time? Or a memory?”

He paused.

Nothing happened.

Lucan tilted his head. “I was thinking about taxes.” When given a pointed look from Ren, Lucan defended. “What? They’re unavoidable, and they linger long after you think you’re free of them.”

Ren pinched the bridge of her nose. “It’s not time or a memory, and it is definitely *not* taxes.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Lucan muttered. “By all means, please grace us with one of your brilliant theories, then.”

Kaelin’s gaze lingered on the carved words.

“I linger when flesh turns to dust,” she murmured. “Bound, yet never seen… it isn’t flesh, and it isn’t blood.” She folded her arms, brow furrowing. “It endures after death which means it isn’t power, or magic.” Her eyes flicked briefly to Ren before returning to the coffin. “If it lingers, then it was never meant to rest.”

“So,” Ren circled the coffin, fingers tapping against her arm as if the answer might shake loose through motion alone. “What lingers but never rests?”

Her words dissolved into the empty cavern.

Ren spat a curse, her calloused hands flying up. “This is bullshit. I was expecting something we could fight–like a creature bound to the artifact.” She shot the coffin a scowl. “Not a riddle that could mean *anything*.”

If she wanted to deal with cryptic, self-indulgent nonsense, she would have stayed with Zakhar. Gods knew she’d logged enough hours deciphering his exhausting antics over the last few weeks to last a lifetime.

But at least Zakhar was a breathing target; this was just a slab of cold stone stalling them while House Vaelaran remained out of reach.

Every second spent playing word games in a dark hole was another second Sylven held the high ground. They should be planning a siege and retaking what was theirs.

Not guessing answers to riddles.

Heat flared instinctively in her palm, fire blooming as frustration unraveled her patience.

“Ren,” Talen said quickly, lifting a hand. “There’s powerful magic woven into this coffin. I don’t know how your dragonfire will react. It could trigger a trap.”

Kaelin nodded gravely. “Runes of this caliber aren’t broken by force. They yield only when they are answered.”

“Perfect,” Ren grumbled bitterly. “Remind me to ask the next monster we meet to solve an ambiguous riddle before I try to kill it.”

Time stretched.

They paced, murmuring possibilities into the stale air. *Wealth. Power. Breath. Fate.* Each guess vanished without response. Ren sat with her back against the cavern wall. She forced herself to stay still, to stop fighting.

And to *think*.

At first, her thoughts skittered uselessly, sweeping over the riddle, the coffin, the magic wound tight around the chamber like a clenched fist. *Neither bone nor blood may hold me. Bound, yet never seen.* The words chased one another in circles, refusing to settle.

Frustration flared hot in her chest again, but she shoved it down.

Kaelin and Talen were right. Force hadn’t worked.

So, she let herself drift. Her mind slipped away from the cavern and the stone and back to her childhood. She remembered the sound of laughter first, echoing through the cramped room she’d once shared with her sister, Eve. The walls had been thin, the floorboards warped and cold, the world beyond them cruel and unkind. They had known hunger.

And yet they laughed, anyway.

Ren could see it so clearly now: the two of them huddled beneath a threadbare blanket, inventing stories by candlelight. They daydreamed of heroes stitched together from scraps of imagination and monsters vanquished not always by strength, but by cleverness.

They even thought of kingdoms being rebuilt because someone dared to believe they could be.

They had nothing, and yet they created everything. Even then, there had been something inside them that could not be taken by circumstance or cruelty–something that endured when the world tried to grind them down into nothing. When hope flickered, it flickered stubbornly–refusing to go out.

We were still us, Ren thought, not because of what they owned and certainly not because of where they lived.

But because of what lived within them.

The cavern seemed to recede, its oppressive weight dimming as another presence rose in its place within her chest.

Vortharax.

She felt his familiar stir, a constant presence since the binding. He had inhabited her through terror and triumph, enduring her grief, her rage, and her laughter. He was not her body, her blood, or even her fire, but something far more intimate—a soul bond that could not be seen or held.

Ren's eyes snapped open. The riddle rose unbidden in her mind, each line suddenly sharp with clarity. *Neither bone nor blood may hold me. Bound, yet never seen. I linger when flesh turns to dust.*

When the body failed, when blood cooled, and when the fire flickered out—what remained?

Ren's heart pounded with a sudden, inevitable realization. As she pushed to her feet and crossed the cavern, stone scraping softly beneath her boots, Talen and Lucan fell silent. Kaelin turned, hope flaring in her eyes.

Ren stopped before the coffin.

"All this time, we keep thinking of what's lost and what's taken." She leaned closer. "But it isn't about loss," Ren whispered quieter, "It's about what *endures*."

Ren straightened, standing tall over the coffin. Her voice was barely more than a murmur, but it carried in the vast and empty space.

"A soul."

A deep, grinding groan tore through the cavern. Runes flared faintly, then fractured, their glow splintering as the coffin's seal began to rise. Dust exploded outward. It coated their skin, their hair, their lungs—time made tangible, defiling them as it broke apart.

The coffin shuddered, then a heavy silence crashed down.

Ren locked eyes with Talen. Moving in unison, they pressed their hands to the cold stone. Ren braced and pushed, her muscles screaming as the coffin resisted. Kaelin stepped in without hesitation, and Lucan joined a heartbeat later, his breath coming sharp and strained under the weight of the coffin.

But with their combined effort, it moved.

Stone shrieked against stone. The lid shifted an inch, then another, every movement a painful struggle. With one final heave, the slab lurched aside.

What spilled out was not shadow, nor a simple absence of light. It was a void that swallowed the space before it, so deep it felt as though it might pull them in if they leaned too close. Cold rushed outward, carrying the stench of something long denied release.

Ren barely had time to inhale when movement stirred within the void.

Five pale, translucent fingers emerged. Trembling, they stretched upward toward the air and life.

As if grasping for the stars themselves.

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A woman rose from the coffin.

Her face was a landscape of harsh angles: a narrow, pointed nose, sharp cheekbones, and a lethal jaw. Aware she was being watched, she turned as she stepped out. Thick, glossy dark hair spilled past her shoulders, catching shifting blue undertones in the low light. Her skin was a deep, flawless brown.

Her gaze lifted.

Her eyes burned a molten gold, glowing against the darkness. Her gaze swept the chamber with predatory ease. She was dressed in deep crimson, corseted lace, and flowing fabric clinging to her form.

There was no rush to her movements, no sign of disorientation.

This was a woman who had been waiting.



Everyone fell into stunned silence as the woman stepped down from the coffin. When her heels touched stone, she swept the dark curtain of her hair over one shoulder with a languid motion, exposing the elegant line of her neck.

Those molten-gold eyes passed first over Ren, sharp and curious, then slid to Kaelin with a flicker of something like appraisal. Lucan received

only a cursory glance. When her gaze finally settled on Talen, it lingered. Her eyes dipped to the steady rise and fall of his throat before they traced back up his jaw, his mouth, his eyes–studying him.

"You may lower your weapons. If I had wanted bloodshed, you would not still be standing."

Ren forced herself to breathe again, a slow draw through her nose.

"We came here for an artifact," Ren broke the silence.

That molten-gold gaze slid to her. Cold flooded Ren's veins, her instincts screaming in protest. This was the look of a predator deciding whether what stood before it was worth respecting.

Or worth devouring.

Impatience barely had time to flicker through Ren before she spoke again. "Let's stop dancing around. Do you know where it is?"

The woman tilted her head. Then her nostrils flared, as if sensing something in the air. A corner of her mouth lifted.

"We have company approaching." Her golden gaze shifted toward the darkened corridor beyond the chamber.

As if on cue, Ren heard the low murmur of voices echoing through the stone, the heavy thud of boots striking in uneven rhythm. Kaelin's gaze snapped to hers. The same thought passed between them without words.

Sylven's men?

Before either of them could speak, the woman did.

"There are ten, perhaps twelve fae. They are heavily armored and well-armed."

Talen frowned. "You're certain?"

"I am."

Ren's fire stirred, a familiar heat coiling beneath her skin. "We should be able to take them."

Talen's mouth curved into something grim. "If your aim hasn't dulled." Then he said to the woman, "Be at ease, my lady. You are under our protection now."

His only response was the woman slightly raising her chin, her golden eyes watching him.

The instant Ren caught movement at the mouth of the corridor, she unleashed her fire. She anchored herself first—drawing the magic inward, holding it tight the way one held the bowstring of an arrow, tension coiling and straining beneath her skin.

Then she released.

The firebolt tore free in a blistering blast, slamming into the entrance in a wash of heat and light. Shouts erupted as the fae soldiers stumbled back, their formation breaking beneath the sudden assault.

Lucan's bow sang as he drew and released in one smooth motion. The arrow struck true, burying itself in a male fae's throat. The soldier staggered, hands flying up too late, blood spilling freely as he collapsed.

Talen charged, blade cutting a lethal arc toward the next two attackers. The clash of metal rang through the chamber. To Ren's right, Kaelin had gone still. Her hand clenched, fingers curling as if around something unseen. Magic snapped into place, invisible but absolute. A fae soldier froze mid-stride, caught fast in her grasp, his breath hitching as he struggled against a force he couldn't fight.

Kaelin didn't hesitate.

With a sharp twist of her wrist, there was a sickening *crack*. The soldier crumpled, lifeless before he hit the ground.

Soon, the stone floor was littered with bodies.

Ren dropped to one knee beside a nearby wounded soldier who lay gasping, one hand clawing weakly at the air. Blood soaked through the gap in his armor where her blade had struck, placed to maim rather than kill. Her gaze flicked to the leather at his shoulder.

House Vaelaran.

Ren fisted her hand in his hair and wrenched his head back, forcing him to meet her eyes.

"Talk," she snapped.

The fae's lips peeled back in a snarl. "Unhand me, you filthy *human*."

Ren laughed. She drove the blade further into his shoulder. The fae choked on a cry, his body jerking as agony ripped through him. She shoved him upright, her hand pressing deliberately against the hilt of the blade buried in his thigh.

"This human," she said coldly, twisting the weapon just enough to draw another ragged scream, "is the only reason you're still breathing." She leaned closer. "Or I can end this now. Which do you prefer?"

The fae's breath came in shuddering gasps, teeth clenched. Still, his eyes burned with defiance.

"I choose to die with my honor. Do your worst."

The words had barely left his mouth before Kaelin stepped in with lethal calm, fingers closing around the fae's skull. There was a swift, brutal twist. The snap echoed through the chamber. The body went slack in Ren's grasp.

Kaelin withdrew her hand.

"Honor is something you earn."

Her gaze flicked to the Vaelaran crest, lips pulling back into a snarl.

"He never had it to begin with."

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“Is everyone still standing?” Talen called out. “Tell me I don’t need to carry any of you back.”

“I’m here,” Lucan answered, sounding winded as he brushed blood-slicked strands of blond hair from his face.

“I’m chirpy as a peach,” Ren muttered, rolling her shoulder.

“Good,” Talen straightened. Then his attention shifted.

The woman hadn’t moved. Leaning relaxed against the coffin, she watched the aftermath as if the violence had been nothing more than a passing inconvenience.

“That was only the first wave. There are more waiting at the entrance,” she noted.

Talen’s nostrils flared. “Of course there are,” he growled. “One way in. One way out. It’s an ambush.”

Ren asked, “How many?”

“Enough that meeting them head-on would be fatal. If you choose a battle, you will not walk away from it,” the woman answered.

She let the words settle, studying them in silence. Her golden eyes reflected the low light, as though she were measuring their inevitability.

“However, there is another option.”

“And what would that be?” Ren asked.

The woman trailed her fingers along the edge of the coffin. “It has been many years since I last returned home. I suspect my mother will be

displeased by my absence. We need not travel as mortals do. I can tear open the Veil and take us there."

Ren straightened, relief flashing through her. "Why didn't you say that sooner? That sounds like a plan."

Talen narrowed his eyes, tracking the elegant way the woman held herself. "Who is your mother?"

The woman met his stare again without flinching. "Countess Carmilla Draegora."

The name drained the color from Lucan's face. "By the Gods…"

Ren swallowed hard. "So… you happen to be a…"

"Vampyre?" The woman purred, a faint smile curving her lips. "Yes."

Lucan frowned. "But your eyes are golden. Not red."

Ren barely registered the exchange. The sound of approaching footsteps echoed down the corridor—closer now.

With a flick of her wrist, the vampyre tore something open in the air beside them.

The world split.

A circular void yawned into existence, shadows spiraling inward. The air warped around it, bending at its edges. Whatever magic powered it made Ren's stomach churn. It felt wrong–as if life itself refused to exist where it touched.

Talen bared his teeth, grip tightening on his sword.

"Taking us to Castle Sangravos would be a death sentence," he growled.

The vampyre regarded him coolly. "Perhaps my mother will owe you a favor for returning me to her and allow you to leave."

"Or she'll decide we're prey," Kaelin snapped.

"That is also a possibility."

Ren met Kaelin's gaze, whose horror mirrored her own. The reality was brutal. There was no way they could stand a chance against Sylven's men, considering how many were at the entrance, waiting for them to leave.

"So many possibilities," the woman murmured thoughtfully. "At least my alternative offers you better odds of survival."

She raised her wrist. Ren's breath caught as she glimpsed her impossibly sharp nails catching the light like honed obsidian.

"If you choose to fight, I can assist."

A deep, violent purple flared to life at the center of the cavern, unfurling into a wide, circular sigil etched with the same ancient markings as was on

the coffin. Power surged outward in a howling gust. Ren was thrown off her feet. She hit the stone hard, skin scraping as she slid across the floor. Pain flared at her elbow, but she barely felt it. Kaelin staggered nearby, boots skidding as she fought to stay upright. Talen slammed a hand against the cavern wall, muscles straining as he held himself in place. Lucan was hurled past Ren, barely twisting in time to avoid smashing his head against the rock.

At the center of the circle, the shadows twisted and swelled into a towering mass. It loomed over half the cavern, a grotesque shape stitched from nightmare. Its mouth split open in a jagged, obscene grin, revealing rows of serrated teeth as a slick tongue slid out—tasting the air.

Hungry.

Ren could only gawk. The vampyre, by contrast, regarded the hellish creature with idle interest before speaking in a low, sibilant language filled with hisses and sharp consonants.

The beast growled in response.

“It is hungry,” the vampyre stated. “And it will feed. But I cannot ensure it will not feed on you as well as the other fae soldiers. But perhaps it will make your ending quicker.” Stepping from the coffin, she walked to the portal and glanced over her shoulder. “You are still welcome to follow,” she paused. “I will speak on your behalf. I do not offer such assurances lightly.”

They exchanged glances.

Lucan was the first to break. He staggered to his feet, took one look at the towering abomination still coiled at the center of the cavern, and promptly doubled over. The sound of retching echoed off the stone as he emptied what little remained in his stomach into a dark corner. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, refusing to look again.

Kaelin, Talen, and Ren drew closer, instinct pulling them into a tight knot.

Ren lowered her voice. “I think we have better odds with her.”

“With a *vampyre*?” Talen snapped, disbelief sharp in his tone.

Kaelin’s mouth twisted. “We know exactly what Sylven’s men will do to us,” she growled. “And as much as I would enjoy watching his head roll across this floor, we don’t get to indulge every desire.” Her gaze flicked to the shadows writhing around the creature. “This is a losing fight. We’re outnumbered.”

Talen dragged a hand through his hair, jaw tight. “And if we go with her, how do we know she won’t turn on us the moment it suits her? Not to mention we haven’t retrieved the artifact.”

“We don’t,” Ren said plainly. “She could be lying. She could be telling the truth. There’s no way to know unless we choose. As for the artifact, we can only hope Sylven doesn’t know about it.”

Lucan steadied himself, face drawn and pale, tugging his sleeves into place. “I was raised to endure many things. This is not among them. Kindly decide before what little refinement I possess deserts me entirely.”

He cast another horrified glance at the creature and shuddered.

“I’ve never seen anything like that. It looks like it crawled straight out of somewhere far and very depraved.” His voice cracked. “And I, for one, do not want to find out what it does next.”

Talen hesitated, eyes flicking between the yawning darkness of the portal and the corridor choked with approaching fae soldiers. His hands clenched at his sides.

“This is an impossible choice,” Talen ground out through his teeth.

“Get used to it, Prince,” Ren snapped. “We don’t have the luxury of certainty—only survival. *Now*.”

She caught Kaelin by the elbow and dragged her forward, boots pounding against stone as they sprinted toward the vampyre. The portal churned beside her, shadows folding inward on themselves.

The vampyre stood before the void with statuesque calm, crimson fabric stirring faintly in the wind it exhaled.

“Very well, then,” she purred. “Whatever you do, whatever you see or sense, stay with each other.”

Then she turned and stepped into the portal.

The shadows swallowed her whole.

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The world ceased to be.

There was no sensation of falling, no rush of air, no lurch of stomach the way one might expect when crossing distance in such a way.

A void that had never known the warmth of breath or mercy of dawn closed around Ren. It pressed against her skin like a hand smothering her mouth. Ren tried to inhale and found the air present but wrong.

Stay together, the vampyre had warned.

Ren reached out instinctively, fingers splayed, searching for the proof of another living body. Her hand met only the void until a warm palm struck hers.

Kaelin.

Ren clung to her like an anchor. Feeling the ground shift beneath her feet, she stumbled but forced herself to keep walking forward.

Laughter drifted past her left ear–light and bright, the kind that belonged to sunlit courtyards and children chasing each other through garden hedges. It came so clearly that Ren’s heart twisted before she remembered where she was. The laughter swelled, spinning around her in a circle, teasing and sweet.

Then the laughter twisted into hysteria, rising until it snapped into a raw scream that vibrated right inside Ren’s skull. Ren’s grip on Kaelin tightened. Kaelin squeezed back. Ren tried to focus on the warmth of

Kaelin’s hand, on the steady pressure of her fingers interlaced with Ren’s, on the simple truth that Kaelin was real and the rest was—

Ren staggered as the darkness around them peeled back in a sudden, flashing glimpse of a feast table gleaming with fruit and roasted meat. Candlelight danced over jeweled goblets. Faces turned toward Ren, smiling yet with too many teeth and eyes that gleamed.

The scene flickered away.

Ren tried to summon flame, even a spark but found it muted, as if her power was a voice calling from behind a locked door.

Kaelin’s hand pulled her forward.

Ren couldn’t feel the rhythm of the world anymore—no sun, no wind, no passage of clouds. There was only the endless void, the strange shifting ground, and the kaleidoscope of scenes that flashed around them.

A battlefield under snow.

A city burning.

A woman weeping into her hands over a body that could have been a lover, a friend, a child—Ren couldn’t tell which, because the grief was too wide to fit one name.

The void was not empty, she realized with mounting dread. It was full of everywhere, everywhen, every life that had ever brushed against whatever magic birthed this passage–full of echoes that didn’t belong to her and yet still reached for her throat like writhing hands. Ren fought the urge to clamp her eyes shut, because she didn’t trust what the void would do if she stopped seeing.

She squeezed Kaelin’s hand tighter. As the darkness rolled around them, a sudden tug made her grip slip.

The void surged between them, and Ren’s hand closed on empty air. The ground seemed to tilt, sending her stumbling forward as the emptiness around her grew wider.

She was alone.

The cold darkness pressed against her spine like sharp teeth. Ren’s mouth opened, but no sound came. Panic clawed up her throat as the void pressed closer, colder, hungrier—

Then a hand snapped firmly around her wrist.

Ren gasped as she was yanked back, hard enough that she collided against a solid body. Kaelin’s arm banded around her, pulling her close.

“I’ve got you,” Kaelin’s fierce voice cut through the void, close enough to vibrate against Ren’s ear. “Through the dark and back, I’m not letting go, Ren.”

Ren nodded. She gripped Kaelin’s hand with both of hers, desperately defying the darkness to try and pull them apart again.

They charged forward.

Responding to their defiance, the void shifted, and a rising tide of sound filled the air. The ground shook as if a hundred horses were galloping through the dark. Then came the smells of sweat, mud, iron, and smoke.

Then the darkness peeled away.

They stood in the middle of a battlefield under a dark sky. Horses screamed as they barreled past, nostrils flared, eyes wild. Soldiers shouted in a language Ren didn’t recognize. Swords clashed so close that Ren flinched, hearing metal scrape bone. An arrow hissed past her cheek.

Ren’s inner fire surged, screaming at her to fight, but the void clung to her limbs like tar. While the war raged at full speed around her, she could only move in slow motion, as if wading through thick water.

Kaelin’s hand was the only constant.

Kaelin braced herself, pulling Ren behind her closely—protective even when none of this should have been real. A horse slammed by, so close Ren saw the whites of its eyes. A soldier collided with another, grappling, faces contorted with rage and terror.

The war smelled *alive*. And then Ren realized something worse. The soldiers’ eyes kept sliding toward them–as if they could *see*.

A hand grabbed at Ren’s cloak. Ren jerked back, and the world lurched with her. Kaelin yanked her closer, snarling a curse into Ren’s hair. The battlefield surged again, a wave of bodies and hooves—

A blinding flash of light exploded through the darkness, shattering the battlefield into pieces. The sounds of smoke and screaming horses collapsed into nothing as the void finally let her go.

Ren staggered forward, her vision blurry. Kaelin was still holding her hand. With her heart racing and her skin tingling, Ren stood there as the echo of screams still rang inside her.

Kaelin’s grip tightened once, an answer to the unspoken question.

I’m here. You’re here. We made it.

And somewhere behind, the portal’s edges shrank behind them, the darkness snapping shut.

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The portal tore open on a cliff's edge, dropping them onto slick black stone.

Below, pitch-black waves crashed violently against the cliffs, throwing up foam. The air smelled strongly of salt and damp rock. Above them, the sky sagged beneath a ceiling of dark gray clouds.

Before them, Castle Sangravos rose from the cliffside.

Its towers speared upward, jagged and asymmetrical, their silhouettes cutting into the sky. Narrow windows glimmered like half-lidded eyes already aware of their arrival.

When Ren finally forced herself to tear her gaze away from the looming structure, relief rushed through her at the sight of Kaelin still at her side, Lucan just beyond her, pale and unsteady, Talen rigid with tension, and the vampyre standing apart from them all, untouched by awe or dread.

Lucan staggered toward the edge of the cliff and retched again, the sound nearly lost beneath the roar of the sea. He braced himself on his knees, muttering something uncharitable about castles, cliffs, and gods who clearly held grudges.

The vampyre glided forward and began the slow ascent up the winding path toward Castle Sangravos.

Ren stiffened, instinct screaming that this was their last chance. Perhaps they still had time to run.

“I suggest you come with me if you value your life.” The vampyre didn’t look back as she spoke, her voice carrying easily over the crash of the waves.

Ren’s shoulders sagged. Lucan swore quietly under his breath as he wiped his mouth with shaking hands. Talen’s jaw clenched, his grip tightening on his sword, while Kaelin’s presence at Ren’s side stiffened, her attention fixed forward.

With no other choice, the five figures followed the vampyre, watching Castle Sangravos loom closer with every step.



“Lady Valeria Draegora! Could it be?” a male voice rang out from above the gate.

Ren’s gaze flicked to the vampyre beside her.

Valeria.

They were nearly beneath the towering iron gates of the castle. Ren flinched; she hadn’t sensed a single presence until the words cut through the air.

Crimson silk stirred as a male vampyre appeared on the battlements. His eyes widened in shock when he saw Valeria, followed by an expression of pure awe–as if he were looking at a ghost.

“By the eternal night. My Lady, I will alert the others of your return. We have waited so long for this day.”

The male vampyre vanished. A moment later, Castle Sangravos answered. Chains groaned and shrieked as the massive gate began to lift, iron teeth dragging reluctantly against stone–like a beast opening its jaws.

Kaelin’s fingers laced through hers, grounding her with a firm squeeze. Talen cast a glance back at them before stepping forward, shoulders squared as he took the lead. Ren fell into the rear, fire humming beneath her skin.

If this went wrong, she would burn their way out.

Or die trying.



The doors opened onto a corridor drenched in crimson and gold. Velvet banners hung between towering columns, and candlelight shimmered across marble floors.

“Valeria. My daughter, is that you?”

The smooth, feminine voice echoed from ahead, drawing them to the top of a dark stairwell. Looking down, they saw a vast enclave stretching out below them. Vampyres were everywhere—sitting at the table, leaning against walls, and perched on stone steps. They all looked up at once, watching the newcomers as whispers of anticipation rippled through the hall.

A female vampyre ventured forward. She moved along the edge of the table, nostrils flaring as she inhaled—testing the air, the scents.

Them.

Her gaze lingered on Lucan. He went pale. Ren placed a steadying hand on his shoulder, giving him a brief squeeze. He swallowed hard and quickly averted his gaze.

“It is me, Mother,” Valeria greeted, stepping to the railing.

A ripple of movement swept through the chamber as recognition set in. More murmurs followed.

The female voice answered again, closer now. “Thank the Night Goddess. Have you brought the book with you?”

Valeria rested her hands on the railing, elegant nails catching the candlelight. “You have not seen me in centuries,” Valeria said quietly, “and that is the first thing you ask?”

Ren, Kaelin, Talen, and Lucan remained a few paces behind her, acutely aware of how exposed they were.

“Yes,” Valeria answered finally. “I have the book.”

There was the clicking of heels.

“Of course, I am delighted that my one and only daughter has chosen to return home at last. Come down, Valeria, so I may look upon you properly.” There was a pause, then, almost as an afterthought, “And do bring your guests.”

Valeria did not look back at them. She turned to her right and began her descent.

The female vampyre standing near the railing inhaled again. Her ruby lips curved into a smirk. “I suggest you obey,” she crooned.

Ren didn’t wait to be told twice. She moved first, forcing her legs to carry her forward as she followed Valeria onto the staircase. The stairs curved to the right, spiraling downward toward the enclave below.

At the foot of the stairs, the figure approached.

“My daughter Valeria has returned at last.”

As soon as Ren saw the woman, the resemblance was unmistakable. Countess Carmilla Draegora stood poised at the head of the table, sharing the same thin, wiry frame, dark hair, bronze skin, and glowing golden eyes as Valeria.

When Valeria approached, Valeria kissed her mother’s right cheek, then her left. Their foreheads touched briefly, an intimate yet restrained gesture that spoke of ritual rather than affection.

“Thank the Night Goddess, indeed–and my daughter brings with her the Book of Prophecy.”

Crystal chimed softly as vampyres lifted their goblets. Only quiet satisfaction followed, red eyes gleaming around the table as they drank.

Scanning the chamber, Ren realized Carmilla and Valeria were the only two who shared that trait. Every other vampyre watched with eyes glowing red.

“Your traitor of a godmother will answer for this,” Carmilla said coolly. “For keeping this from us for all this time and hiding you away.”

Her gaze flicked to Valeria’s satchel.

“Speaking of which,” Carmilla extended one elegant hand, “may I hold it?”

Valeria reached into her satchel and withdrew a book no larger than her palm, its cover dark and worn smooth with age.

Carmilla accepted the book. The Countess’ expression softened into awe, similar to the way one might look upon a prized jewel.

“The Book of Prophecy,” Carmilla murmured, her thumb brushing the spine. She turned slowly, lifting the book so the coven could see. “For centuries, we have endured by hiding ourselves in the shadows. We have allowed the world to believe us myths, relics of a darker age.”

Red eyes gleamed around the table.

“The time for waiting ends. The prophecy will soon be fulfilled. We will bring forth the eternal night not as conquerors skulking in darkness, but as sovereigns reclaiming what has always been ours.”

She raised the book.

“Let the world remember why it once feared the dark, blessed be the Night Goddess.”

Crystal chimed, goblets lifted, and glasses clinked together in restrained celebration. Carmilla turned back to Valeria, studying her daughter with renewed interest. “Dear, you must be parched.”

A goblet was offered to Valeria, filled with a deep red liquid.

“Welcome home, my daughter.”

Then Carmilla’s attention shifted to them. Ren stiffened as those golden eyes fixed on her, on Kaelin, on Talen and Lucan—peeling them apart layer by layer. Ren’s knees threatened to buckle, her fire flaring wildly in response. Carmilla tilted her head, studying them like curiosities.

“Who are you, that you arrive at my table with my daughter and the fate of the night itself?”

Every eye in the room turned toward them, and the awful truth hit Ren all at once. They had made a terrible mistake. They had bled, suffered, and survived the horrors of Vortharax’s tomb to keep the artifact away from this very coven.

Now, after everything they had endured to escape, they realized they hadn't found safety at all.

They had not saved the world.

They had *damned* it.

Ren’s chest tightened as the weight of it settled deep into her bones. This book was a turning point. A key, or perhaps a blade aimed at the future.

By placing it here, beneath the hungry eyes of Castle Sangravos, they had done more than doom themselves. They had handed the artifact directly to the coven, unknowingly sealing the fate of the entire world.

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“These are the mortals who granted me reprieve from my rest,” Valeria sipped the crimson liquid in her goblet as one might a rare vintage. “For their aid in returning me home, I have given my word that they are not to be harmed.”

Relief loosened the tight coil in Ren’s chest. The vampyre was honoring her word. That, at least, held. But her relief vanished the moment she looked up and realized every other vampyre in the room was watching them with rapt attention.

Carmilla said something in her own language that Ren couldn’t follow. Valeria answered, and their conversation ended in a tense silence.

“Nothing is more precious to me than my daughter,” Carmilla purred at last. She prowled closer, studying each of them in turn. Their names and titles didn't matter, Ren realized. To this creature, they were all just prey.

That and nothing more.

Finishing her slow inspection, Carmilla returned to the center of the chamber and opened her arms in a sweeping gesture. Silk whispered as the sleeves of her gown unfurled like dark wings.

“For the return of my beloved, I offer you my blood.”

Ren’s heart missed a beat. *Her blood?*

Carmilla smiled, revealing her fangs, and licked them once. “I offer you immortality. Prey, you will be no longer. Instead, you would stand as a

predator, bound to the eternal night. You shall be granted a place within these walls and become my subject, welcomed into my court."

"An alluring pitch," Talen was the first to speak. "While we thank you for the honor of your court's embrace, our paths belong to the dawn. We respectfully decline."

Movement rippled through the ranks behind Carmilla—chairs scraping softly as several vampyres rose to their feet, eyes catching the light with feral interest. Ren's breath hitched when one male vampyre held her gaze too long, his tongue sliding languidly over his fangs like a serpent.

Carmilla's eyes glinted.

"Then you will be prey," Carmilla declared, her chin lifting as her voice rang through the chamber. "And like all prey, we shall—"

"Mother."

Valeria's interruption was quiet, almost gentle.

"I gave them my word. Let us banish them from our lands instead."

For a heartbeat, the chamber went still.

Then cold fury settled over Carmilla's features. When she turned toward Valeria, the air itself seemed to recoil.

"You mean to spare them?" Carmilla repeated softly. Her gaze swept over the fae and Ren, lingering with particular disdain. "Why should I show mercy to mortals who are neither of our blood nor of our court?"

"If the court sees the royal bloodline go back on its word, what weight do our laws hold?"

"Our laws hold the weight of my will, and my will does not bend to accommodate the fragile sensibilities of mortals." Carmilla leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a harsh, resonant whisper. "You forget yourself. You are a Lady, but I am the Countess. Their blood belonged to *me* the moment they stepped across the threshold. I offered them my blood, and they turned their backs upon the gift. They have chosen death, daughter. Who am I to deny them their choice?"

The brief flash of disagreement in Valeria's gaze was replaced by a cold, resigned mask.

"Forgive me, Mother," Valeria said, her voice dropping to a flat, quiet murmur. "Their fate is yours to decide."

The vampyres behind her stirred again, anticipation curling.

Valeria's gaze passed over them once more—brief, unreadable—before she shifted and turned toward the stairs. The soft rustle of her skirts was the

only sound as she began her ascent.

“Do what you will, Mother. I shall retire to my chambers.”

And just like that, she was gone—her presence dissolving into the shadows above. Fury coiled in Ren’s blood as she stared after Valeria’s retreating form.

That was it? Valeria offered a measured plea and then gave swift abandonment at the slightest resistance from her mother?

As if their lives were insignificant.

The words tore from Ren before she could stop them. “I see the way you look at us—sneering like we're beneath you. But at least we aren't cowards.”

From the corner of her eye, Ren saw Valeria hesitate.

Just for a breath.

Then she continued, her footsteps fading up the stairs. Each step struck the stone like a tolling bell.

We are so fucked.

Ren forced herself to turn back only to freeze under Carmilla’s gaze–where fury burned bright enough to make Ren regret opening her mouth.

“You will regret speaking to my daughter with such insolence.”

Before Ren could find her voice, Talen positioned himself between her and the Countess.

“I propose an offer.”

Carmilla’s eyes narrowed. “And what could you possibly offer that would interest me?”

“I am a fae prince. She is human, so she won’t have much to offer you.”

Carmilla flicked a hand in irritation. “And?”

“Human lives are fleeting. Mine is not. Forgive me if my understanding is imperfect—what I know of your kind comes only from study—but I offer myself as *blood-bound* to Lady Valeria.”

Blood-bound? Ren had never heard the term before.

“On one condition,” Talen added. “You release my companions and allow them to return home.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Kaelin hissed.

At Carmilla’s silence, Talen pressed on, his voice lowering in measured empathy.

“I offer my body and my essence to Lady Valeria’s will. I will not flee. I will not resist. I will serve as sustenance, as she requires. She lay entombed

for an immense amount of time alone in darkness. I cannot fathom such confinement." His tone softened. "She will need strength that I can provide. I will answer her call for however long she keeps me." Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "And consider the image it will cast–that Lady Valeria commands a fae prince, blood-bound to *her* will. Furthermore, I possess the ability to see into the minds of others, and you may use my ability to bleed secrets from your enemies."

"No deal." Ren's voice rang out, cutting through the silence before anyone could stop her. "Absolutely not. You don't get to offer yourself like that."

"By the gods, no," Lucan barked at the same time, disbelief flashing across his face. "This is madness, Talen. You can't possibly mean it."

Kaelin rounded on her brother, grip tightening on his arm as her composure fractured. "You are a *prince* of House Vaelaran," she snapped, violet eyes blazing. "Not a meager bargaining chip. This is not yours to give."

The chamber erupted—voices overlapping, tension snapping like a drawn bowstring.

And then—

"Enough. You presume much," Carmilla snarled, her gaze sweeping over them with glacial disdain. "To argue terms in *my* court and to deny an offer made generously."

Her eyes returned to Talen, her chin raising in interest.

"Nonetheless, a fae prince bound by his own word to serve my daughter and my court rather usefully is no small offer, indeed." Her attention snapped back to Ren, baring her teeth. "You speak again without leave, and I will remind you what prey sounds like when it begs."

Kiss my mortal ass, Ren seethed, the words burning hot behind her teeth. It took every shred of restraint she possessed not to hurl them into the open air–damn the consequences.

She was still shaking with it when a familiar voice brushed against her mind.

We have made a grave mistake, Talen's voice murmured, threaded with urgency. *They have the artifact now. And we don't know where this castle is on any map. The chance of us finding it is slim. I will remain here to infiltrate the castle and find a way to stop them. You will return to*

Driftwood Bay and gather those willing to fight. By the time I return, we will need an army.

"I accept your terms." Carmilla decided, her gaze not leaving Ren. "And I am quite eager to be rid of *you* in particular."

The feeling is mutual, Ren inwardly seethed. She curled her hands into fists, nails biting into her palms to keep from lunging forward and doing something truly irrevocably stupid.

The air shifted. Cold flooded the chamber, raising gooseflesh along Ren's arms. Behind them, another dark portal opened.

"I do not concern myself with where you intend to go," Carmilla purred. "That, Prince, was not part of our bargain. Either way, you will all be banished from my castle, and from this moment forward, should we encounter you in the world, you will be prey." Her smile sharpened. "And I can assure you, we will not show mercy."

Something cold wrapped around Ren, tightening like an invisible shroud around her limbs, chest, and throat. Her breath caught as the magic settled.

"Farewell," Carmilla crooned. "And good riddance."

The force hit without warning. Ren was hurled forward, boots skidding uselessly against stone as she struggled to stay upright. The portal roared louder, wind ripping at her hair, her cloak.

Ren snarled, "You blood-sucking, fucking—"

Another powerful surge of magic cut Ren off, yanking her off the floor and throwing her body into the swirling void.

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Unlike Valeria’s portal, Carmilla’s portal *ejected* Ren, and she hit the ground hard–tumbling through damp leaves and biting twigs, rolling until her shoulder slammed into the rough bark of a tree. Pain flared white-hot along her side. Ren groaned.

A second later, another body crashed nearby and rolled directly into her, knocking the wind out of her all over again.

“Fuck me,” Lucan wheezed.

Kaelin was hurled several feet away, skidding across the forest floor. She surged to her feet but by the time she turned, the portal was gone.

As though the tear in the Veil had never existed at all.

Beyond the rise of the hill, familiar lanternlight glimmered through the trees. The Splintered Siren stood just beyond, its windows glowing warmly against the dark.

A cruel contrast to what they had just survived.

“Did anyone else hear Talen in their thoughts?” Ren asked, grasping the tree for leverage as she brought herself to her feet.

“I did,” Lucan said, hauling himself to a sitting position.

Kaelin didn’t respond. She stood frozen where the portal had just been, her eyes wide and bloodshot.

“No, no, no,” she whispered, the words spinning into a breathless, ragged sob. She lunged forward, her hands tearing through the empty space where the portal once stood. “Talen! Talen!”

“Talen has a plan.” Ren brushed leaves and dirt from her torn trousers. “We have to do our part and trust that he can succeed.”

“Trapped in the heart of one of the most powerful vampyre covens in all of Aetheria as a blood bound, whatever that means?” Lucan said quietly. “That isn’t much of a plan. It’s a death sentence.” He exhaled, gaze dropping. “Perhaps he only meant to save our skins while he could.”

“Talen isn’t reckless,” Ren snapped, the words sharp with conviction. “If anyone among us can stop the prophecy and find a way to escape, it’s him.”

Lucan’s jaw tightened. “True,” he muttered, though the word carried little comfort. Inevitably, he sank to his knees. “That damned fool–risking his life for us.”

Tears streaked down Kaelin’s cheeks.

“That foolish,” Kaelin breathed, her voice breaking, “impulsive bastard.” When she looked up, violet eyes met amber. “He’s too much like you,” she whispered to Ren. “Always throwing himself into the fire for everyone else.”

Ren’s voice softened. “He’ll always do whatever he can to protect you.”

Kaelin swallowed hard as she stared into the dark where Talen should have been flung from. Ren pulled Kaelin into her arms, holding her close. Kaelin folded into her, pressing her forehead against Ren’s chest.

“He won’t fail,” Ren whispered. But she couldn’t even help the tears from blurring her vision. The thought of Talen alone with all those vampyres squeezed the air from her lungs in a vice grip of helpless dread.

Who knew what form of torture they would put him through?

Lucan glanced up. “And how can you be so sure?”

Ren smoothed the tangles from Kaelin’s hair. She brushed a soft kiss to Kaelin’s brow, then cupped her cheek, thumb sweeping away the salt of her tears. She tried keeping her voice steady despite the lump of panic in her throat, but feeling Kaelin’s body tremble in her arms, she knew she had to keep it together.

“He loves his kingdom and his sister too much to give up. Failure isn’t an option for him. A pompous vampyre coven won't be enough to keep him from coming home.”

Lucan wiped at his eyes. “I mean… silly, yes. Pompous, absolutely. Still, they almost killed us.”

Ren shrugged. “They tried and failed. If he doesn’t return after this war with Sylven, then we’ll find him–no matter the cost. How does that sound

for a plan?”

Kaelin’s grip tightened, fire cutting through the grief in her eyes as she met Ren’s gaze. “It sounds like we burn the world if we have to.”

Ren pressed another kiss to Kaelin’s brow. “For Talen? Anything.”



Later that evening, Kaelin rested her head back against the cool porcelain of the bathing tub, eyes half-lidded. Ren crossed back toward the bed, tugging her trousers free and tossing them aside without ceremony as she reached for the hem of her shirt.

“Make sure you fold those,” Kaelin called.

“I was getting to that,” Ren answered, though she paused all the same. With exaggerated care, she picked up the trousers and folded them neatly, setting them atop the bedside table.

Kaelin smiled.

This was how they fit together as two opposite instincts sharing the same space. While Kaelin needed order, clean lines, and control, Ren existed comfortably amid an organized disorder, perfectly at ease with a little chaos so long as she knew where things were.

“Thank you,” Kaelin murmured. Her violet eyes lingered as Ren shed the last of her clothes.

Kaelin watched as Ren crossed the room toward the bath.

Kaelin’s eyes flicked briefly over Ren’s back as Ren undid her braids, trailing over her scars. “Sometimes, I think I forget to say it. But I am in awe of how absolutely stunning you are.”

Heat rushed to Ren’s cheeks, and she turned her face away. “Stunning feels like a generous word.”

Kaelin made a quiet, disapproving sound. The water shifted as she moved closer, forearm resting along the edge of the bath. She caught one of her blonde curls, twirling it around her finger.

“Over here, darling,” Kaelin murmured. “Don’t wander off into that head of yours.”

Ren glanced back at her. “What? I’m being honest.”

Kaelin’s expression hardened. “I don’t find it amusing.”

“You don’t?”

“Of course not. Sometimes I think I would like to throttle your parents.”

“Why?”

“Because they made you believe you were less than you are.”

Ren eased into the bath, muscles protesting as she lowered herself into the water. Kaelin reached for her without hesitation, fingers firm and steady at Ren’s wrist, guiding her closer. Warmth closed around Ren’s body, soaking into her skin and easing aches she hadn’t even noticed.

Ren sighed.

“Just another day of having a run-in with Sylven’s soldiers, finding out we completely mishandled a vampyre artifact, and barely escaping a coven that wanted us dead.” She huffed softly. “Here’s hoping the rest of the night is mercifully dull.” Her gaze drifted, shadows crossing her features. “I hope Veylan, Sir Pindlewhip, and Fryphessyrth are all right.”

Kaelin hummed quietly, her fingers tracing slow, absent lines along Ren’s thigh beneath the water. Goosebumps rose in their wake from the care behind it.

“You can cross that off your worry list,” Kaelin replied. “Brenna informed me that they attempted to fight Sylven’s soldiers and had to flee–they’ve already made it back here.”

Ren let out a long breath, her entire posture slumping against Kaelin as if the news had physically drained the last of her adrenaline.

“Thank the gods,” she muttered. “When this is over, we should take a vacation–somewhere quiet, no wars, no gods, and certainly no prophecy artifacts.”

Kaelin brushed damp strands of hair from Ren’s face, fingertips lingering at her jaw. Her thumb traced the curve of Ren’s lower lip once before her palm settled against Ren’s cheek.

“As long as you’re there, I don’t care where we go.”

Ren felt herself soften instantly in Kaelin’s kiss, tension slipping from her shoulders as if her body finally remembered it was safe. She turned fully toward the fae princess because there was no such thing as a half-hearted kiss where Kaelin was concerned. Ren needed the proof of her warmth, her breath–the steady certainty of her presence.

Ren’s fingers traced the sharp lines of Kaelin’s cheekbones, memorizing them. She slid her hand into Kaelin’s blond curls, grounding herself in the simple fact that Kaelin was here. *Alive*.

Ren had almost lost her today.

Once would have been too much. But it had happened again and again—danger circling them, threats clawing closer, the world eager to take what Ren loved most.

The thought hollowed her chest.

Her heart twisted painfully at the idea of losing Kaelin to anyone—to Zakhar's madness, to Sylven's cruelty, to the hungry vampyres. Fury rose hot and sharp in her veins when she remembered the fear and pain she'd seen in Kaelin's eyes earlier when Talen had been left at Castle Sangravos.

Ren wanted to take that fear and carry it herself instead. She wanted Kaelin laughing without weight in her chest, sleeping without one hand curled tight, and living without the constant ache of responsibility and grief.

One day, they would get there.

But not today.

Today, all she could do was hold the fae princess and be grateful that, for now, it was enough.

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The vampyres dragged Talen up a flight of stairs and down a long corridor. A door slammed shut, cutting off all sound.

Then, the bag was yanked from his head.

Talen staggered once, then caught himself. He drew in a steadying breath, forcing his racing heart to slow as he lifted his gaze to take in the room.

The chamber was vast, its vaulted ceilings disappearing into shadow. A massive bed dominated the space, draped in deep crimson velvet and satin. Beyond it, tall glass doors stood open to a balcony with cool, night air spilling in.

This must be Valeria's bedchambers.

He glanced at his wrists. The chains were thick, the cuffs seamless and solid. He tried to summon his magic but nothing came. The iron was enchanted to prohibit his magic abilities.

To vampyres, prisoners were just food–assets to be drained at whim. But those who went willingly were given another name.

Blood-bound.

Regardless of the fae heritage running through his veins, he was not immortal, which left Talen vulnerable to Valeria's whims. She possessed the power to take everything, including his own life—either slowly, or quickly.

But they're safe, he reminded himself. Ren. Kaelin. Lucan. That had been the bargain he was willing to make.

He eased closer to the bed. His fingers brushed the soft fabric. He drew his hand back, curling his fingers into a fist.

This was not surrender.

This was infiltration.

His magic had always allowed him to peer into other minds—uncovering thoughts, desires, and memories. He suspected he may be able to go a step beyond that–to communicate messages to others through the mind.

When his friends' lives were in danger, he had to try.

Pushing his magic to the limit, he managed to communicate to them before they stepped through the portal–ensuring they knew his true intentions. It had been one hell of a gamble, and he was lucky it worked.

Perhaps he wasn't so different from Ren after all when it came to impulsive moves.

We made a mistake. They have the artifact. He breathed in slowly. *I'll stay here long enough to stop what they're planning.*

Eternal night.

The thought sent a chill through him colder than the stone floor ever could.

First, his gaze lifted toward the moonlit balcony, *I need to find the artifact.*

And then he would find a way out.

No matter the cost.

First thing first–where was Valeria?

Talen circled the bed with measured care. He listened with instinct for the slightest shift of air, the faintest sign that he was not alone. To the right of the bed was an opening. He ventured closer.

And found a bathing chamber.

Roses crept along the walls, their petals so deeply crimson they appeared almost black in the dim light. Candles flickered just enough to cast shadows that danced across the stone. The chamber was larger than the bedchamber, its ceiling arched and inset with meticulously crafted windows that opened to the night sky.

Stars gleamed overhead.

It took Talen a moment to register the figure within the bath.

Valeria reclined in the water, her bronze skin glowing beneath the night sky and her dark hair fanning around her. With her eyes closed and her

expression serene, she looked fast asleep. One arm rested along the edge of the tub, her fingers trailing lazily through the steam.

Talen stilled.

He could kill her right now, right here.

She was not beautiful in any mortal sense. She was shaped by immortality and honed by centuries of bloodshed–a creature forged where starlight turned to shadow and hunger never slept.

As a boy, Talen had been fascinated by the old texts in the Pyraelia library–always surprised that a place of light held lore on such hellish creatures. He used to marvel at the idea of a creature that could live forever.

But the truth was far more monstrous; they only obtained eternity by draining the life essence of others through *blood*.

Talen never imagined he would come face to face with such a creature. And, admittedly, he never imagined one could look so–

“I hear your pulse, fae prince.”

Talen’s jaw tightened. He narrowed his eyes and shifted his weight.

Valeria opened her eyes. Gold caught the candlelight as her gaze met his, the bathwater barely rippling as her fingers curled against the edge of the tub.

“If you’re going to stand before me,” Valeria murmured, “you will do so properly.”

Her gaze dipped.

“On your knees.”

Talen grinded his teeth as he held her gaze. Valeria did not move. She did not rush him.

Seconds stretched.

Then, he stepped forward.

One step.

Then another.

This close, he could see fine flecks of light scattered across her skin as if the stars themselves had brushed against her. She was impossibly still, like a predator was when scrutinizing prey.

He sank to his knees.

“It has been years since I was entombed.” Her gaze slid to his throat. “I am thirsty.”

She rose from the bath, water streaming away. She crossed the space between them and knelt before him. Her fingers brushed his chin.

“Bare your neck.”

She could drain me completely. He hesitated, staring into her golden eyes, amazed by how utterly *still* she was. She looked like a damn statue.

The silence stretched between them until the sheer weight of her gaze became too much to bear. Finally, Talen broke contact and obeyed.

As his head tilted back, her hand slid to his throat. His breath stuttered. The world narrowed to that single point of contact.

Then—

Pain.

And immediately swallowed by something else.

The sensation was vast and overwhelming, as though his body had forgotten where it ended–it was a dissolve into both light and darkness, as if he were suspended among the stars themselves–weightless and burning all at once.

Time fractured.

Talen felt distant, infinite, undone–every thought unraveling into shimmering nothing as the universe took him in.

Her fangs sank deeper, a precise pierce that ignited nerves he didn't know existed. Warmth flooded from the wound. Talen’s mind reeled, the initial sting dissolving into a cascade of ecstasy that started at his neck and radiated downward.

She drank steadily, her lips sealed against his skin, tongue flicking to lap the trickle that escaped. The pull was rhythmic, each swallow drawing his very essence, binding him to her.

Blood-bound.

Talen’s body arched involuntarily, knees scraping the stone as he leaned into her hold. Her free hand gripped his shoulder, nails digging in just enough to anchor him, while the other cradled the back of his neck.

The pleasure descended further, igniting his spine in a line of molten sparks. It pooled in his stomach, twisting low, making his muscles clench. His length hardened.

He gasped.

But she didn’t stop.

Deeper now, the sensation flooded his hips, his thighs–a full-body tremor that left him shaking. Every nerve sang, alive and electric, as if her bite rewired him from the inside out. Pleasure washed over his shaft, squeezing until his groins ached with need.

Talen’s mind was a haze of bliss, lost in the velvet dark where nothing existed but her mouth on him, drawing him out, filling him with euphoria. It surged to his toes, curling them against the cold floor–a total immersion that erased boundaries. His breath came in short bursts, hips bucking forward instinctively, seeking friction that wasn’t there.

The build was inevitable–a pressure mounting like a storm about to break. Her feeding intensified, fangs retracting slightly to suck harder.

And that edge pushed him over.

Pleasure crested, white-hot and all-consuming, ripping a guttural grunt from his throat. He shuddered in her grasp, waves of release crashing through him, prolonging the ecstasy until his vision spotted with stars.

She released him.

The pressure at his neck vanished, and Talen sagged forward, breath unsteady, chains clinking softly as his balance faltered. The world tilted, stars swimming behind his eyes.

He should have felt pain and fear. Instead, a shocking, residual euphoria pulsed through him. His limbs trembled with the aftershock of it.

Of *her*.

He managed to lift his gaze.

Valeria stood over him, composed and radiant in the candlelight, golden eyes darkened with satisfaction. A thin line of his blood marked her chin. She regarded him without apology.

Then, she raised her fingers and swept them through the crimson trail, bringing them to her lips. She lapped his blood away, eyes never leaving his.

Her head tipped to the side.

“That will suffice for now, fae prince.”

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Ren fell asleep that night, passing quickly from darkness into the vast void of her own mind.

Vortharax loomed before her. His crimson eyes fixed on her, assessing her small human shape with the patience of a creature that had watched empires rot into dust.

They regarded one another in silence.

Ren rolled one shoulder and shrugged. “I’ve always had trouble sleeping, ever since my parents were murdered.”

After a long beat, Vortharax’s massive forelimbs stretched forward as he lowered himself.

“And I never thought I’d say this—so this stays between us—but I actually prefer it here.” Ren admitted, glancing sideways at him. “At least you don’t invade my dreams like Zakhar does.”

Vortharax showed no reaction to the name at all.

Ren sat, stretching her legs out in front of her, then leaned back onto her hands and stared up into the swirling nothingness overhead.

“We fucked up,” she murmured. “*Big* this time.”

“*Indeed*,” Vortharax answered. “*You did*.”

“You saw?”

“Through your eyes, the world unfolds before me.”

“That explains why you grumble every time a threat shows up.”

“Your fate and mine are bound together. Should death claim you, it will claim me also.”

Ren’s brows lifted a fraction. “Wow. That’s… comforting.”

“It is not,” he said flatly.

“That was said with bitter humor.” Ren thought for a moment. “The other dragon we encountered in Pyraelia, she mentioned that she could free you from me by killing me.”

“Her theory held weight. My brethren burn with desperation to see these bonds broken, but the truth remains absolute: if you are destroyed, I perish with you. By the working of this binding, I remain caged until you choose to unleash me.”

Vortharax’s tail swept slowly through the void. A strange, quiet comfort washed over Ren. He was a creature of mythic terror, yet the ultimate power rested with her, and as long as she chose it, she could keep him caged away from the rest of the world.

Then she thought of Talen, and the comfort vanished instantly.

“We didn’t know Valeria had the artifact–didn’t even consider it. We practically handed it *to* the blood-sucking bastards and thanked them for the trouble.”

Her throat burned. She blinked hard, but it didn’t stop her vision from blurring.

“And Talen…” Her voice faltered. “Talen sacrificed himself for us.”

Ren pushed herself upright, turning to face Vortharax fully.

“I pretend I have it together–for them. I tell them we’ll figure it out, that there’s a plan.” Her hands curled into fists at her sides. “But the truth is, I don’t think he’s going to make it out of there alive.”

The words landed, ugly and final.

“The odds are impossible. He’s in a coven of vampyres. *Alone*.”

She dragged a hand through her hair, fingers snagging in the knots she hadn’t bothered to fix.

“How are we supposed to do this? First, Sylven took the crown, and now immortal blood-drinking monsters with fancy castles and abilities we don’t know much about are wanting to take over the world”

Her voice broke.

“I’m so *damn tired*.”

The void swallowed her words, but Vortharax did not look away.

“Yes, the odds are poor. Yes, the vampyre coven is lethal. But isolation does not equate to helplessness.”

“He’s *one* fae.”

“He is a fae prince educated in politics, deception, and survival. Vampyres are predators, but they are also creatures of hierarchy and indulgence. They underestimate what they believe they own. And do not forget, mortal, that everything has a weakness.”

His tail stilled.

“He is surrounded by enemies who believe themselves victorious. That is often when mistakes are made. You do not win wars by avoiding impossible battles–you win them by enduring long enough to turn inevitability into opportunity.”

Ren considered Vortharax’s words. Her thoughts drifted back to Vex. Fire had barely slowed her, stealth had been useless, and every trick Ren relied on had glanced off the vampyre like sparks against stone. Vex hadn’t been beaten by force; she’d been beaten by herself.

It had been Talen who saw it first.

He’d watched her, cataloging her movements, her words, the way she reveled in her pride. Her certainty that no one in that room could touch her.

And then he’d turned it against her.

While Ren fought with instinct and fury, Talen waited for his opponent to make a mistake, striking the moment they let their guard down. He was calm under pressure and razor-sharp when everything went wrong.

If anyone could outthink a coven that believed itself untouchable…

It was Talen.



“Sylven knows we’re alive now,” Lucan said as Brenna set a steaming bowl of potato soup in front of him.

It had been two days since their return. The hearth crackled nearby, filling the Splintered Siren with a low, comforting hum that stood in stark contrast to the weight of Lucan’s words.

“We don’t know that for certain,” Ren dragged her spoon through the broth. “He could’ve known about the artifact already, or maybe his soldiers

were patrolling the mountain. Hell, maybe they didn’t even realize it was us inside Mount Solfira?”

Lucan crossed his arms over his chest. “And if he did, he’ll come sniffing around soon enough.”

Kaelin sat close beside Ren, a fresh bowl cradled between her hands. Ren caught herself watching her, relieved to see color returning to Kaelin’s cheeks and to see her eating without prompting.

It felt like a small victory in a string of losses.

Sir Pindlewhip paced before the hearth, murmuring half-formed rhyme schemes under his breath, his spectral form drifting to and fro as he gestured dramatically to no one in particular.

Veylan claimed a seat beside Lucan, soup in hand. “There is a refugee camp near the ruins of Pyraelia where most of the survivors fled after the eruption. They are sitting ducks, being so close to Sylven.”

The kitchen door creaked open, and a fae male known as Oryn emerged with a wooden tray piled high with fresh bread. He was Veylan’s husband. He was striking in an unassuming way, sporting sharp, angular cheekbones softened by a gentle middle, bronze skin warm against the firelight. His golden hair was braided loosely and draped over his broad back.

Ren was on her feet before anyone else. She snagged a piece of bread, still warm, and bit into it. It melted on her tongue.

Oryn chuckled and claimed a seat beside Veylan, setting the tray within reach before lifting his own bowl.

“If I may offer a suggestion, Your Highness,” Veylan said, “I believe it would be wise to return to your people and take a public stand against Sylven as a usurper.”

“What if they expect strength and all they see is someone who couldn’t stop him? A crown doesn’t mean much when the kingdom remembers you losing it. I’ll look like a survivor who ran,” Kaelin admitted quietly.

“King Maelion and Queen Lyra remained and died with their people. You were sent away carrying what remained of the kingdom’s hope.” Veylan’s gaze held hers. “That was not cowardice. It was foresight.”

Brenna brushed past Ren’s shoulder as she settled into the chair at her right. She cradled a heavy mug of ale in one broad hand, and her rugged cheeks were flushed with effort. The tavern had been alive tonight–louder than it had been in weeks, and it pleased Ren to see the Splintered Siren thriving again now that no vampyric shadow lingered over Driftwood Bay.

“For my people, it is a great honor to fight to the death.” Brenna took a measured drink. “But there’s not much of a fight to be had against the wrath of Mount Solfira.”

Ren’s gaze flicked to Kaelin. Ren had been unconscious when molten rock had torn free from the mountain’s sides and reduced Pyraelia to ash. Kaelin had seen it all. Ren knew without needing to ask that Kaelin hadn’t looked away–that she had watched her home burn because some part of her believed she deserved to bear witness.

Ren knew she wouldn’t have been able to turn away, either.

“It’s a hell of a loss,” Brenna went on, her thick brows softening as her gaze settled on Kaelin. “King Maelion wasn’t perfect, but he was trying to right old wrongs that most were content to leave buried.”

“Indeed,” Veylan agreed. “And history rarely turns without resistance. There is almost always great strife before great change.”

Brenna nodded. “Some folks are too thick-headed to accept change, even when it would save them. You’ve been given something most rulers never have–a second chance.”

“Well said,” Sir Pindlewhip chimed in as he adjusted his spectacles. “Once I complete my limerick, I intend to write the greatest odyssey ever penned.” He stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I dare say you’ve already inspired a line or two.”

Brenna asked, “Do I get credit where credit’s due?”

“Of course, madam!” Sir Pindlewhip declared.

Ren leaned back in her chair, folding her arms across her chest. She lifted her chin.

“I’ve learned the hard way that the world is cruel, and the people in it are crueler.” Her mouth twisted into a scowl, teeth flashing as she spoke. “You survive by fighting tooth and nail for every scrap you want to keep. And you fight even harder to protect what’s yours. Our prince heir is inside a vampyre coven right now trying to dismantle a threat that could drown the world in eternal night.” She pushed to her feet and let her gaze sweep the table, locking eyes with each of them in turn.

Lucan.

Oryn.

Veylan.

Brenna.

And finally, Kaelin.

“It’s on us,” Ren murmured, “to gather our people and to take back Vaelaran. I know exactly what Talen would say if he were here–that the people deserve better than a tyrant like Sylven. He’s not misunderstood. He’s not someone you negotiate with. He’s evil, and he *needs* to fall.”

“She is correct.” Veylan agreed grimly. “House Vaelaran needs a new face–someone young enough to inspire hope but tempered by experience.” He glanced at Kaelin. “Someone like you, Your Highness.”

Kaelin stiffened at the title, shoulders tightening.

“Your kingdom needs you,” Veylan pressed gently. “Your people need you. Will you go to them?”

Brenna leaned forward, forearms braced against the table. “Will you raise your blade and fight beside them?”

Lucan pushed back from his chair, muttering something about another drink. But halfway to the bar, he stopped short. Ren noticed it first—the way the color drained from his face, the way his posture went rigid.

“The town,” Lucan managed hoarsely. “By the gods, *it’s on fire*!”

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“Rise, fae prince.”

Talen stirred, muscles stiff and aching as he lifted his head.

Shadows clung to the narrow cell. Iron bars framed his world, hemming him in on all sides. A narrow cot with threadbare blankets crouched against one wall, barely more than a concession to decency. In the corner sat a bowl, unemptied.

A figure stood beyond the bars. The fae thrall’s skin was a deep, unnatural purple, the color startling in the low light. For a fleeting moment, it reminded Talen of Veylan—of books and quiet halls and a life that felt impossibly distant now.

Talen pushed himself upright. He managed a crooked, tired smile. “You come here often?”

The answer came as a sharp *crack*. Pain exploded across his shoulder as the whip sliced through the air and struck flesh. Talen let out a hiss, the sound torn from him as he collapsed back to his knees.

“You speak when spoken to,” the thrall hissed. “Show me your hands.”

Talen hesitated only a moment before sliding his wrists between the bars. Cold metal snapped shut. The cuffs bit down around his wrists, a chain rattling softly as the thrall tested its weight. Satisfied, he tugged once, forcing Talen closer to the bars.

With a grunt, the thrall unlocked the gate.

Iron scraped against stone as the door swung open.

The thrall led Talen down the narrow corridor. The air was damp here, rotten. Iron-barred doors lined both sides—cells carved directly into the rock, their thresholds marked by grooves worn deep from centuries of chains and clawed hands.

Talen counted the cells, his mind latching onto numbers the way it once latched onto blade forms and footwork. Twelve on the left, twelve on the right–twenty-four in total.

Most cells were dark.

Talen did not look too closely.

At the corridor's end, the thrall unlocked a heavy wooden door bound with blackened iron. The hinges screamed in protest as it was heaved open, and sudden light knifed into the passage beyond. Candles lined this second corridor, their flames steady. The thrall strode ahead without looking back.

"You have an hour. Don't bother running. You won't get far."

The corridor bent, then split. The thrall chose the path to the right and unlocked another door.

When it opened, light spilled in.

Grass stretched out before them, knee-high and wild, bending beneath a heavy wind that carried the distant salt of the sea. The sun hung bright but veiled, murky clouds drifting across the sky. Talen inhaled the smell of earth, of green–of something living that did not reek of blood or fear.

The thrall remained planted in the doorway, blocking the only way back inside. When Talen hesitated a second longer, the thrall shoved him forward.

"Go," he snapped. "Walk, *fae prince*."

Talen stepped into the windy meadow. This wasn't kindness. It was a calculated move. Blood-bound were kept alive on purpose—they were fed, watered, and preserved because a starving captive produced spoiled blood.

An hour in the sun it was.

Talen kept walking, letting the distance stretch between himself and the doorway. He did not look back. He could feel the thrall's gaze on him.

Only once the door was a dark smear against stone did Talen glance over his shoulder. The thrall had not moved–a guard not worried enough to feign alertness.

Interesting.

Talen turned forward again and continued across the meadow, his mind already unraveling the threads of possibility.

He cataloged everything as he walked–the slope of the land, the direction of the wind, grass thick enough to hide movement at a distance, but not enough to obscure tracks. No trees nearby—at least none close enough to offer cover. The sea lay somewhere beyond the hills; he could smell it but not see it. That meant cliffs, or at least a sharp drop. *Risky.*

His body felt slower, heavier. He flexed his fingers, feeling the faint tremor there. Running now would be a death sentence. The thrall likely wasn't alone; vampyre covens nested like wasps. You disturbed one, and the rest swarmed.

So escape wouldn't be about speed; it would be about timing.

And first, he needed to figure out a plan to solve the artifact dilemma. Talen bent, plucked a blade of grass, and rolled it between his fingers. If he could draw the thrall away from the doorway—far enough that the guards lost sight—then perhaps…

No. There were too many unknowns. He needed more leverage and certainty. The thrall's disinterest gnawed at him. A bored guard was either confident or expendable.

That meant the real danger was unseen. Wards, perhaps. He tested it subtly, pushing the faintest thread of his own magic outward now that his cuffs were off.

It recoiled—*hard*.

Talen swore under his breath. Whatever magic held this place was old, and it did not care for him.

Which meant this hour wasn't an opportunity to flee.

It was reconnaissance.

He turned again, letting the thrall see his face now—a prisoner enjoying his allotted freedom was no threat at all. But Talen's mind was already mapping opportunities.

An hour was enough to decide that when he escaped, it wouldn't be a rash decision.

He let himself sink into the sun's rays, warmth pressing against skin that still felt hollowed out. He lifted his hands as his fingers trembled. The blood loss from the night before lingered in his limbs, a dull heaviness that should have warned him.

Yet beneath it pulsed something else.

The feeding—*gods help him*—he had enjoyed it.

The realization unsettled him more than anything. What Valeria had drawn from him was sensation, flooding him with an ecstasy so sharp it bordered on agony. He had known desire before—fleeting passions that burned fast and faded faster—but this had been something different.

As if his body had been taught a language it had never known it was capable of speaking.

That was the true danger of vampyres.

And gods, everything about *her* had called to him: the curve of her mouth, the chill of her skin, the way her fingers had held him. When her fangs pierced him, the world had narrowed to sensation alone. He remembered the way his breath had stuttered and how his body had betrayed every vow of resistance he'd ever made. He would have begged if she had lingered longer–begged her not to stop.

Begged her to finish what she'd started.

No tome had ever spoken of this. The histories warned of bloodshed, of death and ruin, but none described the intimacy of being fed from—the way the act blurred pain and pleasure until they were indistinguishable.

Perhaps those who experienced it never lived long enough to record the truth.

Or perhaps they hadn't *wanted* to.

He hated himself for craving it. Hated the way his jaw clenched now, the way his body tightened with the memory alone. His thoughts betrayed him, dragging him back to the feel of her. That was the most damning part of all.

Not the hunger, not the fear, but the longing.

Because longing meant he didn't fear the predator; he feared how eagerly he would bare his throat again.



Later that day, the thrall returned to Talen's cell bearing a plate of food. Chicken, shredded and browned at the edges, lay over a mound of rice. The scent alone made his stomach twist. He ate slowly. The spices burned his throat and lingered on his tongue long after he swallowed.

When the thrall set down the water, Talen drank until the cup was empty. The thirst clung to him even after—the kind no water truly sated.

Minutes passed, or hours.

Time had lost meaning in the dark.

The thrall returned with no warning, leather creaking as he stepped inside the cell. In his hands dangled a collar with a short length of chain attached.

Talen extended his hands as he had before. The cuffs snapped shut around his wrists with practiced efficiency, biting into skin still tender from earlier bindings. Then the thrall stepped closer and lifted the collar. Cold brushed Talen's throat as it was fastened.

For a heartbeat, instinct roared. He imagined images of bared teeth, breaking bones, and spilled blood. He could feel the fight coiled in his muscles.

No. He forced it down. Rage would get him killed. He was deep within a vampyre coven; he did not know the paths, the wards, the exits.

And he still needed the artifact.

The thrall yanked the chain, jerking him forward. Leather dug into his throat, enough to sting. The message was clear: *walk where you are led, or suffer.* Talen followed, teeth grinding as the thrall kept the leash short, tugging without cause, reminding him again and again of what he was here.

Blood-bound.

They reentered the castle, where candlelight glowed warm against stone and velvet banners hung heavy with sigils he did not recognize. Vampyres lingered in corners and along the walls, voices low and intimate, eyes tracking him openly.

A female vampyre stood half-shadowed near a column, her mouth at the throat of a human female who hung limp in her grasp. The human's skin was ashen and waxy, and her eyes stared at nothing. When the vampyre withdrew, blood stained her lips.

She let the human's body fall without ceremony.

Talen tore his gaze away.

The thrall led him onward, into the dining hall where they had first been brought. The chandelier still burned overhead, its crystals scattering light across the long table. His eyes betrayed him, flicking instinctively to the place beneath it where they had once stood—Ren, Kaelin, Lucan.

At least they had left alive.

The hall was full. Vampyres reclined in high-backed chairs, draped in exquisite finery—gowns of jewel-toned silks, suits cut to perfection. Crystal goblets were filled with dark liquid that gleamed thickly in the light.

Not wine, certainly.

Valeria sat to the right of the head of the table, where Carmilla presided as a queen carved from marble. Mother and daughter were mid-conversation, their voices low.

“My Lady,” the thrall bowed his head. He placed the reins into Valeria’s hand. She accepted them with a gentleness that made Talen’s breath hitch. His gaze dropped to her fingers, her mouth. His traitorous mind searched for the glimpse of a fang, remembering how those lips had parted against his skin.

His knees weakened without permission.

Valeria gave the faintest tug. Talen sank to his knees beside her chair, the motion smooth, inevitable.

Talen was hyper-aware of everything around him. The loud laughter, the footsteps, and the clinking glasses all felt dangerous. Vampires drifted through the room as servants refilled their glasses with blood. It wasn't just a drink here; it was a formal ritual–as if it were nothing more than a rare vintage.

Blood-bound followed close at their masters’ sides. Some wore collars like his. Others were seated far too close—perched on laps, draped across shoulders, hands resting possessively at their throats or waists.

Pets, paraded without shame.

His gaze snagged on a young human girl standing near one of the columns. She could not have been much past adulthood, her slight frame wrapped in a fine gown that swallowed her whole. When her eyes met his—soft brown, wide and doe-like—Talen felt his blood turn to ice.

There was nothing behind those eyes. No spark of self–just an empty stillness that suggested she had been here long enough for something essential to be hollowed out.

Music eventually filled the hall—the low, reverent swell of an organ. The notes drifted through the space like smoke, wrapping the decadence in elegance.

“…your traitor godmother will be held accountable for locking you away,” Carmilla’s voice carried smoothly across the table, and Talen’s attention snapped back into focus.

“Where is she?” Valeria asked.

“No one has seen her since you were entombed. She’s as good as gone. But I would rather hang her head on a spike myself.”

“Mother,” Valeria sighed, exasperation threading her voice like a warning.

“She stole you from us,” Carmilla snapped, tapping sharp-nailed fingers against her goblet. Talen kept his gaze lowered, but his ears strained for every word. “And she *knew* you had the artifact.”

“You are upset she took the artifact.”

“Of course. But far more upset that she took my only daughter. Do you see what her intentions were? To bury you with the artifact, never to be freed.”

“And Vex?”

Carmilla waved the question away, ruby rings flashing. “She left.”

Vex.

The name sent a cold recognition through Talen as the vampyre terrorizing Driftwood Bay.

Their conversation blurred as nearby movement drew his attention away. A vampyre had drawn their *blood-bound* close, feeding without care for the audience. The human clung to them, breath hitching, hands grasping, murmuring pleas that twisted Talen’s stomach.

No one else in the hall even glanced their way.

This was routine. The female blood-bound couldn’t seem to tear her robes off fast enough to sink onto the vampyre’s waiting cock, groaning loudly as he sank in deep.

“…and what of him?” Carmilla’s voice cut back through the haze.

Talen felt her gaze settle on him.

“Have you fed enough, dear? It has been quite some time for you.”

“Yes,” Valeria replied. “He is sufficient.”

“Has he been obedient?”

“Yes.”

“I know you have not kept many *blood-bound*,” Carmilla continued.

“He is my first.”

“Then you are aware of the customs.”

The female blood-bound’s cries filled the air. To the right, another blood bound sank onto his knees, taking his vampyre master’s cock into his mouth. Blood seeped down in thin trails from the blood-bound’s back, having just been fed on. Talen went rigid as the scene unfolded before him.

He had read tomes of the pain inflicted from being devoured by a vampyre; he had never read tomes recording what vampyres did in their

pastime.

“I shall retire to my bedchamber,” Valeria murmured.

Carmilla hummed in acknowledgment, lifting her goblet and taking an unhurried sip. For a fleeting moment, Talen dared to look up.

His gaze collided with Carmilla’s.

Valeria tugged his collar. The sudden pull broke the moment, snapping his attention back to her as she swept past him without a backward glance. Talen rose quickly, too quickly. His legs protested, trembling beneath him. Pins and needles flared through his knees, stiff and aching from hours spent kneeling at her side.

How long had it truly been?

He followed Valeria down the hall, feeling absurdly like a newborn foal —too aware of his own limbs, each step a negotiation with pain and weakness. The chain between them was short, forcing him to keep pace with her graceful stride or suffer for lagging behind.

They passed through adjoining corridors where the coven’s indulgences spilled freely into view. Vampyres fed, bodies pressed close to their *blood-bound*, mouths at exposed throats. Low moans and broken cries echoed off stone walls, weaving into the music still drifting from the hall behind them.

The scent hit him all at once—iron-rich blood thick in the air, mingled with scented oil, sweat, and something sweeter beneath it all. *Desire,* he realized.

Talen kept his eyes forward, forcing himself not to react to the sounds ot to the pull of the collar. Each step carried him farther from the public spectacle of the hall and deeper into the private darkness that awaited.

A vampyre male had his blood bound waiting on a table in the corridor, his blood bound female on her knees with him thrusting into her from behind. Tears streaked down her cheeks as she begged him for more.

Talen averted his gaze as the male vampyre met his eyes.

“Care to join, My Lady?” he asked Valeria as she passed. His hand gripped his blood-bound’s hips tightly, one wound in her long blonde hair, as he continued thrusting into her.

“No. Please, enjoy.”

Valeria swept into the hall, heels clicking softly against stone. They ascended a winding flight of stairs, the air growing cooler with each step. Talen’s legs protested, stiffness settling deep into muscle and joint, but he

did not slow. The silence between them stretched, broken only by the echo of their steps and the distant murmur of the coven below.

All too soon, they reached her door.

Valeria opened it without pause and stepped inside, leaving him just long enough in the threshold for uncertainty to bloom. He crossed into her bedchamber as the door closed softly behind him.

Talen stopped where he stood and lowered his gaze to the floor.

He waited.

Valeria unclasped the leash from his collar. She tossed the chain aside, letting it fall to the floor.

Talen remained where he stood as Valeria moved toward the bed. She did not look at him as she reached the edge of the mattress. She slipped her fingers beneath the fabric at her shoulders and let it fall away inch by inch, the dress sliding down her arms with a whisper of silk. It pooled at her ankles in a dark spill of cloth.

Talen's breath caught despite himself. His gaze traced the elegant line of her bare back, the subtle rise of her shoulder blades beneath her smooth skin, the graceful curve where her waist narrowed before flaring softly at her hips.

He willed himself not to stare.

And failed.

There was something devastating in the ease of her movements and in the confidence with which she revealed herself. His eyes drifted lower before he could stop them, to the area between her thighs, then snapped away.

He gritted his teeth.

Valeria turned and lowered herself onto the bed, satin sheets shifting beneath her weight. She leaned back into the pillows, one knee lifting languidly while the other remained stretched along the mattress. Her midnight-blue hair spilled loose across the pale fabric, dark as shadow.

"Come to me, fae prince," Valeria murmured. "Let me taste you."

Talen moved before he could stop himself. The faint jingle of his chains betrayed him as he came to a halt at the foot of the bed.

Every instinct urged him closer, yet every shred of sense warned him what that closeness would cost. There was a soft shuffle of movement, the mattress whispering beneath her weight.

Valeria leaned forward, and in a single, fluid motion, her hand closed around the back of his neck. She guided him down without effort, and Talen found himself on his knees atop the bed, hovering over her.

She rose to meet him, lips brushing the side of his throat. Her breath ghosted over his skin, stirring the frantic beat beneath.

Right where his pulse betrayed him.

Talen shut his eyes. He couldn't bear to see her. If he opened his eyes, he would lose whatever fragile control he still possessed.

Then her fangs pierced his skin.

Pleasure flooded him in a violent rush. His breath hitched, a broken sound tearing free of his throat before he could stop it. His body betrayed him, shuddering as sensation rippled outward from the point of contact, racing through his veins like fire laced with ice.

It was euphoric and mind-numbing in its purity.

He quaked, his muscles trembling. His thoughts dissolved, fractured into sensation alone. The ache, the pull, the slow, rhythmic draw of her feeding sent waves through him that left him dizzy, light-headed, undone.

He let out a sound before clamping his jaw shut, mortified by the noise he'd made. His body leaned into her instinctively, chasing the feeling even as his mind screamed for restraint.

Gods, he wanted to touch her.

The urge was overwhelming—his hands burned with it, fingers twitching as they hovered uselessly at his sides. He imagined the feel of her skin beneath his palms, imagined anchoring himself to something solid before he dissolved.

No.

He curled his hands into fists so tightly his nails bit into his palms. The pain was grounding, barely enough to keep him tethered. His arms shook with the effort of holding himself back, every instinct screaming at him to claim, to cling.

To give in.

The pleasure kept coming. It seeped into his thoughts, dulling fear, erasing resistance. The world narrowed to her mouth at his throat and the bliss it delivered with terrifying ease.

He felt unmade, pulled apart and rewoven around that singular sensation.

This was why vampyres were feared. Not for the blood they took but for the way they made you *want* them to take it.

Talen clung to the last scraps of himself as Valeria fed, horrifyingly aware that some part of him wished she wouldn't stop.

And then all too suddenly, it was over.

Her fangs slid free from his skin, and the euphoria ebbed in a slow, disorienting retreat, leaving him hollow, as though something essential had been pulled loose inside him.

Sensation blurred.

Sound dulled.

He felt as though he were drifting through clouds with no ground beneath his feet. His eyes opened without permission. He found her gaze immediately. Blood trailed from the corner of her mouth, a thin crimson line slipping down her chin before staining the pale satin beneath them.

Valeria lifted a hand and cupped his cheek with a tenderness that felt almost obscene in its contrast. Her thumb rested just below his eye while the sharp brush of her nail grazed his brow.

She tilted her head.

Talen's breath came in shallow pants. His chest rose and fell too fast, his mouth parted as though he'd forgotten how to close it. He felt submerged in her gaze, drowning in the depthless gold of her eyes, unable to surface.

And before sense could return—before fear could catch up—he spoke. "When this ends, I will be the one who kills you."

Valeria stilled.

Then, she smiled. It was the sort of smile that acknowledged a worthy enemy. Her grip on his face tightened just enough to make her meaning clear, thumb brushing his jaw as though testing its strength.

"You dream of my death. How admirable." She leaned closer. "If you are going to dream of killing me, then you should understand this first. I have tasted warriors, princes, even queens. Most blood fades the moment it touches the tongue." Her gaze darkened. "But yours *lingers*."

Valeria's smile lingered a moment longer before she grew sober.

"I overheard your deal yesterday, with my mother. You *offered* yourself as blood-bound." Her crimson eyes lifted to meet his. "Why?"

The question caught Talen off guard more than her feeding had. He had expected mockery, cruelty.

But curiosity was not anticipated.

"I offered myself so your mother would spare my friends."

She stared at him for a moment. “As if their lives were worth more than yours.”

“Yes,” he said.

Valeria studied him a moment longer, her gaze drifting over his face.

“How curious,” she murmured.

But Talen felt something shift beneath it, and what unsettled him most was not the question itself.

It was the fact that she had asked it at all.

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Kaelin tore through the forest.

Roots clawed at her ankles; branches lashed her face. She vaulted slick trunks, ducked snapping limbs, and shouldered through brush without losing momentum.

Veylan's words lodged in her chest.

Your Kingdom needs you. Your people need you. Will you go to them?

Bursting from the dense wall of trees, Kaelin found a meadow opening before her, gently sloping toward Driftwood Bay.

Kaelin froze to assess the valley below.

The sky was smothered in smoke. Flames clawed upward from the outer edges of Driftwood Bay, devouring rooftops and collapsing walls, while the air carried a desperate tide of screams–threaded with the crack of splintering wood and the distant, unmistakable roar of destruction.

Kaelin hurtled across the meadow, driven by adrenaline. Ren's frantic voice had chimed in earlier, as they were fastening their armor.

Driftwood Bay has one of the largest orphanages in the region.

Children.

There was no time to wait for the others to ready horses or fasten armor.

She tore into the outskirts of town, barreling past those fleeing in the opposite direction. Families clutched one another. A little girl stood frozen in the road, screaming for her mother.

Kaelin did not stop. She couldn’t. Every instinct screamed at her to turn, to gather them, to *shield* them, but the weight of what waited ahead dragged her forward with merciless force.

She could not afford to slow down.

Overhead, Kaelin felt the dragon’s presence.

Just as she burst into the square, a roar split the sky above the Vaelaran soldiers who stood below with weapons already drawn. Stationed on the rooftops, soldiers scrambled with bows strained, their notched arrows trembling as they searched the smoke-choked darkness for a target too elusive to see, let alone hit.

“Miss!” one of them shouted as Kaelin approached. “You need to leave *now*!”

“Do we have eyes on it?” she asked, never breaking stride.

A younger soldier answered, “Last I saw, it was circling like a damn vulture.”

A hand closed around her shoulder, yanking her back. “Miss, you need to __”

Kaelin twisted to face him, and the sudden slam of recognition loosened the soldier's grip, catching the breath right in his throat. “Your Highness?” he whispered in disbelief.

The younger soldier’s sword dipped, eyes wide as if he were staring at a ghost. “You’re… alive?”

Kaelin’s gaze tracked the sky. She could hear the heavy beat of wings cutting through the air above them.

“Shield yourselves by any means,” she informed. “Dragonfire devours stone and flesh alike. To remain in the open is certain death. Do you hear me?”

The ground lurched before they could answer; the world seemed to buckle beneath their feet. A large shadow swept overhead, and the dragon landed atop the Salt Keep across the cobblestone street.

“Archers, loose!” Arrows sliced through smoke and flame.

They struck true.

And did nothing.

The dragon’s scales turned the volley aside as if the shafts were rain, splintering and skittering harmlessly across its silver hide. Firelight revealed its full enormity then—sleek and monstrous, silver shot through

with veins of blue that pulsed beneath its scales. Its eyes burned the same color–bright and cold.

And knowing.

It lifted its head, long neck arching as it looked down upon them, one by one.

Then it unfurled its wings.

The roar that followed tore through the square like a physical blow. Kaelin's hearing vanished in an instant, the sound replaced by a ringing screech as the air itself seemed to rupture.

Still, more arrows flew, and yet more shattered uselessly against the beast's scales.

Kaelin met the dragon's gaze. For a heartbeat, the world narrowed to that single point of connection. Its eyes locked onto hers, as if it were considering her.

Then its jaws parted.

"Down, all of you!" she screamed and hurled herself before the last word left her mouth.

Brilliant, blinding light bloomed in the dragon's maw before fire exploded outward.

Kaelin dove, heat tearing at her back as she hit the cobblestones and rolled hard. She seized the nearest soldier by the shoulder and dragged him into the mouth of an alley just as the inferno tore through the square.

Devouring everything in its path.

The stone where she had stood moments before glowed white-hot. Screams cut short. Silence rushed in, broken only by crackling flames and the distant collapse of ruined stone.

A quick assessment showed that only a handful of soldiers had survived. The two Kaelin had spoken to earlier were gone, with only blackened shapes burned into the cobblestone where they had stood.

"I… I can't believe it," a soldier croaked behind Kaelin, his hands trembling as he fumbled to force his dented helmet back into place. "The legends are true. Dragons are real."

"How do we defeat it?" a female soldier demanded. Her knuckles were white around the hilt of her sword. "Nothing pierces those scales!"

Kaelin's gaze swept across the ruin with deliberate calculation. She scanned the fractured skyline, past shattered towers and smoking rooftops, searching… measuring… choosing.

There.

The lighthouse rose through the haze like a spear of pale stone, its height untouched by the worst of the destruction.

The only vantage that mattered.

“Your Highness, where are you going?” the youngest soldier asked, his voice barely more than a whisper. He had not stopped shaking since the dragon’s shadow passed over them.

Kaelin regarded him with a cool glance. “See that the people are safely away from here.”

“Who will go with you?”

“I’ll go myself.”

She froze. Behind her, three voices rose at once—not loud, but steady and perfectly aligned. They trembled, but they did not falter.

“One will, one crown, one house—House Vaelaran!”

Not since her kingdom's last grueling conflict with the orcs had Kaelin heard those words uttered—a desperate battlecry born of great difficulty.

Kaelin let the weight of their faith settle over her like armor. Then she ran into the smoke, into the ruin, straight toward the lighthouse where a legend had fallen into flame and fury.

So long as she drew breath, no beast of this world or the next would *ever* claim her people.

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Talen paced, unable to calm his racing thoughts.

He couldn’t stop seeing her face. A curse burned under his breath. He dragged a hand through his hair, jaw clenched hard enough to ache. And gods help him, his body betrayed him–the heat in his blood, the unmistakable pull low in his abdomen, the growing strain against his trousers.

Disgust surged through him.

“Stop,” he muttered to himself, voice rough. “Think of anything else. *Anything*.”

He forced his thoughts away from *her*, grasping instead for a memory that wasn’t poison: sunlight on warm stone corridors and laughter echoing beneath vaulted ceilings. He could almost feel Kaelin yanking his sleeve as she darted around a pillar, whispering that he was too slow before vanishing into the shadows. They had played hide-and-seek alone in those palace halls, isolated because the other younglings kept their distance, wary of the blood that ran in their veins.

Afraid of *them*–his power to slip into minds and twist thought like thread, and Kaelin’s power to seize a body and command it like a puppet. Even as children, they had been stories other children were warned about.

Yet, even though they had few friends as younglings, they always had each other.

As the memory steadied him, the frantic hammering in his chest slowed, and his restless pacing faltered. He slid slowly down the wall until the chill of the stone seeped through his clothes and into his bones, where he drew his knees to his chest and rested his forearms over them.

“You aren’t the only one, mate.”

The baritone voice came from the cell across the corridor.

Talen’s head snapped up. The darkness in the chamber was thick; he couldn’t make out so much as a silhouette. But he heard the slow, dragging jingle of chains shifting.

“When they feed, it does something to you. Humans go mad quickly–their minds snap like twigs. For fae, it may take longer.”

“How long…” Talen’s voice came out rough, unused. He cleared his throat. “How long have you been here?”

“Too long. The years have bled together.”

Talen hesitated, his fingers tightening where they rested against his knees. The question perched at the edge of his tongue. “Are you also a…” The word refused to come.

Across the cell, the voice spared him the effort. “Blood-bound? No. I’m a *feeder*.”

Talen frowned, mind rifling through memory the way one might turn pages too quickly in search of a forgotten passage. Nothing. He had never encountered the word before.

“We’re just blood cattle. We don’t belong to anyone, and we certainly didn't offer ourselves up or choose this. Any one of those blood-sucking monsters can just request us whenever they please.”

Talen’s jaw tightened.

A feeder.

What a vile, wretched thing to call a person.

For a long moment, Talen said nothing, not because he had nothing to say, but because too many thoughts surged through his mind at once. Anger. Revulsion. Pity.

Finally, Talen said quieter, “That is cruel.”

The chains stilled.

Talen leaned forward, peering into the dark as if he could will his eyes to pierce it. “What’s your name?”

“Piotrek. What about you?”

“Talen.”

They didn't exchange full names. In the outside world, a name carried power, family lineage, and expectation; a name could open gates or start wars. But here, titles were just wasted breath in the dark, and pedigree meant less than dust.

Here, only blood held value–blood to be taken, blood to be bartered, and blood to be drained slowly enough to keep a body breathing. Everything else had been stripped away the moment the doors closed behind them.

The silence that followed pressed in, thick. Somewhere deep in the corridors, water dripped in a slow, relentless rhythm.

Talen said nothing more. Neither did Piotrek.

At length, the weight of exhaustion dragged at Talen’s bones. His head tipped back against the wall. The darkness above him was absolute, like staring into the inside of a grave.

His breathing slowed. The tension left his shoulders. Thoughts dulled. Edges softened. Even the dread curled somewhere deep in his gut lost its teeth.

Sleep crept over him gently, a tide pulling him under.



Every afternoon, guards came to get him. Without speaking, they led him up through winding stone hallways until he finally reached the outside meadow. It was always the same hour, always the same pale stretch of sky, and always the same allotted sliver of freedom. For one hour, they let him walk.

After so long underground, the sunlight felt painfully bright and warm, but he still tilted his face up to drink it in. The grass brushed his boots, and the breeze smelled of wildflowers and earth instead of damp stone. Whenever birds flew overhead, he stared up at them, his chest tightening at the sight of their wings.

The hour always ended far too soon, where he was led back down, back into the bowels of the castle. Food usually awaited him when he returned, if it could be called that. The trays were always pristine, the portions measured, and the presentation was almost elegant.

The taste was another matter.

The first bite was always wrong, the spices sharp and bitter. Heat burned his throat and stomach like hot coals. He wanted to spit it out, but hunger forced him to swallow.

Perhaps vampyres never tasted the food they served.

Perhaps they simply did not care.

He stayed in the darkness of his cell until the thrall arrived to take him to Valeria.

He rarely spent his evenings alone. More often, he was brought to the grand dining hall, where beautiful music from violins and harps drifted through the air—a sound that felt almost cruel in a place like this.

Vampyres mingled in clusters of silk and jewels, their laughter soft and elegant. Goblets glimmered in their hands, dark liquid catching the light when they tilted them to their lips. Every so often, new feeders arrived, ranging from all forms of life–humans, fae, orcs, and even druids were brought in with chained wrists. They were lined up just like livestock.

The most esteemed vampyres chose first.

What he noticed instead was that Valeria never participated. While others selected their prey with idle amusement, she remained seated beside her mother. She spoke only to a small circle of vampyres, seemingly uninterested in the frenzy around them.

Even in a room full of predators, it was obvious where the true hierarchy lay. Carmilla sat at its peak like a crowned spider at the center of her web.

And Valeria sat just below.

Talen had quickly learned to blend in; the less attention he drew, the better. But while his body played the part of submission, his ears strained constantly, catching fragments of conversation drifting through the hall.

Once or twice, someone remarked upon him—the fallen fae prince reduced to a *blood-bound*. The novelty earned a few amused glances at first, a few murmured jests. But fascination faded quickly in a court that thrived on newer cruelties, and soon, they stopped looking his way.

Exactly as he wanted.

It reminded him bitterly of Pyraelia–of glittering balls and polished floors and nobles circling each other with sharp smiles and sharper intentions. All those conversations layered with hidden meaning. Alliances forged in laughter, and betrayals whispered behind glances. The games were the same here.

So, Talen listened, but not to everyone.

To Carmilla.

Because it became frighteningly, unmistakably clear that the Matroness was obsessed with The Prophecy. Again and again, her voice returned to the same subject, yet for all her hunger for answers, frustration threaded her tone more each night.

No one in her court could read the book; its language didn't match any known to exist in the world that they knew of.

And that, more than anything else, seemed to gnaw at Carmilla.

Carmilla’s moods had become a spectacle unto themselves. Some nights she erupted over the most trivial thing–crystal goblets shattering against the floor, courtiers falling silent mid-sentence. A feeder would be dragged forward, trembling, and before anyone could look away, her hand would close around their throat and—

Talen lowered his gaze before the end.

Other nights, Carmilla was cool, soft-spoken, and smiling. Those nights, the court laughed more loudly, because no one could tell what might displease her.

And when Carmilla was displeased in silence, someone *always* paid for it.

He watched, he listened, and he learned.

And what he learned most was this: Despite standing just beneath Carmilla in rank, Valeria carried no visible weight here. She did not issue commands. She did not sway decisions. She did not interrupt when others spoke over her.

She was simply… present.

A princess with no throne in her own court.

It didn’t make sense. True power left signs in a person's posture, voice, or how others reacted to them. But Valeria, for all her elegance, moved through the court like a shadow. People were afraid to step on her, but no one actually obeyed her.

That night, the door to her chambers closed behind him. Talen’s gaze lifted to her. He had been watching her closely these past days. Weeks, perhaps. Time blurred in this place. But the more he observed, the more the question sharpened.

How could a princess hold no authority?

She looked at him, then.

“Fae prince.”

Unlike when the other vampyres sneered his title, there was no mockery to her tone when she uttered it. Just cool recognition. Out there, his title had meant something.

Here, he was nothing.

Talen sank to his knees. His eyes moved over her openly, drinking her in with shameless appreciation—the smooth silk of her skin, the graceful line of her throat, the curve of her waist. His pulse had already begun to quicken, treacherous thing that it was. Anticipation coiled low in his body, heat and danger braided together until he could not tell where one ended and the other began.

Gods, she was breathtaking.

She kneeled in front of him. When she leaned in, her nose brushed his shoulder in a slow, curious nuzzle.

Her lips parted, and Talen spoke.

“I find it curious how powerless you are here.”

Valeria stilled. Slowly, her eyes met his.

Talen tilted his head, deliberately baring his throat. It wasn't an act of submission, but a dare for her to go ahead and strike. He didn't flinch, knowing she was going to listen to him, anyway.

“You hold no authority,” he murmured. “You let your mother rule everything.”

Cool fingers wrapped around his throat, tracking the steady beat of his pulse. Her thumb softly brushed the hollow of his jaw.

The contact was almost gentle.

Almost.

She tilted his chin upward, forcing his head back until he had no choice but to look up at her fully.

Submission, the gesture said.

Talen did not resist.

But his lips curved–just the faintest suggestion of amusement pulling at one corner of his mouth. His eyes didn’t leave her face. And very deliberately, they dropped to her lips.

“Interesting. You are not afraid of me,” she observed. “That makes you very foolish, fae prince.”

“Foolish?” He purred. He let his throat relax against her grip, his eyes locked onto hers with absolute certainty. “Perhaps. Or maybe I just know that for all your power, you’re curious.” His eyes lingered on her lips again,

unashamed. “I’ve been enjoying you. I do have a particular talent for making whoever is in my arms feel good. Would you like a demonstration?”

Valeria’s expression remained composed, but her body betrayed her. The shift was subtle enough that anyone else might have missed it.

Talen did not.

Her pupils widened first, the dark swallowing the violet of her irises until they looked almost black. Hunger did that. Interest did that. *Want* did that.

Ah.

The realization slid through him like warm silk. Her knees pressed together—not enough to be obvious but enough to be telling. Talen felt his pulse kick once against her palm, as if greeting her.

So the untouchable vampyre princess was not made entirely of frost and silence, after all.

Gods, she was stunning like this.

So alive.

His gaze flicked once more to her mouth. *Interesting*, she had called him.

No.

The word belonged to *her* now.

A flicker of resolve crossed her face, as though whatever war raged inside her had reached its breaking point. The hunger in her eyes sharpened. Her hand tightened around his throat as she surged forward, and her fangs sank into his skin.

Pain sparked.

Then—

Euphoria detonated through Talen’s body like lightning striking marrow. It rushed through his veins in a molten wave, unraveling thought, unraveling tension, unraveling *him*. His breath caught, chest shuddering once as sensation crashed over him, overwhelming and intoxicating and impossible to resist.

The world narrowed to the feel of her mouth against his neck, the pull of her feeding, the electric thrum of his pulse answering hers. His fingers flexed against the stone at his sides, grounding himself in the last fragment of clarity he possessed.

Because even as pleasure blurred the edges of his mind, one thought remained sharp.

I do not know the way yet…

Darkness lapped at the edges of his vision.
…but she is the door.

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Ren ran straight through the fire.

A toddler clung to her against her chest, small arms hooked around Ren's neck. The world was nothing but blistering heat and screaming. Buildings burned on all sides as a desperate tide of people fled in every direction—abandoning everything that could not run.

Above them, the dragon swept low overhead. Ren threw it a glare over her shoulder, lips peeling back in a feral snarl.

Bastard.

The child's screams drew Ren's attention back. Ren hoisted the bundle in her arms as she sprinted, making a beeline for the forested edge of Driftwood Bay, just outside the main gate in the east.

Ren burst through the tree line. The air here was clearer.

"Hey," Ren shifted the girl gently so she could see her face. "You have been so brave. I need you to be brave for just a little longer, alright? But I need your eyes. Look around for me–do you see your momma or papa?"

The girl silenced at hearing Ren's voice. Ren took the toddler's tiny hand in her own and squeezed.

Shouting and crying echoed nearby, but Ren held the child's gaze like it was the only thing keeping the world steady.

The girl sniffled. "Mama?" she whispered.

Ren's expression softened. "Yes, your—"

"Sara!"

A woman ran out from the smoke, her face streaked with soot and tears. She snatched the child from Ren's arms, crushing her to her chest and sobbing.

"Oh, my baby! My baby—thank the gods, thank the gods—"

Ren watched them as the girl's cries dissolved into hiccupping relief against her mother's shoulder.

Safe. Good.

Ren's face hardened as she turned back toward Driftwood Bay, where a geyser of flames shot into the sky, feeding the smoke. Above it all, a dragon circled.

A cruel beast surveying its ruin.

Ren drew her sword. She had run back and forth into the fire all night, rescuing anyone she could. Looking back at the quiet evacuation line, she knew most of them were finally safe. Her grip tightened on the hilt, knuckles whitening.

Good. Because that meant she could stop running.

Her gaze locked onto the circling beast.

And this time, she stepped toward it.

"Alright," Ren muttered, eyes blazing bright as the fires behind her. "Now, you deal with *me*."

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The dragon circled Driftwood Bay.

Its vast wings carved through the smoke, blotting out the stars as it wheeled above the burning town. Every pass the beast made was measured, as if it savored the spectacle of ruin it had authored. Then it landed atop a watchtower and unleashed a torrent of fire.

High above the carnage, Kaelin stood atop the lighthouse, the lone border between the flames and the black expanse of the northern sea. Wind whipped her hair across her face, carrying with it salt spray from the crashing waves below, a sound that might have been soothing, might have been beautiful, if not for the screams carried on the same air.

Her people's screams.

Her violet eyes tracked the dragon's path through the sky. Her magic surged outward, stretching toward the beast in a searching sweep where it slammed into a wall dense as mountain stone. The dragon's mental shield pressed back against her probing power with brutal force.

A barrier forged over centuries of existence.

This beast was nothing like the creatures she had practiced on for only a few weeks. Its mind was older, stronger.

But as the screams of her people echoed from below, she braced herself. Failure was *not* an option.

"Your Highness," Lucan stepped onto the slanted roof beside her. His bow was already drawn, an arrow nocked. "You are not alone in this fight."

Kaelin braced her boots against the slick shingles, finally tearing her violet gaze away from the sky to meet his eyes with fierce resolve.

“Lucan, I’m going to bring this beast down. And when I do… I need you to destroy it.”

They both knew steel could not pierce those scales. Lucan nodded, anyway. They would find a way to defeat the dragon.

Because they had to.

But for now, the upper hand belonged to the beast. When an enemy has the sky, it is at a great advantage—and from high above, the dragon ruled the battlefield.

Above them, the dragon dove again, its pattern evident–strike, withdraw, circle, and then strike again. It never lingered long enough for retaliation, never descended twice in the same place.

Kaelin’s eyes narrowed.

I see you.

Her magic lashed outward again. This time, it *struck*. Power shot from her mind like an arrow loosed from a war bow and slammed into the dragon’s defenses. The beast shrieked, a piercing, furious sound that rattled the lighthouse exterior and sent a tremor through the air.

And Kaelin seized the edge of its mental barrier and ripped.

Pain detonated behind her eyes. Blood spilled from her nose, streaking down her lip, dripping onto the cracked tiles beneath her boots. A sudden gust of wind slammed into her like a battering ram, nearly wrenching her balance from her feet. Her hand shot out, gripping a broken roof beam to steady herself.

Still, she held.

Still, she pushed.

Never again.

The words burned through her mind like a vow carved into bone. Never again would she stand helpless while her people suffered. Her magic drove forward tearing at the dragon’s defenses with relentless, merciless force.

And then came a small *crack*. But it was enough. The moment Kaelin’s consciousness pierced the dragon’s mind, the impact hit her like a physical blow.

Rage. Ruin.

The dragon’s thoughts were a roaring inferno of wrath so vast it nearly drowned Kaelin in its wake. This was no predator hunting prey, no beast

feeding to survive–this was a force of annihilation given flesh.

Pierced by her magic, the dragon ignored the town below and flew straight for her.

Kaelin's eyes flashed.

Nice try.

She drove her magic deeper. Her magic sliced into the dragon's mental defenses, prying apart the ancient shield layer by layer, brick by stubborn brick. Each strike sent a shock of pain ricocheting through her skull, blood spilling faster from her nose, streaking her lips, her chin.

Still, she tore.

You don't threaten my people and live to see another dawn.

But the dragon fought. His shield was stronger than any she had encountered.

Kaelin bared her teeth, and her magic plunged again–until there was nothing left.

And again.

And again.

Digging.

Ripping.

Breaking.

Beneath the relentless assault of her magic, the dragon's mental walls splintered. Its defenses crumbled, leaving the beast with nowhere left to hide.

Midair, the creature faltered. Its wings beat once, then twice, before the rhythm broke. The steady motion stuttered, fracturing the grace of its flight.

Down, Kaelin commanded.

The dragon fought her command, wings thrashing as it forced itself closer, closer, closer to the lighthouse.

To her.

Kaelin did not yield. Her vision blurred red. Her hands shook. Her pulse thundered.

"Down!" she bellowed, a low guttural sound tearing from her chest.

For her people, she would do anything.

"For. My. *People*."

And the dragon, with its once powerful wings, had its wing ligaments torn and crumbled to the ground.

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At first, Talen clung to time like a drowning male clutching driftwood, marking each day in the privacy of his mind and carving invisible tallies into the walls of his thoughts.

But the feedings blurred them. Time seeped. And with it, so did he.

His memories began to thin at the edges, details slipping loose like threads from worn cloth. Faces faded. Voices dulled. Places he once knew by heart became indistinct impressions.

Yet Valeria threaded through his mind like a second pulse.

When he walked the meadow, he felt phantom fingers at his throat. When he forced down the food that burned his stomach raw, he sensed her instead—the sharp velvet press of her fangs, the intoxicating rush that followed. Even in solitude, even in stillness, even when he tried to think of nothing at all, she was there.

“It’s poison,” Piotrek had told him. “Once you get a dose of it, you never go back.”

Talen finally got it. He dreamed of her so deeply that waking up felt like being kicked out of paradise. He would wake up gasping and exhausted, as if he’d been running toward her the whole time.

Movement dulled it. So during his hour outside, he jogged the meadow until his lungs burned. When locked inside his cell, he forced his body through relentless motion—push, rise, breathe, repeat—until sweat cooled

his skin and exhaustion dragged his thoughts into something resembling quiet.

It never lasted.

Now he knelt beside her again in the dining hall, hands resting loosely on his thighs. The picture of obedient stillness.

Behind them came soft laughter, and low, breathy sounds drifted from a lounging trio tangled in velvet cushions—two vampyres and a fae feeder caught between them. The noises crawled across Talen's nerves, setting his skull throbbing. Or perhaps that was from earlier, from the violent retching after another meal his body refused to accept.

Time was indeed slipping, and he was no closer to the artifact.

Carmilla never displayed it. She only spoke of it. She speculated aloud which Fae House would fall first when the prophecy came to fruition—House Vaelaran, of course, then House Thorawen. The entire continent of Lytherien would be the first to fall. Names were spoken with idle amusement, like pieces being removed from a board she already considered won.

And lately, she had been smiling more–not the brittle smiles that cracked under strain or the sharp ones that preceded bloodshed. They were sly, private smiles.

The look of someone who knew something nobody else did.

Talen watched her carefully because a creature like Carmilla did not grow content without reason. And whatever that reason was, it could not mean anything good.

The next evening, something had changed.

While low, golden candlelight still bathed the vaulted walls and music drifted like silk through the hall, the atmosphere had begun to hum. Goblets still gleamed in cold hands, but a shift had occurred–and even the courtiers felt it. Their voices grew softer, their smiles sharper, waiting for something to be unveiled.

At the head of the hall, Carmilla glowed.

She lounged upon her seat as though the throne itself had become too small to contain her delight, crimson lips curved, eyes bright with a feverish gleam that bordered on intoxication. True joy radiated from her in a way Talen had never seen before.

No, triumph.

"My court," she purred, "we have guests this evening."

Instinctively, Talen straightened. The great doors at the far end of the hall groaned open, sending the echo of heavy bootsteps cutting through the room. And then, he saw them: silver-threaded cloaks and polished armor. There were crests wrought in moonlight hues.

Sigils he recognized as intimately as his own pulse.

His breath caught.

House Vaelaran.

The emblem gleamed from breastplates and pauldrons alike — the mark of home, of crown, of everything that had once defined him. The sight of it struck like a blade sliding between his ribs, sharp and sudden and impossible to ignore.

They shouldn’t be here.

Yet they marched forward across the obsidian floor.

And at their center stood Sylven Draeth.

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When the dragon struck the earth, Brenna swore under her breath.

Running beside Ren, the orc woman gleamed in fitted silver armor, its thick pauldrons flaring from her broad shoulders. A crested helm framed her angular features, and in her grip, the massive longsword looked like an extension of her will. She moved with frightening speed–the weight of steel doing nothing to slow her stride.

She looked exactly what she was raised to be.

A proud daughter of battle.

“What the hell knocked it down?” Ren shouted.

“Not sure. But whatever did has my thanks. You don’t think your dragon friend could provide aid?”

Ren gritted her teeth. *No.* The frantic, echoing mental warning she’d received moments ago still vibrated in her chest. Fryphessyrth was trapped on the perimeter, pacing the tree line in a helpless rage.

Ren hadn’t even known dragons were capable of wielding magic, but the beast tearing through their town wasn't just a brute force—it was a weaver of wards and illusions.

According to Fryphessyrth, it had cast a magical barrier over Driftwood Bay and the surrounding forests–locking their ally out of the fight.

They were entirely on their own.

“Not this time, unfortunately,” Ren said aloud, tightening her grip on her blade. “The damn dragon casted a ward over the entire town. Fryphessyrth

can’t break through.”

“Dragons can use magic?”

“Apparently so.”

Shouts rose ahead. The closer they ran, the worse it became. Bodies lay scattered across the ground—soldiers, townsfolk, shapes Ren refused to study too closely.

The faithful of Lytherien believed that death was a lifting of the veil, where the majority of souls were guided upward to pass into the heavens, charting a peaceful eternity among the stars. Only the truly evil, those who dared transgress against the gods or their fellow kind, were reserved for below.

But looking at the slaughter, Ren found no comfort in the night sky.

If the underworld existed, this was its gate.

A cluster of soldiers appeared ahead, sprinting west. Ren and Brenna veered after them. Ren gripped the sword Brenna had given her. It was shorter and slimmer than the orc’s massive blade, but beautifully balanced.

And perfectly lethal.

“The beast is down!” someone shouted.

A roar answered.

They rounded the corner and saw the dragon had crashed into what had once been a home, its enormous body half-buried in splintered beams. The structure had collapsed around it like kindling. Blood streaked the beast’s jaws.

And its wings…

Brenna and Ren both swore under their breath at the same time.

The dragon’s wings were twisted, crumpled–the vast membranes sagged unnaturally, bone ridges bent at angles no living thing should hold. They did not appear to be pierced, and no arrows jutted from them.

They looked *crushed*–as if someone had simply closed a fist around them and squeezed.

Someone had *done* that. Somehow.

The dragon reared its massive head with a furious bellow, blood sloshing between its fangs as it snapped down on a nearby soldier who didn’t even have time to scream before the jaws closed. The beast’s tail lashed into a brutal sweep. Three soldiers were hurled through the air, armor clanging as they struck the ground.

Bringing the beast down was a victory, but a hollow one. The broken wings stripped the dragon of its greatest advantage—the absolute supremacy of the air—but even grounded, it was far from helpless. Ren stared at the beast, knowing they still had to survive its impenetrable scales, its massive teeth, and worst of all, the fire.

How do we kill it?

“Nice of you to join us,” Lucan called out from her left. He joined her side with his bow raised, an arrow already notched and half-drawn, his face tight with focus.

“Catch us up,” Ren said.

“Kaelin knocked the dragon out of the sky. Now we just have to finish the job.”

An involuntary smile tugged at the corner of Ren’s mouth, a sudden spark of warmth lighting up under her skin despite the smoke-choked air. A fierce, protective pride surged through her veins. *Kaelin did that?*

“Any bright ideas?” Ren asked.

Before Lucan could answer, a soldier charged from the flank with a battle cry, blade raised. The dragon’s head snapped toward him. Its jaws clamped down on the man’s legs with a sickening *crunch*. There was a scream, and then his body was in two places at once.

Ren flinched. Beside her, Brenna’s eyes narrowed as she studied the beast.

“Its scales are thick. We’re not piercing that with blades or arrows.”

Soldiers circled the dragon in widening arcs, shouting orders, loosing arrows that struck scale and skidded harmlessly away.

One charged.

Another fell.

Another charged.

Each one fell.

A blade glanced off the beast’s hide and snapped from its wielder’s grip. A spear shattered against its shoulder ridge. A shield crumpled like thin tin beneath a swipe of its claws.

“This isn’t working,” Ren snarled, voice sharp with urgency. “We need another idea.”

Lucan loosed an arrow. It struck the dragon’s neck and ricocheted uselessly into the dirt. “Agreed,” he muttered, nostrils flaring. “Any suggestions?”

Brenna circled slowly, studying the creature the way a butcher studied a carcass before choosing where to slice.

“Eyes, mouth, or belly,” she murmured. “Every beast has a weak spot. Even a dragon.”

Another scream split the air.

Ren’s head snapped toward the sound just in time to see a young soldier stumble forward, slipping in blood as he tried to retreat. The dragon’s head swung toward him, jaws opening, strings of red saliva stretching between its teeth.

Gods, he was just a boy.

Ren didn’t think; she *ran*.

Her boots pounded over rubble and bone and splintered timber as she lunged forward, grabbing the back of the soldier’s cuirass and yanking him hard. The dragon’s jaws snapped shut where he’d stood an instant before. Heat blasted over Ren’s back as she dragged the soldier with her, sprinting for the edge of the clearing. She shoved him toward the retreating line.

“Run, you fool. Don’t stop!”

He ran. Ren turned back just in time to see another soldier charge, his blade raised high. His armor didn’t quite fit. His stance was wrong. His swing would be too wide.

They weren’t dragon-slayers, legends, or heroes forged for this kind of battle. They were just townsmen—farmers who had traded their plows for spears, sons and brothers and fathers with families waiting anxiously. Yet they were also the kind of people who would throw themselves directly into the path of death if it meant saving those they loved.

They were desperate. And desperation made men charge monsters they could not possibly kill. It wasn’t cowardice or idiocy that drove them forward; it was love.

But love alone would not save them here.

The dragon’s head snapped toward the soldier, jaws parting, a furnace glow building deep in its throat. Ren lunged forward again.

But she was too late.

Fire blasted past where he’d been standing, heat scorching the air so violently it stole the breath from her lungs.

“Fall back!” Ren barked hoarsely to the soldiers behind her as she met the dragon’s gaze. “All of you, fall back!”

Ren spun, chest heaving, eyes blazing as she scanned the chaos—the circling soldiers, the fallen bodies, the dragon's thrashing bulk carving ruin into the earth. She could see it now with devastating clarity.

If they kept fighting like this, they'd only die faster.

Her jaw set.

Enough.

Amidst the panic, a plan clicked into place. It was reckless, dangerous, and it might get her killed.

But it *could* work.

She turned to Lucan and Brenna.

"We need everyone out."

Lucan frowned. "Out?"

"All of them. *Now*. I need this area clear."

Brenna's brow creased. "Ren—"

"If anyone's still here when I do this, they'll get caught in the crossfire. I need no one near me, or that fucker."

Lucan studied her face, and whatever he saw there made his expression tighten. "What are you planning?"

Ren didn't answer. Her eyes were locked on the dragon as it roared again. Her grip tightened on her sword until her knuckles whitened.

"Clear the field," she said, voice low and absolute. "That's all you need to know."

For a fraction of a second, nothing happened.

Then Brenna drew in a breath that filled her chest like a war horn being wound.

"FALL BACK!"

Her voice crashed across the battlefield like a battering ram, causing a few nearby soldiers to flinch and turn. Most, however, were too deep in the fray—too rattled, desperate, and deafened by the roar of fear and fury to heed anything but the raw instinct screaming at them to survive.

One man hurled a spear.

Another charged again.

"I said fall back!" Brenna bellowed, pointing toward the treeline. "That's an order, you thick-skulled fools!"

Still, they fought. Dread coiled low in Ren's gut. They weren't disobeying out of arrogance; they were disobeying because they were

terrified. They fought whatever was in front of them because stopping meant thinking, and thinking meant realizing they might die.

Another roar split the air. The dragon's tail lashed, slamming into the ground hard enough to knock two men off their feet. One didn't rise.

"Damn it," Brenna snarled.

"Stand down."

A smooth voice cut through the chaos.

The soldiers froze. Ren turned.

Kaelin loomed atop the fractured stone ridge overlooking the clearing, her silhouette carved against the burning sky. Blood traced a thin line from her nose, and her violet eyes blazed.

"That is not a request."

The dragon snarled, thrashing below, but even it seemed smaller with her standing there. Kaelin stepped forward, cloak snapping behind her like a banner in a storm.

"I am commanding you to fall back. That is an order from your sovereign."

Her gaze moved across the soldiers.

"Go find the wounded, guard the children, and stand where you are needed." Kaelin's eyes flashed, catching the firelight. "This creature is not your burden to bear." She lifted her chin. "It is ours."

For the first time, her gaze shifted, landing on Ren.

"We will finish this."

The dragon roared again, thrashing against its broken wings, jaws snapping at empty air as if it could taste their defiance.

Kaelin did not look at it. She was still looking at her soldiers. Her people. "That is your *queen's* command."

The effect was swift. One by one, then all at once, the soldiers began to retreat.

Ren rolled her shoulders, adjusting her grip on the sword, eyes dragging over Kaelin with open approval.

"Good," she muttered. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to share the glory. I wouldn't want anyone else stealing the best view."

But despite the chaos and the dragon roaring its defiance below, Ren looked over Kaelin's body, tracing the leather against Kaelin's legs and how the top hugged the generous curve of her thighs.

Kaelin’s violet eyes traced Ren from boots to brow, taking in every detail with the sharp focus of someone cataloging damage after battle—the blood streaked across Ren’s cheek that wasn’t hers, the way her chest rose and fell too fast beneath her armor, the faint tremor in her sword hand she was trying to hide.

The fae princess’ jaw tightened.

The world roared around them, but in that moment, Kaelin saw only *her*.

“Are you hurt?” the fae princess asked quietly.

Ren’s mouth curved, crooked and wild.

“Hell no, I’m just getting started.”

Ren stepped close enough that she knew Kaelin could see the fierce light burning in her eyes—the kind that only appeared when Ren was standing on the edge of violence. Ren tilted her head, gaze dragging over Kaelin in open challenge.

“Let’s go make that overgrown lizard regret its actions today, *Your Highness*.”

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Talen had endured humiliation and captivity with a composure.

He had knelt when ordered, lowered his gaze when required–even held his tongue when witnessing death.

But the moment he saw *him*, something inside Talen unraveled.

There, just across the hall, was the fae who had built a throne out of his people's graves.

Sylven Draeth.

Rage snapped through Talen. He bolted to his feet. A raw snarl tore from his throat as the world narrowed to a single point of red.

Him.

He lunged, but a blur slammed into him from the side. A vampyre thrall drove him into the floor, knocking the breath from his lungs. Cold marble scraped his cheek as a knee pinned his spine, wrenching his arms back until his wrists forced into angles they were never meant to take.

“You *traitor*!” Talen snarled as he fought the hold, muscles straining, tendons standing out along his neck. “You do not deserve to wear House Vaelaran sigils!”

“Restrain him,” Carmilla hissed, her lip curling in disdain. “This display is beneath us.”

The thrall obeyed without hesitation. Pressure increased. Bone protested.

Then—

Crack.

The sound was small, but the pain was excruciating. Agony exploded through Talen's arm. A strangled sound tore from him, his body jerking as pain flooded every nerve. His right hand went useless instantly, fingers spasming before falling slack with no strength left to command them. White-hot pulses shot up his arm, each heartbeat driving the pain deeper, sharper, brighter.

The thrall seized Talen's other wrist and bent sharply.

Talen sucked in a ragged breath, teeth bared. Sweat broke cold across his skin as instinct screamed at him what was coming.

Snap.

This one was louder.

The world flashed white. A groan broke from Talen's chest as he ground his teeth against the pain. His wrists lay limp and unresponsive, his hands suddenly feeling like they no longer belonged to him. Pain pulsed in waves, swallowing sound, sight, thought.

"How the mighty have fallen," Sylven's voice caressed the haze.

Talen didn't need to see his face to know the fae was smirking.

"It seems our fae prince has been reduced to *this*." Sylven gave a pause. "Had we not secured the crown when we did, this is precisely what House Vaelaran might have become. Shameful, really."

And through the agony, through the ringing in his ears and the fire in his bones, Talen lifted his head from the stone just enough to bare his teeth at him.

Blood hummed in Talen's ears. Pain still surged through his shattered wrists in vicious pulses. His hands lay useless against the stone, fingers slack. But his eyes burned up at Sylven through strands of hair, seething with hatred.

Talen dragged in a breath. "I certainly hope you aren't foolish enough to be negotiating with *him*."

A curious ripple moved through the court.

Talen's gaze never left Sylven.

"Because," Talen continued, "traitors rarely improve with age. He's already betrayed one House he swore loyalty to. I can't imagine you believe he'd hesitate to betray another."

Talen's eyes gleamed.

"So if you are making deals with him, I hope you're not expecting *loyalty* as part of the bargain."

A hairline fracture split Sylven's polished composure. His gaze sharpened, a muscle twitching in his jaw as Talen's words hit their mark. The smugness vanished, replaced by a flash of irritation.

Sylven shifted his attention, treating the broken prince like an unpleasant smudge on the floor. His face smoothed into a neutral mask as he turned toward Carmilla.

"I'm surprised you kept him alive."

Carmilla drifted closer, her gown whispering across the floor. Sylven inclined his head, kissing her knuckles with a perfect, practiced elegance that held no warmth.

"He is my daughter's blood-bound."

Sylven's brows lifted. "Blood-bound?" he echoed, and though his tone remained smooth, the word itself carried disdain. The corner of Sylven's mouth twitched. "Can he be bought?"

For the first time, Carmilla's smile faltered. "If she is willing to sell, perhaps."

A hush rippled outward through the hall. And then, Valeria stepped forward. She came to stand at Talen's side. Candlelight caught along the pale line of her throat, the curve of her cheek, the dark shine of her hair.

Sylven saw her, and his eyes widened enough to betray surprise–enough to reveal that he had not expected *her*. He lifted her hand to his lips.

"Well?" he asked, straightening. "I would be more than happy to take him off your hands. He possesses information I require, and I will take my time bleeding it out of him if it brings you pleasure."

Pleasure. The word burned through Talen's skull like acid. He knew the cruelty that lived beneath Sylven's polished exterior. If Sylven took him, death indeed would not come swiftly. Worse, Talen would be flayed for information until he gave every detail he knew of Kaelin, of their defenses, of their plans.

Carmilla tilted her head, her gaze shifting between Talen and Sylven.

"And what kind of information could a fae prince possibly provide to interest you so deeply?"

Sylven's expression hardened. "Talen is the prince of House Vaelaran. His sister, the princess heir, likely lives as well. So long as those siblings draw breath, there will always be a rebel force to contend with."

"We did see his sister, some time ago," Carmilla purred, unbothered. "When they first appeared in our lands."

Sylven’s eyes darkened. “So she *is* alive,” he murmured. He stepped closer to Carmilla, his gaze boring into hers. “Do you know where they went after that?”

“Unfortinutely, no. They vanished shortly after, and we haven't crossed paths since.”

Talen lifted his head against the fire in his arms, staring at Valeria. Her expression was marble. Still, he searched her face, desperate to find a crack in her armor of indifference.

“Then he remains with me,” Valeria’s smooth voice cut through the tension.

Sylven turned a sharp look on her, but Valeria raised her chin.

“You want to bleed him for information to stop a rebellion, but executing him or locking him in your dungeons will only turn him into a martyr for the rebels. A dead prince is a rallying cry. A captive prince held under our roof, however, is leverage. If his sister is rebuilding an army, she will come for him. We can keep him here and use him as bait. Let their folly rebellion bring itself right to our gates.”

Carmilla’s face lit up, a cruel, delighted smile spreading across her lips as she studied Valeria.

“I could not agree more,” Carmilla crooned, her voice dripping with satisfaction. “Yes, let them bring their foolish little rebellion straight to us, where we can vanquish them all at once. Besides, once the prophecy comes true, we will smite all rebellion across the lands. All of Lytherien will be ours, and then, of course, all of Aetheria.”

Carmilla clapped lightly, summoning servants to fill goblets and spread platters. The court turned its attention to seating Sylven and his soldiers.

Behind Talen, the vampyre thrall pinning him leaned closer. “If I release you and you so much as twitch the wrong way, I’ll snap your legs. Understood?”

Talen’s jaw tightened, teeth grinding against the pain still throbbing through both arms. “Got it,” he muttered.

The pressure lifted. Slowly, carefully, Talen rolled himself upright. Fire screamed through his wrists the moment he shifted, his hands hanging wrong at the ends of his arms. He risked a glance downward.

His fingers were turning blue.

Not good.

“Any chance of a healer?” Talen asked through his teeth.

The thrall sneered. “That depends entirely on Lady Valeria, *blood-bound*.”

Pain tore through Talen, but his rage burned hotter. He looked across the hall to where Sylven sat at Carmilla’s left, the two of them talking easily, as if discussing nothing more than wine. Valeria sat at Carmilla’s right. She lifted her goblet, sipping with languid grace.

And Sylven couldn’t stop looking at her.

The fae male’s attention kept drifting, his gaze snagging on Valeria. He watched her openly, interest gleaming in his eyes, hunger thinly veiled beneath politeness–the same way Sylven used to look at Kaelin when he thought no one noticed.

Except Talen noticed.

And Valeria did not return the attention. She didn’t acknowledge him beyond the barest civility. If anything, her indifference was absolute, which naturally only seemed to fascinate Sylven more.

A sudden, vicious urge surged through Talen. He wanted to rip Sylven’s eyes out.

Talen stilled.

The fury was something darker than anger–possessive in a way that made his stomach twist with confusion and disgust. Why should he care how Sylven looked at her?

He should *hate* her.

He *did* hate her.

She was the daughter of the monster who meant to destroy everything he had ever known. He should want her dead–should want to tear this entire cursed court apart and end the prophecy before it ever drew breath.

Yet his eyes returned to Sylven, watching and measuring him. Like a predator waiting for the right moment to strike.

He ripped his eyes from Sylven and Valeria, forcing his thoughts away from her suffocating pull. He stared at the far wall instead—focusing on the lifeless stone, on anything that wouldn't look back at him with those knowing eyes.

He needed distance.

He needed control.

This was a symptom of the blood bond, a sweet venom curling through his veins. It softened his edge, dulling his mind until he forgot who he was and exactly what she was.

Poison.

And poison burned, it lingered–it tried to root itself into flesh and bone. But, it faded. Once he got out of here, it would drain from him like fever leaving the body. He would forget her.

He had to.

A rigid stillness took him, his breath slow and deliberate as he locked the thought into place like armor around his mind. He would fight this. He would tear it out of himself if he had to. Because whatever this thing was growing inside his chest…

He refused to let it be the chain that finally broke him.

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“You’re going to use your dragonfire.”

Kaelin and Ren stood shoulder to shoulder at the ridge's edge. Below them, the dragon shifted. Though its legs were too badly injured to move, it pawed the ground, locking its gaze onto them and shaking its horned head as if daring them to approach and fight.

“I figured it’s worth a shot,” Ren deadpanned. Beneath her ribs, her magic stirred hot and restless.

Waiting for release.

Ren bared her teeth at the dragon. “I’m going to burn this bastard to a cinder.”

Kaelin didn’t respond immediately. The fae princess quietly studied her, measuring the promise behind her words.

“What’s the alternative?” Kaelin asked.

“I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“My magic is nearly spent. It will take time to replenish.”

“Is that how magic works?”

“It’s like an oil lamp,” Kaelin answered. “If you burn the wick too high, then the oil burns right up. Once it's dry, you have to refill it before you get any more light.”

Ren arched a brow. “Can you train yourself to make the fire last longer?”

“Yes, but it doesn't happen overnight. You have to stretch your limits a little bit every day until your body gets used to the strain.”

Ren clicked her tongue. “I expected something far more dramatic.”

Kaelin lifted her chin, affronted in that elegant, imperious way that always made Ren want to grin. “What else were you expecting?”

Ren gave a shrug. “I don’t know–a bit more flair, perhaps. If I’m going to pass out from magical exhaustion, I at least want it to sound cooler than a metaphor about an oil lamp.”

Kaelin’s eyes narrowed. “Flair doesn’t keep you alive when you empty yourself completely. The lamp does. If you burn through your reservoir, you go dark. It’s not poetic, Ren. It’s dangerous. Magic comes at a cost, and if you empty yourself in a single, desperate attack, you leave yourself defenseless the moment it’s over. Restraint is what keeps you alive for the next strike.”

Below them, the dragon let out a roar. Ren’s muscles tightened, every nerve sharpening, her attention snapping back to the threat.

She let out a low whistle. “Well, probably best we save this conversation for later.”

She shifted her stance, readying.

And froze.

Kaelin’s arm slid around her waist, and the fae princess’ fingers brushed stray strands of auburn hair from Ren’s brow, tucking them back with a tenderness that did not belong on a battlefield. Ren blinked, startled, as Kaelin leaned in and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“I’ll be right behind you,” Kaelin murmured.

Something fierce and warm unfurled in Ren’s chest. She turned, cupping Kaelin’s face between her hands, thumbs brushing her cheeks. Then she pulled the fae princess down just enough to press a firm, chaste kiss to the fae princess’ lips.

Gods, Ren could never tire of feeling Kaelin’s lips against hers.

But it was time.

Kaelin’s presence slipped from her side, retreating a few measured steps behind her. Though Ren could still feel her there, the air where she’d stood seemed colder without her.

Ren faced the dragon and coolly surveyed the dragon’s injuries. One wing hung at a sickening angle, its torn membrane crusted with black blood. Each labored breath hissed like a forge's bellows. Pain radiated from the creature in waves, visible in its tightly coiled spine and the restless twitch of its spined tail.

On foot, it was slow. Dragons were not built for pursuit without the sky beneath them. Their bodies were too long, their limbs too thick with muscle meant for launching, not running.

But even crippled, it was still a dragon.

Heat gathered beneath Ren's skin. Magic surged through her veins. It had been months since she'd let it rise without the careful walls she'd built to keep it caged.

The last time…

Greymoore.

The memory slammed into her with the force of a war drum–fire swallowing rooftops, stone splitting, screams swallowed by flame. Talen's voice echoing somewhere in the chaos. The very moment she'd lost control, and the world had paid for it.

It was a good thing everyone had evacuated.

Because she would not hold back now.

Ren opened her eyes, and light poured from them. Her irises blazed with molten gold and infernal white. The dragon saw it instantly, and froze. Its head lowered, nostrils flaring.

It was *scenting* her.

The dragon froze in recognition. Its lashing tail stilled mid-sway, and the tension in its shoulders shifted. A low sound rumbled from its throat. Its slit-pupiled eyes narrowed.

"Vortharax."

The dragon dipped its head, smoke curling from its nostrils as it watched her. Deep within her chest, Ren felt Vortharax's awareness. She felt the flicker of ancient memory pass through him.

They did know each other.

"*Vortharax the God Slayer,"* it rumbled. "*I do not wish to battle with you today.*"

Ren's lip curled.

"You think Vortharax is a threat? He is just smoke and shadow. *I* am the living flame standing right before you. I am endless, and you should be on your knees, begging me for mercy."

The dragon stilled as Ren prowled forward. Flame licked along her skin, beginning at her fingertips in thin ribbons of gold before racing up her arms, over her shoulders, and down her spine in a blazing mantle. The intense heat warped the air, making her silhouette shimmer like a mirage.

Her hair lifted in the rising current, strands igniting at the tips until she looked crowned in living embers.

“Your terror ends here.”

Power detonated.

Flame erupted from her body in a roaring inferno that devoured the space between her and the dragon in a single breath, as if she had been a vessel holding back a star and had finally shattered.

The dragon thrashed once, twice, its roar breaking into a shuddering, guttural bellow as the fire consumed it, searing through ancient hide, through muscle, through bone.

Ren did not stop.

She poured everything into it—all the fury, all the fear, all the power she had once been too afraid to claim. Fire obeyed her like a loyal beast, tightening, crushing, burning hotter, brighter, until the dragon’s shape collapsed inward beneath the blaze.

Until there was indeed nothing left to burn.



Magic roared through Ren’s veins like a blazing current that made her limitless, as though the earth itself had loosened its grip on her body. If she leapt now, she would tear through the sky like a comet and leave the heavens scorched in her wake.

Every nerve sang. Every breath tasted like lightning. The magic inside her thundered, a relentless rhythm that drowned out thought, drowned out reason, drowned out anything that was not the intoxicating rush of *more*.

She had never felt so alive– not in battle, not in victory.

Not even in love.

This was divinity clawing its way through her bones. Somewhere, distantly, someone was shouting her name–a voice she should have known, a voice that should have anchored her.

But she couldn’t hear it.

The roar of her magic devoured it whole.

The image flickered through her mind then—the one Kaelin had given her. The metaphor of magic as an oil lamp–finite and measured, now depleting with every breath she took. Ren felt that inside herself.

Her magic was draining. She could feel the hollowing pull in her core where power had once pooled deep and steady. But instead of fear, she felt hunger that rose up from somewhere ancient and merciless within her.

More.

She needed more.

She reached deeper than she ever had before, grasping for whatever remained at the bottom of that unseen vessel.

The glass strained.

Cracks splintered along its surface.

Still, she pulled.

Still, she demanded.

Still, she *burned*.

Somewhere, a voice screamed her name again. Ren didn’t stop.

The cracks spread. Light poured through them.

And then, the glass *shattered*.

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Inside Valeria’s bedchambers, Talen kneeled.

It had been several nights since Sylven’s arrival, and his wrists had been healed on the first night. He flexed his hands, curling his fingers. There were no sharp pains, no lingering throb of injury.

Someone had healed him while he slept.

Even though he woke to this realization, it continued to unsettle him more than the injury ever had. Talen had survived battlefields, ambushes, assassination attempts. He had trained himself to wake at the slightest shift of sound. Yet someone had touched him, mended him.

And he had not stirred.

His fingers curled again, slower this time, testing the strength in them, as if he expected phantom pain to return and accuse him of weakness. None came.

A gift, then.

Or a leash.

He could still hear the terrifying, smooth cadence of her voice when she’d told Sylven, “*If his sister is rebuilding an army, she will come for him. We can keep him here and use him as bait. Let their folly rebellion bring itself right to our gates.*”

Even though her dark plan had extended his life, it was a stark reminder of what a wicked creature Valeria truly was.

Talen lifted his gaze.

Valeria reclined upon her bed. With one leg draped over the other, bare foot dangling lazily above the floor, she watched him.

The blood bond stirred beneath his skin, a phantom chain coiling around his ribs. He hated the way his body recognized her before his mind allowed it and hated more that some traitorous part of him felt steadier simply being within her presence.

Valeria made no move to speak, yet her gaze pinned him where he stood. The realization came slowly.

She wanted gratitude.

The thought nearly dragged a laugh from Talen's throat. Gratitude, from *him*? She might as well demand the moon to kneel.

He gave her nothing–not a word, not a shift, hell, not even a flicker of irritation. Talen simply held her stare with equal stillness, his expression neutral. It was the only defiance he could offer without testing the invisible leash of the blood bond.

Most nights, he would already be at her bedside, kneeling, head bowed. Most nights, he would tilt his throat toward her, exposing the vulnerable column of his neck so her fangs could sink in and claim what she believed was hers by right.

But tonight, she only watched.

And then he saw the smallest tick at the corner of her mouth, as though amused.

A soft knock sounded at the chamber door behind him. Talen did not turn, and his attention remained fixed on her.

"Come in."

The door creaked open. Only then did Talen glance over his shoulder.

A female vampyre stood on the threshold.

Blond hair fell in pale strands across a face sculpted with cruel precision —high cheekbones, hollowed planes, eyes like polished glass. She was tall and willowy.

Beautiful, most would call her.

The moment their gazes met, instinct detonated through Talen's body. His shoulders locked. His spine went rigid. Breath stalled halfway into his lungs as something feral rose beneath his skin. Power coiled along his limbs, begging release. His fingers twitched, already imagining the sensation of lunging forward, slamming the door shut, driving the stranger back with bared teeth and a warning snarl.

Territory.

Threat.

Intruder.

Every instinct he possessed screamed it.

“Elizabeth,” Valeria murmured. “I didn't expect you until tomorrow. To what do I owe the pleasure of an early arrival?”



Valeria beckoned Elizabeth closer.

The blond vampyre approached her. She wore a crimson dress that dipped low, boldly baring her cleavage. Valeria let her gaze drift down, drinking her in and openly admiring the lush curve of her hips and chest. They had shared many nights just like this over the centuries. In the bedroom, Valeria drew no lines between men and women—she simply desired a consenting partner.

And Elizabeth had always been an exquisite distraction.

When was the last time she lay with another? It had been years, perhaps. Decades, even. Time blurred during her confinement. She could not remember the last time she had been held intimately without expectation. The absence of it pressed in on her now.

And stars, she wanted the intoxicating weight of hands roaming her skin, the frantic heat of a lover's breath, and the fierce validation of being looked upon with rabid, unapologetic desire. For too long, she had been a symbol, a prisoner, a ruler—anything but a creature capable of *feeling*. Watching the slow sway of Elizabeth's hips, a primal ache flared to life deep in Valeria's core.

She wanted to be consumed, to consume in return, and to lose herself in a touch that didn't demand an empire.

This would mean nothing to her.

It would mean nothing to Elizabeth.

When Valeria had first stepped from her tomb, she had been achingly, violently thirsty–the kind of thirst that clawed through bone and marrow and demanded blood and nothing less. It had consumed her then, driven her, defined her.

But this was something else entirely.

This hunger whispered and slipped beneath her armor in ways she did not know how to defend against. It was not a need she could simply sate and be done with.

Closing the distance between them, Elizabeth stepped up to the edge of the bed, her movements fluid and agonizingly slow. She didn't say a word; she didn't need to. Holding Valeria’s gaze, Elizabeth slid a single crimson strap down her arm, letting the sleeve slip off her shoulder. The smooth expanse of pale skin was bared to the room, an open, deliberate invitation.

Valeria’s hand glided up Elizabeth’s arm to toy with her other sleeve, before pulling it over her soft skin. She caught Elizabeth’s gaze, holding it as she brought one of the blonde’s fingers to her lips, dragging it slowly between them before sucking it into her mouth.

Elizabeth groaned. “*Stars*, I want to feel your mouth on me, your body writhing beneath mine...”

She trailed off with a hiss as Valeria traced along her hardened nipples with her other finger. “Then undress for me. I want to see every inch of you.”

Elizabeth didn't need to be told twice. Keeping her gaze locked on Valeria, she slid the other sleeve down her arms. With a subtle shimmy, the crimson fabric gave way to gravity, pooling around her ankles on the cold marble floor. She stood fully bared, her curves catching the low light of the chamber.

Beautiful and entirely unashamed.

Valeria's breath caught, the hunger inside her clawing to the surface. Standing up from the bed, she began to discard her own garments. She shed the layers that felt like armor, letting them drop until nothing stood between her skin and the cool air of the room.

When Valeria climbed back onto the mattress, she leaned back against the plush pillows, parting her thighs.

Elizabeth crawled over the sheets, and her eyes darkened with desire as she settled between Valeria’s knees. Slowly, she leaned down, her warm breath fanning across Valeria's inner thighs before her lips finally made contact. Valeria let out a sharp gasp, her fingers tangling tightly in the sheets as Elizabeth began to feed on her, driving away the decades of isolation with every stroke of her tongue.

The whole while, Valeria could feel Talen’s eyes on her, burning into her flesh. As Elizabeth lapped at her, Valeria realized she had *forgotten* about

the fae prince’s presence.

The fae prince was still kneeling by the threshold, a silent, rigid statue of coiled fury and forced submission. The sheer audacity of her own lapse in judgment sent a thrill of dangerous adrenaline through Valeria’s veins. She was completely exposed, entirely vulnerable, and yet the knowledge that he was openly watching her pleasure only added a wicked, intoxicating layer to the heat pooling between her thighs.

She forced her expression back into something smooth, something untouchable. But beneath it, something had shifted, unsettled by the quiet intensity of a certain fae prince’s attention.

Because Elizabeth’s hunger was simple, predictable.

Talen’s was not.

Valeria turned her head to meet Talen’s gaze, which looked several shades darker. There was no mistaking it now. Whatever simmered in him had risen to the surface. It coiled in the air between them, far more potent than anything Elizabeth’s presence stirred.

Valeria tore her gaze and spoke sharply in her native tongue, her voice cutting through the chamber.

The command was immediate. The doors swung open, and two thralls entered. Valeria did not acknowledge him as they seized him, as they began to drag him toward the door.

But she felt the tension in the room tighten as he was pulled away, even when the door closed shut.

“By the night, you taste so sweet on my tongue,” Elizabeth murmured as soon as they were gone.

Elizabeth paused her assault down below just long enough to crawl further up Valeria’s body, where she dragged her tongue up the sensitive skin of Valeria's stomach, until she reached her chest. Elizabeth took one hardened nipple into her mouth, lapping and sucking at it with a fierce rhythm.

Valeria threw her head back against the pillows. The twin sensations of Elizabeth’s mouth on her breast and the lingering memory of Talen’s burning gaze sent her senses into overload.

Before Valeria could fully catch her breath, Elizabeth slid a hand back down between her thighs where she found Valeria dripping wet. Elizabeth plunged two fingers inside her, using her thumb to circle and apply an agonizingly perfect pressure against her clit.

The pace was relentless.

Elizabeth pumped her fingers deep inside her while her mouth continued to tease and bite at Valeria's breasts.

Valeria arched off the mattress, her fingers clawing frantically into Elizabeth’s shoulders. The decades of loneliness, the stifling walls of her confinement, and the sheer desperation for touch all narrowed down to this single, explosive point.

The tension snapped.

A shattering orgasm washed over Valeria, forcing a loud, uninhibited cry from her throat as her walls clamped down tight around Elizabeth's fingers, her body trembling in the aftermath of the release.

By the stars, indeed.



Valeria lay back in the water, her dark hair damp against her shoulders. As she rested her head on the smooth rim, the heat soaked into her limbs and dissolved the last of her tension.

For once, she felt sated.

The sensation was rare enough that she lingered in it, eyes closed as droplets traced slow paths down her skin. The quiet lapped at her just as gently as the water, wrapping around her in a way nothing else ever truly had.

And yet it was not enough.

It never was because it never could be.

Vampyres were greedy creatures by nature. They indulged in excess—blood, pleasure, sensation—drowning themselves in it as though they might one day fill the hollow within their chests, as though enough indulgence might make them feel whole again.

It never did.

It only sharpened the longing to feel *alive*.

There were fleeting moments when Valeria could almost see herself from the outside–see what she was. The endless cycle of taking, of feeding, of seeking something she could not name through bodies and blood alike.

And in those moments, she felt despicable.

Her fingers drifted through the water, watching the ripples distort her reflection.

But what choice did she have? She had been born this way, bound to a hunger that would never truly leave her. Blood was survival. It coursed through her existence just as surely as it had once flowed through her veins when she'd been something else.

To deny it would be to deny herself.

The faint creak of the chamber doors broke the silence, followed by the quiet *thud* of the thralls.

And between them, Talen.

They guided him inside with practiced ease, releasing him only once he stood within the threshold. He was no longer restrained, but the implication lingered all the same.

Valeria's gaze slid toward him at last, drinking him in.

The fae prince believed himself subtle. Believed the shifts in his gaze went unnoticed. Believed the tightening of his jaw, the careful stillness of his hands, the measured cadence of his breath concealed what simmered beneath.

Valeria saw the way his eyes tracked her even when he feigned disinterest. Saw how, over the past days, the shadows within those forest-green eyes had deepened with desire. She noticed how his fingers braced ever so slightly against the mattress when she bent to his throat… how the tendons along his wrists flexed when her fangs pierced his skin… how his breath would hitch once—only once—before he mastered himself again.

He wanted to touch her.

It was unsurprising. Most creatures succumbed to the effects of the feeding. It was not merely hunger being satisfied; it was something far more insidious. The rush of it, the heavy pull, the way it blurred the line between pain and pleasure until there was nothing left but sensation.

That was what made her kind so dangerous. One could be drained to the brink of ruin and still feel as though they had been given something divine.

Yet he never did touch her. That restraint of his was a marvel–a rare, exquisite thing. Most creatures who fell beneath a vampyre's influence dissolved into trembling want, all logical thoughts be damned. But Talen held himself together through sheer will, every muscle locked in disciplined control even as his pulse thundered against her lips.

Valeria had taken lovers, but she had never taken a blood-bound. Blood bounds were meant to offer their blood to their master. But she knew the truth of why Talen had submitted to the bond. He hadn't *chosen* her; he had offered himself to save his friends.

There was no desire in him, only desperation.

Valeria wanted no part in a forced intimacy. She would never seek his touch, nor would she ever allow him into her bed, because she knew it would never truly be with his consent. To take him under those conditions would be cruel.

Yet, he was her first blood-bound, and she had never expected to feel any pull toward him. She had not anticipated the sensation of it. The bond came as a low, steady hum beneath her ribs that sharpened whenever he entered a room. When he stood near, she felt it like a second heartbeat syncing to her own. When he left, the absence was noticeable–an irritating quiet where something should have been.

She found herself attuned to him in ways she did not understand, aware of him even when her back was turned, aware of him even when walls separated them, aware of him even when he was nowhere in sight and yet still there.

More than once, she had caught her thoughts drifting toward him unbidden, toward the strength in those hands, toward the elegance in the way he moved, toward the sharp intelligence in his eyes, the defiance he wore like armor, the lethal grace coiled beneath his skin.

He was a finely crafted weapon given fae form, all sharp lines and controlled violence and simmering power. And his blood…

By the night.

His blood was sweeter than any she had tasted in centuries, laced with something ancient and wild that lingered on her tongue long after she'd withdrawn her fangs.

When he had stepped forward, sacrificing himself for his companions, Valeria had only accepted his offering that night because she had given her word to his companions that she would try not to harm them–a promise made out of amusement more than mercy.

The memory still intrigued her.

Creatures rarely chose suffering when escape was possible. Rarer still when they possessed the power to fight instead. Yet Talen had knelt before

her of his own will, chin lifted, eyes steady, as if daring her to test the depth of his resolve.

She had accepted his blood out of curiosity. She kept him bound for the same reason. Valeria glanced at him now with quiet fascination. The fae prince was many things.

But above all, he was interesting.

"Leave us."

The thralls obeyed, the doors closing behind them.



She was a fierce, vicious creature. Arguably the most dangerous one Talen had ever encountered. And yet, he was beginning to understand her. Each passing day peeled back another layer, another truth.

Today more than any other.

Vampyres believed themselves superior above other creatures. But Talen saw through it now. They were creatures of gluttony; they took because they could. They indulged because nothing stopped them. Blood, bodies, sensation—whatever might quiet the endless hunger and *void* gnawing beneath their skin.

Fae lived long lives, but they still ended. One day, Talen would return to the earth like all things were meant to.

But vampyres clung to existence through the essence of others. And yet… it could not be that simple. There had to be something more beneath it all, some truth buried under the indulgence, the cruelty, the endless taking. He had not uncovered it yet. Perhaps he never would.

But he understood her.

Years entombed in darkness, forgotten and abandoned by the very coven that should have come for her. But there was no rescue that came for her.

She existed, but she did not *live*.

And even she reached for the illusion of intimacy, however fleeting. Even if it came in the form of a female vampyre she barely spoke to. Talen would know, seeing how often he was by Valeria's side during the evenings.

He almost smiled at the realization if not for the dark, coiling fury tightening in his chest. It took everything in him not to move, not to close the distance and to drag her out of that bath just to prove—what, exactly?

That he was still there?

That she hadn’t erased him so easily?

She had *forgotten* him.

The thought burned hotter than it should have. He had been overlooked before. It was nothing new. He had never been one to crave attention, never needed the weight of a title to remind himself who he was. Let others bow and whisper *fae prince*; it meant little to him.

But this was different. She had not dismissed him. She had not chosen to ignore him. She had simply… forgotten, as if he were nothing more than a shadow lingering at the edge of her world.

His gaze dragged helplessly, hungrily over the curve of her bare skin beneath the shifting water, the steam clinging to her, the way she looked entirely unbothered by his presence.

Gods.

It made something feral rear up inside him—a sharp, restless hunger that had nothing to do with the bond and everything to do with her.

He should look away. He should step back, regain control, remember exactly what she was, what she had made him.

But his eyes betrayed him, drawn back to her again and again, drinking her in, like if he looked long enough, he might understand what *this* was, why it felt like something clawing beneath his ribs, demanding to be let loose.

This was madness. He knew it with a clarity that should have been enough to stop him. And yet his control slipped, until the restraint he clung to shattered.

His gaze locked with hers—gold meeting something far darker, far less contained.

A breath passed between them.

Another.

And something in him gave.

Fuck it.

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Talen’s mouth crashed into hers.

The kiss was a brutal collision of wills. Their teeth grazed and breath tore as all the emotions he had hidden for weeks—jealousy, hunger, and anger at her games and for himself—poured into this kiss.

In his youth, Talen had taken lovers reverently. He had been known as the gentle, thoughtful prince. He had traced skin like it was scripture, kissed like it was something to be cherished.

He had never needed to be cruel to be desired. Never needed to take, to conquer.

Until *her*.

Because when Talen seized Valeria’s mouth, he kissed her like he wanted to *devour* her.

Valeria’s answering sound was just as furious. She tangled her fingers deep into his hair and yanked hard, eliciting a sharp sting of pain across his scalp.

She tightened her grip, dragging him closer–*daring* him to feel exactly how little control either of them had left.

Whatever fragile thread of restraint had held him snapped clean through. Hauling her from the bath in one swift motion, he carried her to the bed—water spilling in his wake—and drove her back onto the mattress. His body followed without hesitation. By bracing one arm beside her head and

anchoring the other at her waist, he caged her in. His weight pressed down deliberately.

A silent reminder of exactly *who* had claimed this moment.

His mouth found her throat where he dragged his lips along the elegant line of her neck, teeth grazing, claiming. Each mark he left was slower than the last, more deliberate, as if he wanted her to feel every second of it and whose touch specifically seared against her skin. Her lips parted on a breath that was almost a growl. *Gods*, her lips were as soft as he'd imagined.

That thought alone nearly undid him.

His hand rose between them, fingers brushing her mouth, testing, daring. When he slid them past her lips, the heat inside her nearly stole the air from his lungs. His voice dropped, roughened with a single command.

"Taste."

Her eyes flashed. She bared her teeth. His other hand gripped her cheek, and his teeth bared.

"I said, *taste*."

The room seemed to hold its breath.

Valeria closed those exquisite lips around his finger. Her gaze never left his as she did it, golden eyes glinting with fury and promise.

Heat shot through him.

Gods.

By the gods, her mouth was *so* warm, and the sensation of her lips sealing around him, the subtle pull along with the quiet defiance still blazing in her stare as she complied with his command was too charged, like watching lightning coil inside glass and knowing it could shatter at any moment.

He had faced armies without flinching. But this might be what truly undid him.

A tremor of pure need shook his hands. Swallowing hard, he drew back his fingers and gently parted her knees. There, framed by a shadow of dark curls, her swollen, weeping heat met his greedy eyes. A low curse caught in his throat at the sight.

She was already soaked for him.

Talen's tongue plunged deep into Valeria's weeping heat, lapping at her swollen folds with a savage, desperate hunger. Her thighs trembled against his temples as her spine arched. He drew her sensitive flesh fully into his

mouth, sucking hard until her hips bucked wildly and her sharp gasps shattered into ragged moans that echoed off the stone walls.

A bitter hatred burned in his chest—this vampyre had tormented him, played with him for far too long—but *gods,* she was dripping wet, her tight, pulsing warmth clenching in exquisite fury around his invading tongue.

And he wanted *more*.

Valeria ground ruthlessly against his face. Her fingers knotted deep into his hair as she chased her release. Talen felt every muscle in her body turn to coiled wire, her breath hitching into short, desperate bursts as she teetered on the very edge of shattering.

Just as her thighs locked around his head, Talen wrenched his mouth away. Before she could react at the sudden emptiness, his hand clenched against her inner thigh.

She fucking *yelped*.

Talen wrapped his hand around her throat. A slow, wicked smirk curved his lips against the sensitive skin of her jaw, utterly pleased with the havoc he'd wreaked on her pride.

"You don't get to take your release yet," he growled, his voice a dark, gravelly rasp against her ear. "Look at you, dripping all over my face and begging for it with your hips. You'll come when *I* tell you to come, and not a second before."

She stiffened, before her her sharp nails lunged for his face. He caught her wrist in a vise grip, twisting it just enough to make her wince, his fierce green eyes locking onto her glowing golden ones.

"You don't get to unravel until *I* say so. Beg for it, or I swear by the gods, I'll make you wait all fucking night."

She bucked against his hold, a mix of defiance and need twisting her features, but the heat in her gaze betrayed how his dominance ignited her even more. Talen dove back in, fingers spreading her slick lips wide as his thumb circled her clit. A deep groan tore from her throat, hips jerking up to meet his touch.

He should stop this madness. She was his enemy, the vampyre princess who'd been a threat to his kin, his kingdom.

The very realm itself.

He wanted to ruin her—*gods*, he wanted it so badly his chest ached with the sheer weight of his hunger. He wanted to bury himself in her until she

screamed, until tears of raw pleasure streamed down her cheeks and she forgot every bit of her icy composure.

Hell, until she forgot her own name.

Driven by that desperate need, his tongue flicked and nipped at her weeping heat. His teeth grazed her swollen flesh just hard enough to sting, dragging another sharp gasp from her beautiful lips. Valeria's frantic curses filled the air, her body writhing beneath him in beautiful, chaotic surrender. He could feel her climax building again, her tight, pulsing walls fluttering in a desperate rhythm against his probing fingers. She was right there, teetering on the very edge of shattering.

And just as she began to tip over, he pulled away.

He chuckled softly as her hands pushed against him. She was strong, but he was a fae warrior. He pinned her wrists above her head with one hand, his body looming over hers. His length throbbed hard against his fabric, straining to bury itself deep, deep within her.

But he could be patient.

This was not about a quick moment of pleasure. This was about seeing her bend to him, to feeling her skin against his, to hearing her call *his* name and his name only.

"You don't get to *forget* I'm in the room." His gaze locked onto hers, and she froze for a moment upon realization. "And if anyone puts their hands on you…" he gave a pause. "They won't *keep* them."

He ground his hips forward, letting her feel the thick ridge of his erection pressing against her. She bucked beneath him, wanting more.

With a guttural growl that vibrated deep through his chest, Talen seized Valeria by the waist and flipped her over in one swift motion. She landed on all fours. Her body responded on pure, unadulterated instinct—her spine arching as she lifted her hips high, her tight cheeks parting. Over her shoulder, her golden eyes narrowed at him, a volatile storm of mutiny and desire brewing in their depths.

Talen knelt behind her, eyes locked on the tempting sight of her. He didn't rush, *oh no*, he savored it, letting the anticipation coil tighter between them like a drawn bowstring. His hands roamed her hips first, fingers tracing the curve of her ass with deliberate slowness, thumbs pressing into the soft flesh just enough to make her squirm.

"Look at you, so ready to take me. You are beautifully depraved, and yet utterly exquisite."

Valeria’s fingers clawed at the satin beneath her, knuckles whitening as she pushed back against his touch, her body betraying her fury with a needy tremor.

He chuckled, the sound rumbling low as one hand slid up her spine, tangling in her raven hair to yank her head back, exposing the elegant line of her throat. His other hand dipped lower, fingers teasing along her inner thighs, brushing feather-light over her dripping folds and teasingly circling her clit just enough to make her hips jerk forward in frustration.

“Not yet,” he rasped, nipping at her earlobe. “Feel how close you are? One thrust and you’ll shatter, but you have to *earn* it.”

She growled in response as she ground back against his hand, seeking more friction. The tension built like a storm, her breaths coming in sharp pants, body taut and quivering under his control. Talen’s length throbbed painfully against his leathers, straining for release.

He yanked the ties open, and it sprang free at last.

Gripping her hips, Talen positioned himself at her entrance, the blunt tip nudging her slick heat. He rocked forward in a slow, agonizing friction, coating himself in her slick warmth, teasing her with the promise of what was to come before ruthlessly pulling back.

He waited, his breath hot against the small of her back, watching the desperate arch of her spine.

“You want it?” he rasped, his fingers digging into her hips to keep her perfectly still. “Then you tell me exactly what you need. I’m not moving a muscle until you *beg* me for it.”

Valeria threw her head back, her fangs bared to the ceiling as a frustrated growl caught in her throat. She tried to thrust backward, seeking the blunt weight of him.

But his grip was iron.

“Say it,” he demanded.

“I need you,” Valeria gripped the sheets, using every ounce of her strength to force her hips back against his thigh, fighting his restraint. “Inside me—now. *Please*.”

A satisfied smirk touched his lips as he watched her do the work, her own desperate movements sliding her tight, wet heat right against his tip.

“You want it so bad?” he murmured. “Take it, then. Let me see how you take me.”

Valeria’s breath hitched, her crimson eyes locked onto his as she hovered over his thick, demanding length. Slowly, she lowered herself. The friction was agonizingly perfect, her tight, weeping heat stretching to accommodate him inch by grueling inch. A ragged gasp tore from her throat as she swallowed his length entirely, her internal muscles clenching around him in a desperate embrace. She paused, her head throwing back as she adjusted to the overwhelming fullness, her hips giving a subtle, involuntary twitch to lock him in deep.

“Good girl,” Talen praised softly. His hands remained anchored on her hips, not forcing the pace, simply watching her consume him. “Look at you... taking every single inch like you were *made* for me.”

Valeria swallowed the praise as she began to lift and drop her hips. She was setting a rhythm born of pure, unadulterated need. With every downward stroke, she adjusted beautifully, tilting her pelvis to grind her swollen clit right against the base of his shaft, milking him with an exquisite, rhythmic heat.

“Gods, Valeria,” he growled, his eyes darkening as he watched her movements. He reached around, his thumb catching her bottom lip and tugging it down to expose her sharp fangs. “You feel so fucking good. Ride me just like that. Take it all, you beautiful fiend.”

“I'll take every inch,” she seethed, her golden eyes flashing with absolute triumph as she held his gaze over her shoulder. “And I'm *never*—”

She didn’t get to finish.

Talen’s patience snapped. Gripping her hips, he bucked his hips upward in a claiming thrust. He buried himself to the absolute hilt. The words die in her throat as her eyes went wide and her entire body locked around him.

Her body pushed back ruthlessly, meeting his punishing rhythm as he pounded into her from behind. Each slick, heavy slap of his hips against her ass echoed wetly through the room, the heavy weight of his pelvis slamming hard against her swollen clit with every deep, bruising plunge. Talen drove into her, secretly intoxicated by how perfectly her tight warmth took his savage force. He leaned low over her trembling spine, one hand fisting her dark hair to yank her head back, exposing the long, vulnerable line of her throat to his gaze.

“That’s it,” he rasped. “Don’t stop.” He grunted, thrusting deeper, feeling her shatter around him, her orgasm ripping through her despite the edge he’d denied.

But Valeria wasn’t one to submit fully.

With a burst of lethal, predatory speed, she whirled on him and used her momentum to flip their positions. Suddenly, she was straddling his lap, her hands slamming against his shoulders to shove him flat on his back beneath her.

She began to ride him fiercely, setting a wild, unforgiving pace that consumed his length entirely. Her spine arched, her golden eyes holding his captive as she dragged her fingertips down his chest. Her sharp nails raked slowly across his skin, scoring shallow, stinging lines through his flesh as she claimed him with every heavy, downward stroke.

“My turn,” she hissed, grinding down hard, her lips curling in triumph as she chased her pleasure on top.

Talen’s hands shot up, his fingers wrapping around the slender column of her throat in a bruising, iron grip that pinned her gaze to his. He bucked upward with a savage, retaliatory force, matching her wild rhythm stroke for unforgiving stroke. Deep within her core, her slick walls began to spasm around his length, clamping down with a desperate, clenching tightness.

Talen could feel the pressure building at the base of his spine, the telltale tingle of impending release. He reached up to palm her breasts with his free hand, pinching and rolling her nipples between his fingers.

Her eyes locked on his, hatred and hunger mirroring his own. Despite his fury, he was in awe at how she took control, how her slick walls gripped him like she was claiming him, and it only gave him more ache with the need to fill her up.

It was then he realized that earlier, she *allowed* him to handle her. She could very well handle her own, with her strength and speed.

“Look at you trying to master me,” he rasped, bucking up hard to meet her. “Claw me to pieces, Valeria, but you're taking every goddamned drop of me when you unravel.”

His words shattered her. Valeria threw her head back, a guttural cry ripping from her throat as her orgasm crashed through her. She clamped down around him, spasming fiercely in hungry pulls that dragged him toward the edge.

They collapsed together. Talen’s body trembled, his length still twitching inside her as aftershocks rippled through them both.

He should have shoved her off, ended this insanity, but his limbs felt like lead.

Valeria lifted her head from his shoulder, her lips curling in a wicked, triumphant smirk. Before he could react, she struck—her fangs sinking into the curve of his neck. Pain bloomed hot and immediate, but it twisted into pleasure as she drank. Her mouth latched on, sucking deep pulls of his fae blood.

Talen's eyes flew wide, a groan escaping him despite himself. The bite sent jolts of pleasure straight to his core, his length stirring back to life inside her even as she pulled off him. Her hand wrapped around his slick shaft, fingers stroking steadily, firmly, from base to tip.

"You taste so delicious," she murmured against his skin, fangs grazing the wound as she licked the punctures clean. Blood trickled down his collarbone.

He should have pushed her away, but he didn't *want* her to move away.

Her hand was relentless, twisting at the head of his length, thumb rubbing the sensitive underside. His hips bucked involuntarily, chasing the building pressure as she drank another slow, deliberate swallow, her tongue lapping at the flow. The sensation was oblivion, his mind fogging with euphoric haze, hatred warring with the raw need she dragged from him.

"Fuck," he rasped, the world only rendering to that singular, vulgar word. His hand tangled weakly in her hair, holding her there instead of yanking her off.

Valeria hummed against his neck, the vibration shooting through him, her strokes speeding up, gripping tighter. She worked him like she owned him, her palm slick and hot, pumping his thickening length with expert rhythm. The pull of her mouth on his blood amplified everything. He was lost, body arching, a low, broken moan tearing from his throat as pleasure ripped through him like wildfire, leaving him gasping, trembling, utterly spent. The world narrowed to the throb in his neck and the warmth of his release, his strength drained to nothing.

Valeria pulled back finally, licking her lips clean of his blood, her eyes gleaming with dark satisfaction. She rose above him, her naked body a silhouette in the moonlight.

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Ren bristled at the sound of water. Above her, branches whispered together. Perched among them lounged a dark figure.

“Flameborne, Flameborne,” the hoarse voice crooned. “When will you ever realize that you and I are not so different?”

Ren forced herself upright, muscles trembling. Before her lay a round pond, its surface glass-still except for two fish circling one another in endless orbit—one white as moonmilk, the other black as a starless sky.

“Watching you summon your magic was exquisite. And yet you wanted more. I can’t blame you. Once you get a taste of magic, it’s hard to resist wanting more.” A low chuckle scraped through the air. “But magic is a bargain. What you take, you must give.”

The figure dropped from the branch, directly in front of her. Pale blue eyes locked onto hers—too pale, too bright.

His pupils widened.

“No…”

Ren’s brow furrowed. She tilted her head, studying him. The change was instant. Rage detonated behind his eyes.

“No, Ren. No—no, no, no, no.”

His voice fractured. Ren pressed back on her elbows, boots scraping damp earth as she tried to put distance between them. He surged upright, fury spilling out of him in violent motion—kicking stones, splintering branches, sending leaves scattering.

“No. No. No. *No*!”

The words deepened into a guttural snarl, a sound too large for his body, as if something ancient were clawing up his throat to speak through him. The noise slammed into Ren’s skull. Pain spiked behind her eyes. She clapped her hands over her ears.

“Stop!”

He froze with his back half-turned, head angling slowly toward her. The look he gave her from the corner of his eye was the feverish calculation of a rabid beast.

Ren held his gaze. “Who are you?”

He dragged a hand through his hair and gripped the ashen strands hard enough to pull, as though he might tear the thoughts straight out of his skull.

“Shouldn’t be more than a day or two,” he muttered, pacing once, twice, nodding to himself like a man agreeing with voices no one else could hear. “Yes. No more than that. First time always burns too bright. She drowned in it but is not past saving. Not yet. Rest, restraint, silence… and it will mend.”

“What?”

The word had barely left her mouth when he moved. One blink he stood several paces away.

The next, he was on her.

His hand shot out and closed around her throat, fingers tightening just enough to remind her how fragile breath was. He hauled her toward him until their faces nearly collided, his nose brushing hers, his eyes blazing.

He inhaled sharply, like he was scenting her. Then he hissed, voice splitting, “Even if I must break you into splinters and stitch you back together bone by bone, I *will* bring you back, Flameborne. You do *not* get to escape me.”

Ren’s hands shot to his wrist, nails digging in. “What in the hell are you raving about? Get the hell off me!”

Her teeth bared when his gloved finger slid along the line of her chin in a way that made her skin crawl. His mouth curved.

“Wake, Flameborne,” he whispered. “I’ll be here when you do.”



Morning birdsong stitched itself through Ren’s consciousness, thin silver notes drifting in and out of her mind until they tugged her fully awake. She sat up, the movement heavy.

She lay in a bed.

Four wooden walls boxed her in—rough-hewn planks the color of warm chestnuts, their grain catching the soft gold of morning light that slipped through an unseen window. At the foot of the bed stood a closed iron door.

A blonde fae sat beside the bed, one leg crossed over the other, porcelain teacup cradled in elegant fingers. Steam curled from its rim.

“Ren, thank the gods you’re awake,” she breathed. Before Ren could react, the fae surged forward and wrapped her in an embrace.

Ren froze.

“You’ve been out for three days,” she murmured against Ren’s shoulder, voice threaded with relief. The scent intensified—grapefruit, sharp and sunlit.

She pulled back.

Ren found herself staring into one of the most arresting faces she had ever seen. Beauty carved with precision: high cheekbones, luminous skin, pale lashes framing violet eyes. But those brows were knit tight, her expression edged with unmistakable severity.

Elegant fingers closed gently around Ren’s chin, tilting her face upward.

“Do not ever spend yourself so recklessly again,” she murmured. “Magic is a hungry thing. Feed it too freely, and it will consume more than you intended to give.” Her head tilted, pale hair sliding over her shoulder. “Do you understand?”

Ren’s cheeks warmed under that scrutiny. They were very close. Close enough that her attention betrayed her, drifting downward to where the soft lavender fabric of the woman’s gown dipped modestly, yet temptingly. Her throat tightened. Ren’s mouth went dry. When she went to speak, her voice sounded barely above a whisper, so hoarse.

“Who are you?”



“Who are you?”

The words struck Kaelin harder than any blade.

For three days, she had scarcely left Ren’s side. The fae princess had dragged in spare blankets and fashioned a narrow cot beside the bed, refusing the comfort of her own chambers. If Ren woke in darkness, she would not wake alone. She would wake to Kaelin’s voice, Kaelin’s hand, Kaelin’s presence anchoring her to the world.

But Ren had not woken.

She slept.

And slept.

And slept.

Each passing hour tightened the coil in Kaelin’s chest. Even as the village moved forward, the world beyond these wooden walls had demanded her. The townspeople had buried their dead with soot still staining their hands. Broken beams were hauled aside. Foundations were cleared. Plans were made. Hope was being pieced together.

They looked to her for it. Their queen.

Yet Kaelin could barely bring herself to step outside when the woman she loved lay motionless in this bed, breath shallow, skin too pale.

She had imagined too many endings. Ren never waking. Ren never opening those amber eyes again. Ren never flashing that wicked, crooked smirk that always made Kaelin’s pulse trip over itself. Never teasing her. Never challenging her.

Veylan had taken charge where Kaelin could not, organizing the villagers with steady command. Lucan had gone with the burial parties, lending his strength. They carried the weight Kaelin should have been carrying.

It had been a mercy that Ren ordered the evacuation first. Without that command, there would have been nothing left of the town or its people to save. The dragon had been erased–burned down to its last scale. In its place, the earth itself bore witness—a crater blasted into the land as if the sky had struck down in fury.

Kaelin had stood behind Ren that day, close enough to feel the magic as it roared out of her. It had detonated a cannon of living flame and light.

Gods, it would have been beautiful if not for the destruction.

It kept pouring from Ren, wave after wave, long after the dragon should have been nothing but ash. Kaelin had shouted her name once. Twice. Again.

No answer.

And in that breathless, suspended moment, Kaelin had thought—

This is it. This is where I lose her.

Ren had turned then. Kaelin had known instantly those were not Ren's eyes. They were older than kingdoms. Older than crowns. Older than the bones of the world itself.

And utterly, divinely terrifying.

Kaelin had watched the magic leave her. It poured out of Ren in a final, blinding exhale, light tearing free from her body in ribbons until nothing remained. The glow vanished from her skin. The fire died from her veins. Color drained from her face.

Ren's eyes rolled back. Her body tipped forward. Kaelin caught her before she struck the ground. The heat still clung to Ren. It scorched Kaelin's arms the instant she touched her—searing, blistering, biting through cloth and skin alike.

But Kaelin didn't loosen her hold. She gathered Ren tighter against her chest, as if the strength of her grip alone could tether her soul inside her body.

Even now, the burns traced Kaelin's forearms and palms in angry red whorls, the skin still tender three days later. The healer had promised they would fade with time. Kaelin almost hoped they wouldn't. They were proof she had held her.

And yet…

Of every horror Kaelin had faced, nothing had come close to the devastation of that single question. Or the look in Ren's eyes when she'd asked it. Emptiness where recognition should have been.

Who are you?

The words had nearly driven Kaelin to her knees. Ren's magic had claimed its due. She had demanded more power, and power had answered, but magic was never a gift freely given. It was a bargain, a law older than gods.

And it had taken its payment.

It had carved pieces from her. Shards of her soul. Fragments of memory. Kaelin knew many powerful magic wielders across the realm, but not one who could mend a mind once it had been torn apart.

Save, perhaps, Talen.

A knock sounded at the door. Kaelin could not bring herself to answer. Ren turned her head, cleared her throat awkwardly, then rustled out of the bed. She swung open the door.

Brenna stood, gaping. “By the gods, you’re awake! I’ll let the others know.”

Moments later, the room was flooded with Veylan, Lucan, and Sir Pindlewhip appearing through the wall, wiping at his eyes with a handkerchief.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Veylan exclaimed, adjusting his glasses.

“You tore a hole into the earth,” Lucan added, letting off a whistle. “Remind me again not to get on your bad side.”

Instead of a snarky whip, Ren looked down at her hands, rummaging with her fingers. A nervous habit.

“All of you,” Kaelin said, “step outside. A word, please.”

“But—” Lucan went to protest, but Kaelin grabbed him by the elbow, pulling him along sharply.

As soon as they were in the hallway, Kaelin whispered, “She depleted herself too much. The magic took her memories.” She glanced at Veylan. “Have you ever read anything like this in tomes?”

“Oh, yes. What you take from magic, you must give something in return. You wouldn’t believe the crazy things people have lost from depleting themselves.”

Kaelin’s nostrils flared. “How do we resolve this?”

Veylan went quiet for a moment, thinking. “She certainly needs to rest her mind. We could perhaps try jogging her memory. A song, perhaps, even a scent. I even—”

The door behind them slammed open hard enough to rattle the hinges.

Ren sauntered out. She moved with a loose, dangerous grace, like a blade freshly unsheathed. She didn’t look at any of them as she crossed the threshold, gaze fixed ahead.

“Whoa, Ren,” Lucan started, instinctively reaching for her arm.

She knocked his hand aside. “Don’t touch me.”

The words snapped like a whip. Only then did she seem to notice them. The way every pair of eyes tracked her.

She froze. For a heartbeat, she looked startled. Almost small. Then her gaze dropped, lashes lowering.

“Look, I don’t recognize any of you. Hell, I don’t even know my own name.” Her jaw tightened. “I don’t know who I *am*. I need out,” she muttered. “I need air.” She strode for the front door.

Kaelin moved.

Ren's head snapped up. She bared her teeth. "Take one more step and your ass will be in the dirt. Got it?"

The entire hall seemed to hold its breath.

It was Kaelin who broke the silence. "You need rest," she said quieter. "Your mind needs time to gather itself. Please."

The last word slipped out before she could stop it.

Lucan's gaze shifted toward her at that, but she ignored him. All she could see was Ren and the tension in her shoulders, the wildness in her eyes, and the way she stood like someone ready to bolt or bite.

"You don't know what the hell I need." Her gaze dragged deliberately down Kaelin's body, then back up again, assessing, measuring. "I know what I need. Now, back off."

The door slammed behind her.

Veylan flinched. "She's one stubborn person," he muttered.

"Too stubborn," Kaelin grumbled through her teeth.

Lucan folded his arms, watching the door. "We'll keep an eye on her. But we should give her space and time to sort through the mess in her head."

No. I need to be with her.

The thought came fast and fierce. It clawed up Kaelin's throat, begging to be spoken. Lucan must have seen something of it in her face, because his expression softened. "We're all here for her. She isn't alone. But we can't smother her, either."

For one reckless, treacherous second, Kaelin imagined striding after Ren, hauling her over her shoulder, carrying her straight back to her chamber, and tying her to the bedposts so she'd be forced to rest whether she liked it or not.

The image was satisfying.

And completely barbaric.

Kaelin exhaled slowly through her nose and forced the thought away. She couldn't cage Ren. Not even to save her. If she wanted Ren back, she would have to meet her where she stood now.

Even if that place was wild.

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Valeria drifted into sleep like someone sinking slowly into deep water. Her body relaxed, her breathing slowed, and the world vanished around her. She felt weightless, suspended in a quiet moment outside of time.

But she did not sleep. Vampyres after all did not sleep.

Time loosened, spooled out like black thread slipping through thin fingers. When she opened her eyes, there was only darkness.

“My Lady.”

The voice echoed, as though it traveled through stone, through earth, through graves before reaching her.

Valeria did not turn her head. She did not sit up. She did not move at all.

“Yes?” she said, her voice sounding distant, as if she were speaking from the far end of an empty building.

A dark shape gathered to her left.

“It is time for a feeding.”

Another softer voice came now, this one from the right.

“It has been three days.”

Valeria watched the darkness above her as if stars might appear if she waited long enough.

“I am here.”

“You are absent,” said the first voice.

A third presence flickered near her feet.

“You left just before feeding. I watched it happen. Your eyes went still.”

“They were speaking,” Valeria murmured.

“They were ready to feed you,” the second voice insisted. “They were *feeders*.”

A pause.

Then, it whispered, “You used to like that.”

Valeria considered this. She searched herself for the memory of liking something, anything. The silence stretched. Vampyres were patient creatures. They could watch a thought gradually decay the way mortals watched sunsets.

“Did something startle you, My Lady?”

“No. But something confounded me.”

The darkness seemed to lean closer. “What was it?” asked the soft voice.

“I saw something that should not exist.”

“And?” the second voice pressed.

“You retreated,” the first voice observed.

“Yes,” Valeria answered.

“Will you return?”

Valeria did not answer immediately. She listened to the silence, to the dark, to the slow and distant thrum of a world she had stepped out of.

So loud.

So bright.

So breakable.

“I never left.”

But even she sensed the untruth in it. The shapes did not argue or accuse. They simply remained, ancient witnesses draped in shadow.

After a long while, the soft voice asked, “How long will you stay?”

Valeria’s eyes closed again. Darkness within darkness. A nesting of voids.

“Until the world forgets I ever was.”



Sylven was a snake forged into a fae male body. In that way, he reminded Valeria very much of her mother. When Sylven smiled, her mother purred. When she lifted her glass, his eyes lit with answering hunger. They did not speak the same words, did not move in the same rhythm, yet they mirrored

one another all the same: two predators circling the same throne, each pretending the other was not also measuring where best to sink their teeth.

Both creatures wanted total dominion.

Endless night.

Valeria's gaze slid toward the window. Beyond the glass, the full moon hung low and luminous, swollen with silver light.

For her kind, an endless night would be paradise.

For the realm, it would mean certain extinction.

Humans would be culled or caged, their blood hoarded. The lesser races would bend or be killed. The delicate ladder of life would splinter rung by rung until only apex things remained.

Until only *they* served as the ruling class.

Behind her, voices murmured, discussing plans threaded through the air: territories to fracture, borders to swallow, alliances to poison. They spoke of crowns as if they were coins to be traded, of nations as if they were livestock to be branded. And threaded through it all, an alliance between Sylven and her mother.

Sylven's laughter sparked across the chamber. Valeria did not turn back. She only watched the moon until movement snagged her attention. Her gaze drifted downward to the figure kneeling at her heels.

Brunette hair.

The fae prince.

She regarded him with a distant detachment, as though she had stepped outside her own body and was watching the scene from somewhere high above. He did not move, and yet his eyes held hers with unwavering intensity, as if looking away were a thing he simply did not allow himself to do.

They were the most vivid shade of green she had ever seen.

Alive.

Were forests that color when sunlight pierced their canopies? Did leaves glimmer like that when the wind parted them?

She would never know.

The thought had barely formed when a memory struck. His hand at her throat. His mouth was in her ear. The press of his body, relentless, consuming, the world narrowing to heat and breath and the shattering pull of sensation until she had come undone in his grasp, piece by fragile piece.

It felt like something that had happened in another lifetime.

As the night wore on, the door clicked shut behind her. Moonlight poured through the tall window in a silver flood, bathing the chamber in a pale glow as Valeria crossed the floor and came to rest at the foot of her bed. She lowered herself slowly onto the cushioned bench there, movements unhurried. Her gaze lifted to the horizon where the full moon hung.

The fae prince kneeled at her feet. She only looked down when his hand closed firmly around her knee beneath the fall of her dress.

“How long has it been since you’ve fed?” He asked quietly.

Valeria stilled.

He leaned closer, fingers tightening where they held her. “Since me?”

Silence. The kind that was answer enough.

A slow breath left him, sharp through his nose. He released her long enough to rake a hand back through his hair, agitation snapping through the movement.

“So, three days, then. You must be thirsty.”

He had no idea.

Valeria felt the slow, treacherous awakening inside her–the instinct she had been pressing down, burying, starving into submission. Her fangs lengthened almost imperceptibly, a faint ache threading through her gums as her gaze drifted to his throat. His pulse leapt beneath his skin. It always did that when they were alone, when he looked at her like that.

Why?

Her tongue touched one fang, and Talen noticed.

“Gods,” he muttered, “you’re wasting away.”

“I am fine.”

“You’re lying.”

“I am not.”

His hand shot up swift enough that her breath caught as his fingers closed around her jaw, thumb pressing beneath her chin, forcing her head to tilt.

“Feed,” he seethed.

The word was *not* a suggestion.

Valeria’s eyes narrowed. “Watch it, mortal. You presume much.”

“I observe,” he countered. “Your pupils are blown, your fangs are out, and you keep staring at my throat like it’s the only thing in the world you can see.”

Her gaze flicked back to his eyes. He did not release her.

“If you don’t feed soon,” he went on, quieter now, “you won’t choose who you feed from. Your instincts will.”

“I said I am fine.”

Something in him snapped. In one sharp movement, he seized her wrist, pulled her forward, and pressed it flat against his chest. His heart hammered beneath her palm.

“Feel that? It’s yours if you want it.”

Stars, each beat rang through her senses like a drum struck in a silent hall.

“Feed,” he repeated.

Her eyes flashed.

His voice lowered, rougher now. “You’re fading, slipping somewhere I can’t follow. I won’t *let* you vanish.”

Silence stretched between them. His pulse thundered under her hand.

Her fangs ached.

“Drink,” he urged, voice barely above a whisper. “Or I swear to every god still listening, I’ll keep provoking you until you do.”

Her control thinned. For a long moment, she only stared at him—searching his face, his eyes, the reckless certainty there.

He wasn’t afraid.

He should have been.

She leaned closer. His breath hitched. Her lips brushed the line of his throat.

And then her fangs sank in.

Talen exhaled sharply, hand tightening at the back of her neck as the first pull of blood left him. A shudder ran through him as she drank slow at first, then steadier, her restraint unraveling thread by thread as warmth flooded her senses.

Life.

Heat.

Strength.

Color returned to her skin. Her shoulders loosened. The hollow ache inside her eased, soothed by the steady rhythm of his pulse feeding her. Only when she was certain she would not lose herself did she withdraw. A thin line of red traced his skin before sealing shut. Valeria lifted her head.

Talen’s chest rose and fell once, hard.

“Better?” he asked hoarsely.

Her gaze lingered on his throat. “Yes.”

Indeed, as she once had before, she found herself staring at something that should not have existed–someone who saw *her*.

His gaze was so unflinching, and so full of life.

And it was a quiet, terrible tragedy to be looked upon so unflinchingly, when she knew she was a creature the world would be kinder without.

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The sun bled into the horizon, streaking the late-afternoon sky in molten gold and embers. Ren leaned against the rough-hewn table, elbows digging into unforgiving wood. She tore into the warm roll beside her bowl of chowder. Butter soaked into the bread, rich and simple and achingly ordinary.

The first bite tasted like something she had once known by heart. Comfort bloomed in her chest—soft, golden, almost dangerous in its sweetness. Joy, yes. But threaded through it was something sharper. Warmth clutched tightly during a season of ruin. It was the kind of happiness forged in survival. The kind you only recognized after everything had been taken.

She searched for the memory, for the face across the table, for the sound of that laughter. That, and she was very, very hungry.

But the past remained a locked door.

And she had no key.



Ren tipped the glass back and took a long swallow of rum, the burn sliding down her throat.

Flameborne.

The word unfurled inside her chest. It was a presence, low and resonant, a vibration that rolled through her ribs. For a moment, she thought her stomach was growling, hunger gnawing from within.

She drained the rest of the rum before she set the empty glass aside. Behind her, sailors burst into a raucous song, boots pounding, laughter rising with the salt-thick air. Ren pushed through the tavern door and slipped into the cooling dusk, the music muffling behind her.

She drifted toward the tree line, boots crunching over dirt and shell fragments. Branches clawed at her sleeves as she passed, leaves whispering against her skin. When she reached the shadowed forest floor, she sank to her knees, head light. Then she tipped backward, staring up through the canopy as the world tilted from the drink.

Flameborne, the voice called again.

What the hell was that?

It was strange how her body remembered what her mind could not. She didn't have to think about paying for her meal. Her hand had known which coin to offer, how long to wait, where to sit. Reflexes lived on where memories had died.

Something twisted inside her chest suddenly. Sadness. Panic. The loss was so vast she couldn't name it. She squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them, the forest was gone and darkness spiraled around her.

She *knew* this place.

A low growl sounded behind her. She turned slowly. First, she saw two glowing red eyes. Then a massive creature appeared from the shadows, with dark scales and folded wings.

The dragon's name struck her like a spark catching dry tinder. *Vortharax*.

"*You are beginning to remember*," he rumbled, lowering his massive head. Heat gusted from his nostrils.

Ren squinted, swatting the hot mist aside.

"It's hard to forget you, I suppose," she said dryly, the rum loosening her tongue. "Do you know what the fuck happened to me?"

"You dug too deep. Magic is not a well without bottom. What it gives, it takes."

"Takes what?"

"Shards of your soul."

The words landed heavy.

"My memories," she breathed.

“Indeed.” he bared his teeth, as if scowling at her. *“Very foolish.”*

Her head snapped up. “Let’s not linger on the negatives.” She gestured vaguely between them. “Maybe cut me some slack? How was I supposed to know that? No one taught me how this works.”

“You were cautioned, Flameborne. You chose to heed only what pleased you and let the rest fall upon deafened ears.”

Ren looked away first, jaw tight. Because beneath the irritation, she knew he was right. A memory flickered–past the warning ache in her bones. Taking more even when she felt the edges of herself splintering. Fire racing through her veins, bright and intoxicating.

Infinite.

And then, all at once, it all clicked.

Memories surged forward, colliding, locking into place with a force that stole the breath from her lungs. Every moment, every choice, every scar and spark that had shaped her—rising, demanding to be seen.

To be claimed.

She did not flinch from it this time.

She let it burn through her, let it carve through the last remnants of doubt until there was nothing left but truth and certainty. Her fingers curled at her sides as the weight of it settled. Like something long lost had finally found its way back into her bones.

She knew who she was.

Her chin lifted.

“Ren,” she stated.

Her gaze sharpened, fire flickering behind it as the last of the pieces locked into place.

“Ren Harper.”

And this time, there was no hesitation, no doubt.

“Do you know what it’s like to feel small your entire life? Powerless?” Ren confessed. “And then suddenly, you’re not. When you finally taste that kind of power, it’s damn near impossible to stop.”

Vortharax’s tail swished as he lumbered closer. Sinking onto his haunches, the dragon brought his massive head low, letting his nostrils rest atop his talons.

“I suppose.”

Ren’s jaw tightened. “Right. Of course, you suppose. How *could* you understand? You’re powerful enough to raze villages and snuff out lives.

What would *you* know about feeling small?”

She scoffed and spun away, stalking a few paces into the dark before stopping short when she realized there was nowhere to go–only an endless shadow. Stiffly, she sank to the ground with her back to him, arms braced on her knees.

“You have read about me.”

She barked a humorless laugh. “Hell yes, I did.”

“You dive into deep waters without checking the currents, foolishly believing that drowning in information is the same as drinking wisdom.”

“Excuse me?”

“Has your brief mind not grasped the great irony of time? The truth of an age is never written by the righteous—only by the remaining.”

Ren hesitated. “I know what I was taught, that the world nearly ended because of you. No one could kill you, so they bound you instead–sealed you into a Flameborne. And generation after generation, pieces of your soul get shackled in bloodlines like mine.” Ren huffed. “Which apparently makes me the lucky one stuck with you.”

“They neglected a truth that did not suit them.”

Ren tapped her finger against her elbow. She forced herself to think past the anger and past the stories she had been fed since stepping into fae court.

Behind her, Vortharax did not move. But she felt the heat of his breath roll over her back in slow waves, heavy and patient.

Waiting.

And then the absence in the story revealed itself like a missing stone in a wall that her fingers brushed against.

“They never said *who* bound you,” Ren murmured. Her mouth went dry as the thought took shape. “I always just… assumed it was the world uniting, kingdoms standing together against some common enemy.”

“They did stand together, but they stood in pursuit of profit. They required a common enemy, and so they fashioned one. Consider your beasts of burden. Horses broken into obedience for travel and toil. Oxen bent beneath the plow and yoke. Swine fattened for slaughter. Mortals do not enslave without purpose; they harvest. Your kind possessed nothing we coveted. Your gold would tarnish with time. Your steel had its limits. Your thrones crumbled in a small span of our lifetimes.”

His breath scorched the air behind her as he exhaled.

“But our scales did not burn, they did not break–they were impervious to blade and arrow alike.”

Ren’s voice barely carried. “No…”

“They coveted what they could not create, and so they went to war for it.”

The truth struck her fully then.

“Dragon armor,” she whispered.

“Indeed. They sought to harvest our scales—to hammer our bones and scales into instruments of conquest. Because they could not defeat us when fully grown, they began with our hatchlings. They crept into our nesting grounds while mothers hunted. They stole eggs from stone cradles still warm with life. They tore babes from the shells before their first breath had fully filled their lungs.”

“Fucking hell,” was all Ren could muster before she turned to face Vortharax.

“When the mothers returned, they found emptiness where there should have been life. Hatchlings mean everything to our kind. Hatchlings are defenseless, and a mother dragon…” His molten eyes flared. *“A mother dragon does not forgive.”*

Images clashed in Ren’s mind—villages burning and fields turning to ash. These were the stories told with absolute certainty, yet they had conveniently omitted this part. As the world tilted beneath her understanding, the titles echoed in her head: *The God-slayer. The World-Ender.* The monster in every history text.

It was all so one-sided, a narrative polished smooth to hide the blood on Aetheria’s hands.

“And when I refused to remain still while my kin were hunted,” Vortharax seethed, rising to his full, terrible height, *“I indeed became the common enemy they required.”* His wings unfurled slightly, vast and suffocating. *“So, we went to war. And I would have burned their kingdoms to cinders a thousand times over before I allowed them to forge my kin into weapons for mortal hands.”*

Ren couldn’t breathe. The void felt thinner somehow, like the truth had stripped the air from it. Her hands trembled at her sides, fingers curling uselessly as she tried to anchor herself to something solid, but there was nothing solid here. Only shadow.

Vortharax the God-Slayer.

Vortharax the Devourer.

Vortharax, who brought the world to its knees.

Never Vortharax the *protector*.

She hadn't even realized she'd begun crying until her vision blurred, the first hot tears streaking her cheeks.

"They stole your hatchlings," Ren whispered. "I didn't know," she breathed, voice breaking. "All this time… I thought you were…"

A monster.

The words wouldn't come.

She peered up at him through tear-heavy lashes. He was enormous, terrible, ancient beyond comprehension.

And yet—

"They *harvested* your hatchlings," she said again, softer now. "Of course you burned their villages and waged war. By the Veil, I'm… I'm *so* sorry. What a cruel thing for them to do."

The admission left her raw.

For a moment, softness flickered in Vortharax's gaze. Then it hardened. A growl rolled from his chest, low and seismic, shaking the very fabric of the void.

"Do not offer me your pity, mortal."

The shadows around them recoiled as his wings snapped wider, heat surging outward in a violent wave.

"I do not seek your sorrow."

The ground beneath her fractured. Darkness split like glass beneath a hammer.

"You are bound to me by shadow and flame," he thundered. *"Not by mercy."*

The force of his roar struck her like a physical blow. Ren gasped as she was hurled backward, the void collapsing in on itself. Shadow gave way to spinning branches and the sharp scent of pine and damp earth. She slammed onto the forest floor, breath punched from her lungs. The trees loomed overhead, moonlight filtering through swaying leaves. Her heart hammered against her ribs as if trying to escape.

For a long moment, she lay there, staring up at the sky. Tears slipped silently into her hair. The forest was real. The earth beneath her, solid.

But nothing felt the same.

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Talen did not understand why five days without being summoned to Valeria’s chambers felt less like relief and more like exile. He remained in his cell as commanded. Guards brought him out when required. He was fed. Given water. Given space enough to pace and breathe and think.

Too much space to think. Day after day passed, and no thrall came to take him to Valeria.

By the fifth day, he was already on his feet when the thrall finally came to retrieve him. And when he saw her in the dining hall, one glance was enough to know something was wrong. Valeria stood like a hollow shell. Her body moved. She spoke when spoken to.

But her eyes were distant, as though she were watching the world from somewhere far away. Her pupils were blown wide, swallowing the color from her irises.

She was retreating inward as though she had found some internal chamber and locked herself inside it. She had spent how long entombed before they found her? Months? Years? Decades?

What did isolation like that do to a mind?

Valeria was a prisoner just as surely as he was. Only her cage was gilded. She was the daughter of the Matroness and powerful enough to bend lesser vampyres to her will, and yet she held no true authority within her own Castle. The coven admired her, but when direction was needed, their eyes did not turn to Valeria.

They turned to Carmilla.

And the way Carmilla looked at her daughter was not maternal; it was evaluative, like a jeweler weighing a rare gemstone beneath candlelight—admiring its brilliance, calculating its worth, and considering how best to display it for maximum gain.

Valeria was valuable, but she was not free.

What unsettled him most was that being away from her without a feeding should have cleared his mind. But it didn't. It *worsened*. He could almost feel the distance between them like a physical ache in his chest—a stretch of invisible cord pulled tauter with every passing hour. And he could feel her slipping as though some part of her was walking further and further into shadow.

Why was she retreating?

Shame prickled beneath his skin when he thought of the day she brought another female vampyre into her chambers. Watching another person touch her had nearly driven him mad, and something had broken loose inside him.

Yet, surely whatever strange bond had formed through her feeding should have faded by now. Five days should have dulled it.

But it hadn't.

If anything, it had deepened.

And watching her hollow herself out before his eyes, Talen realized with a clarity that felt almost violent.

If she disappeared into herself completely, he would follow her into whatever darkness had claimed her.

Or he would tear that darkness apart trying.



Talen shifted at Valeria's heels. He had been seated through what felt like hours of endless ceremony, but all he could think of was the moment Valeria return to her chambers.

To where it would just be them.

His pulse betrayed him with a sharp, traitorous leap at the thought of her mouth at his throat.

Then—

Clink-clink-clink.

Carmilla rose from the head of the table, tapping her fork against crystal. The delicate sound sliced cleanly through the chamber, and the coven fell silent. Every eye turned toward her. Even Sylven, lounging at her side like a decadent serpent, tilted his head with a pleased curl of his mouth.

“My beloved coven, we are most fortunate tonight. We have a guest among us, one capable of reading the language of the prophecy. Before this night is through, we shall know how to enact the Prophecy and usher in our eternal night.”

Applause rippled across the table, soft and eager and hungry.

Who could read such a thing?

A hooded shape emerged at the top of the winding staircase. The figure was slight, yet with shoulders hunched. The figure descended slowly, one step at a time, staff tapping faintly against stone. They were not tall, not imposing.

And then recognition struck.

That staff.

Talen’s breath hitched. *Impossible*.

Movement to his right snagged his attention. Against the wall stood Elira.

The traitor fae.

The spy who had worn a human face like a veil and slipped into their ranks. The one who had smiled sweetly while memorizing their secrets. The one whose dagger had nearly slit open his throat.

She was staring directly at him.

Talen met her gaze without blinking. He gave her nothing, but neither did she. Her expression was smooth, empty of tells the way only someone highly practiced could manage.

Had she been here the entire time?

“It’s such a delicious thing, isn’t it?” came a hoarse, delighted voice. “Hearing words that simply aren’t spoken anymore.”

The hood slipped back.

Zakhar’s skin looked even paler than Talen remembered. His hair had gone wilder in his absence, grey streaks jutting in chaotic directions as though lightning had struck. His eyes glittered with the bright, fractured shine of someone who found the world unbearably amusing.

“Languages,” Zakhar turned slowly in place, peering at the gathered vampyres as if they were curiosities in jars. “Such fragile little things. Born,

used, adored… then snuffed out–dead as moths in a lantern. And yet, we keep their corpses, just in case they decide to whisper again."

A few of the coven shifted, unsure of what to make of him.

"We have been anticipating its contents," Carmilla murmured, drawing forth the leather notebook with deliberate care.

Zakhar's eyes snapped to it. "Oh," he breathed. "Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes. That will do nicely." He reached for it, then stopped short, hands hovering, fingers twitching as though resisting the urge to snatch.

"I may need a moment or two. Or twelve. Time is such a flexible thing, don't you think? Especially for you all who have nothing *but* time."

His gaze drifted across the room, glancing face to face.

Then it landed on Talen, where his gaze lingered. Zakhar's mouth twitched into a hint of a smile.

And suddenly, Zakhar turned away from them all, humming under his breath. His shoulders bounced faintly with silent laughter, as though he alone had just heard the punchline to a joke centuries in the making.

"Oh, don't mind me," he chirped, waving one long-fingered hand in a lazy spiral. "Carry on–laugh, feast, plot the end of the world. Whatever it is you delightful creatures do after sunset."

He snatched the leather-bound prophecy from Carmilla's grasp with surprising quickness, then cradled it to his chest.

"I'll just… borrow this. Perhaps I'll take it home and read it to myself by candlelight—really savor the syllables."

"Take all the time you require," Carmilla purred, though her eyes narrowed at the loss of the book.

"Oh, I always do."

Conversations resumed in uneasy waves, muffled at first. Goblets clinked. Chairs scraped. A few vampyres grew impatient with waiting and claimed their bound humans from the periphery of the chamber. Soft gasps and sharp inhales threaded through the air; pleasure tangled indistinguishably with pain.

Talen glanced toward Valeria. She was not watching Zakhar or the coven. Her gaze remained fixed beyond the window, where the moon hung pale and full above the horizon, untouched by the scheming beneath it.

Did she not care? For a creature born of night, the promise of eternal darkness should have stirred something.

Instead, she looked elsewhere. As if she were already gone.

Time dragged.

Zakhar wandered the edges of the hall, flipping pages, muttering to himself, occasionally giggling under his breath. “Mm, mm, no, that’s not it… ooooh, that’s unpleasant… ah! That’s very unpleasant…”

A silky voice cut through the low murmur of the chamber. “I am so very thirsty.”

Talen’s attention snapped to a female vampyre as she crouched before him, her red eyes gleaming with hunger. Draped in crimson, her elegant gown swept long to the floor, its high slit revealing the sharp line of her leg with every movement. Delicate gold filigree traced the bodice to curl across her torso, matching the glittering accents at her throat and wrists. Clad in deep red, fitted gloves that climbed her arms, she flexed her hands.

“I have always wondered what a fae prince’s blood might taste like.”

Her jagged nail tilted his chin upward.

She was beautiful in the way a blade was beautiful. Her lips, the deep garnet of fresh-spilled blood, parted just enough to reveal the glint of her fangs as her tongue swept slowly across them.

“He is Lady Valeria’s blood-bound,” a male vampyre muttered from behind her.

“I do not think she will mind,” she said lightly.

“You may consider asking her.”

Every muscle in Talen’s body coiled as her fingers slid into his hair. She swept it back, exposing his throat.

“You are handsome,” she crooned. “It is a shame you are not immortal.” Her gaze dropped to his throat. “And you smell *delicious*.”

With brutal strength and speed, she yanked his head back, baring his neck fully to her. Talen held himself rigid, teeth grinding as instinct screamed at him to fight—to tear free, to strike, to do anything but sit there like prey.

“And your blood calls to me,” her breath ghosted across his skin as she leaned closer. Her fangs hovered just above his throat.

Talen’s hands curled into fists at his sides. He could feel it, that pull, that unnatural draw vampyres had, the way the air itself seemed to thicken with it.

He could break free. He knew he could. But the consequences…

Her mouth brushed his skin. His restraint cracked. He jerked against her grip, a low sound ripping from his chest as he tried to wrench himself free.

The female hissed, her hand lifting to strike him for the resistance.

She never landed the blow.

A sharp crack split the air.

The vampyre's body went still.

Then slack.

For a single breath, the room seemed to hold itself in silence as the female's head lolled at an unnatural angle, her eyes wide with surprise.

Valeria loomed behind her, one hand still outstretched.

"You forget yourself," she murmured.

And with that, she let the body fall.

Valeria's gaze shifted and landed on the male vampyre who had warned the female against her actions. He went still. For a brief moment, he held her stare, chin lifting, as if weighing just how far he could push.

Valeria did not move.

Did not blink.

The male vampyre was the first to look away. His jaw tightened as he dipped his head before turning on his heel and stalking off into the shadows.

The moment was shattered by soft footsteps. Zakhar entered the chamber.

A swift hush came over the coven in anticipation.

"Well?" Carmilla prompted.

"It's rather poetic, actually. All this talk of shadows and veils and the devouring of suns–very common for literature depicting prophecies." He paced as he spoke, tapping the spine of the book against his palm. "To enact the night… to stretch it eternal and suffocate the dawn…You need an arrow, see."

A murmur rippled across the chamber.

"Yes, yes," he nodded eagerly. "Crafted and forged of blackened iron and ash. A lovely little thing, really."

Carmilla's eyes narrowed. "And?"

Zakhar's gaze lifted to the head of the table–to the place where Valeria sat.

"You would, uh, need to tip the arrow in the blood of the Matroness."

The word seemed to echo.

Matroness.

Carmilla went eerily still, like a statue. Several heads turned.

“The first daughter, born of the night’s sovereign line–the living vessel through which the Night Goddess’ blood flows.” His eyes locked onto Valeria now. “Which, unless I’m mistaken–which is rare–would be your dearest and *only* daughter.”

The chamber went very, very still. No one laughed, and no one applauded.

“Of course, the prophecy doesn’t specify whether the Lady must be willing.”

Zakhar’s gaze flicked to Carmilla.

Then back to Valeria.

“And that,” he whispered, grinning wide enough to show teeth, “is where things get interesting.” His attention settled on Carmilla. “Well, now that we know what our lovely little night requires, how far are you willing to go to make it last forever?”

Zakhar took a few idle steps closer to Carmilla, boots whispering against stone.

“Prophecies are terribly literal things. Very picky. Very precise. They loathe substitutions. You can’t just… improvise. No, no, no. They demand *authenticity*. So, tell me, Carmilla Draegora, will you bleed your own daughter for eternal night?”

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By the time Ren pushed open the door to the Splintered Siren, her head buzzed. The tavern greeted her with warmth and noise.

Her team. Her companions.

Her friends.

Lucan sat at a corner table, fingers steepled as he argued some fine point with Veylan, who looked one breath away from snapping back. A fiddle player near the cracked hearth dragged his bow across the strings, the tune lively and off-key. Brenna lounged against the wall, tankard in hand, biting back laughter as Sir Pindlewhip scribbled furiously onto his ghostly parchment.

It was normal. Ordinary.

Safe.

And then there was Kaelin.

She had been pacing, but the moment the fae princess saw Ren, she stopped mid-stride.

Ren paused at the threshold.

For a heartbeat, the tavern noise faded. Then Ren crossed the distance to Kaelin in two long strides. She simply reached for Kaelin, cradling her face between her palms as if proving she was real.

And then she kissed her.

Fiercely, desperately–like someone who had nearly drowned and finally found air. Ren kissed her as if the only thing that made sense was *this*.

Kaelin. Her *Veyra'thiel, shaen draveth*.

As Kaelin's lips moved against hers and everyone in the tavern erupted into cheers, Ren realized that no matter how fractured the world was, no matter how dark the truths waiting for her might be, this was something worth fighting for.

Something that made the chaos feel survivable.



"Do not ever do that again."

Kaelin had said it at least ten times that evening.

Ren dropped back into her chair, cheeks flushed and hair disheveled from attempting to dance with Lucan, who didn't know his right from his left foot at this point.

"What?" Ren grabbed a nearby tankard and took a long swallow. "Lose my memory?" She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and arched a brow at the fae princess. "You think I wanted that?"

"I think that you have an alarming talent for recklessness."

A drunken fae staggered past mid-verse, sloshing ale as he clinked his glass against Ren's. "To the dragon-slayer!" he sang off-key.

Ren grinned. "See? I'm a hero. Technically, *we're* heroes. Maybe they'll write a ballad about us."

"You are impossible," Kaelin muttered.

The tavern roared around them. Ever since the dragon attack, the town had celebrated without pause. The sun dipped below the horizon, and the music only grew louder. They had lost forty-four souls, but victory had still come. Hammers already rang through the streets by day.

And by night?

Drinking and celebration.

Those living in Driftwood Bay were hardy workers, but they certainly knew how to celebrate.

Ren leaned back in her chair. "We deserve this," she said quieter.

"When you wield your magic, you must exercise restraint."

"I know."

"Do you?"

Ren snorted. "Hell, yes."

Kaelin’s gaze narrowed. “Ren.”

Another cheer erupted near the hearth as Lucan nearly toppled into Veylan.

Ren glanced toward the fiddler. “Do you know this song? It sounds familiar.”

Kaelin sighed. “Deflection does not make you clever.”

Ren’s nostrils flared.

“The more you overextend your magic, the more it will demand in return.”

Ren’s eyes flicked back to hers.

Kaelin lowered her voice. “I will not watch you disappear piece by piece.”

Ren’s shoulders sank, the fight draining from her in a quiet exhale. The tavern noise blurred at the edges, leaving only Kaelin’s steady gaze.

“No,” Ren admitted softly. “Of course I’ll be more careful.”

The truth settled between them.

Then, Ren crooked a grin and extended her hand. “Enough lecturing. May I have this dance, Your Royal Highness?”

Kaelin’s lips twitched despite herself, but she placed her hand in Ren’s anyway, fingers threading together with familiar certainty.

They stepped onto the floor as the fiddle swelled. Ren pulled Kaelin close, and for the first time all evening, the tightness in her chest loosened. She was back. Her memories had returned. The missing pieces had slid into place, sharp and painful and real but hers.

They had slain a dragon and had survived. House Vaelaran still needed liberation, of course.

But not tonight.

Tonight, the world narrowed to music and warmth and Kaelin’s palm against hers.

Ren spun her, laughter rising from somewhere deep and unguarded. She felt light and alive–the kind of lightness that came after surviving something that could have destroyed you. She dipped Kaelin low, so low that her golden hair brushed the worn floorboards. Kaelin’s breath caught, one hand gripping Ren’s shoulder, the other trusting her completely.

Ren pulled her back up slowly, their faces inches apart.

Later, long after the music faded and the tavern thinned, Ren led Kaelin to their tiny room under the stairwell. The room was quiet, washed in soft

candlelight. Outside, distant laughter drifted up from the streets, but inside there was only stillness.

They undressed one another slowly, reverently, as if unwrapping something precious. Every touch lingered, and every kiss said what words had failed to. Ren traced the line of Kaelin’s jaw. Kaelin pressed her forehead to Ren’s, hands steady at her waist.

They moved together like two halves finally aligned. Ren kissed the hollow of Kaelin’s throat. Kaelin’s fingers threaded through Ren’s hair as though anchoring her to the world.

Outside, the kingdom still waited to be reclaimed.

But in that small room, beneath quiet candlelight, they held each other as if the rest of the world could burn and it would not matter.

Because here, in the hush between heartbeats, they were not warriors or royal heirs.

They were simply two souls choosing each other again and again, despite everything.

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Blood slicked the stone floor beneath Talen’s bare feet.

Ren had once told Brenna that life could unravel so quickly. She had never been so right before until now.

The whip cracked again. The sound split the chamber before the pain even landed. Talen’s body jerked, chains rattling where they bound his wrists above him. His shoulder muscles strained as another stripe of red opened across his back.

Another lash followed.

And another.

At first, he flinched with each strike, gasping as he tried and failed to brace himself. Then, he clenched his jaw so hard a vein pulsed at his temple, grinding his teeth to swallow a muffled cry.

He counted.

Fifty-three.

Fifty-four.

The whip struck again, flesh splitting anew.

Fifty-eight.

By the fifty-ninth lash, he sagged in his restraints, blood running freely down his sides to join the pool below.

“Enough.”

The whip fell still.

Boots echoed against stone. A gloved hand seized Talen’s chin. Blood trailed from the fae prince’s split lip as his unfocused gaze struggled to steady.

Slowly, painfully, his eyes met Sylven’s cold gaze fevered with morbid enthusiasm.

“You *will* break,” Sylven murmured. “Sooner or later.” His grip tightened, forcing Talen to hold his stare. “Now that you are mine.”

Talen swayed, then forced his gaze to focus. Through blood. Through haze. Through agony.

“Remember this moment when your world burns. And understand… you should have killed me,” Talen whispered hoarsely, baring his teeth.

Sylven’s elegant features twisted, beauty curdling into venom. He drew his hand back.

The crack of palm against flesh rang through the chamber.

Talen’s head snapped to the side, blood spraying from his split lip as the force tore a fresh sting across his already ravaged skin. Before he could recover, Sylven’s fingers tangled in his hair, yanking his head back so hard his neck strained against the chains.

“I will make you *pray* for death, but I will not grant it. I will dismantle you piece by piece–strip away the arrogance, the hope, that foolish belief that the world bends toward goodness. Once, you were a gallant fae prince.”

He jerked Talen’s head lower, forcing Talen to face the blood-slick floor.

“Now, you are nothing more than a blood-bound to a *vampyre*. And as for a prince?” Sylven’s lip curled. “You are a *prince of nothing*.”

He released him.

Talen’s body sagged forward, chains groaning as they took his weight.

“Twenty more lashes,” Sylven ordered without looking back. “And leave him in his filth.” He paused at the threshold. “Do not heal him.”

The guards gathered the whips.

Talen let his head drop as the first strike hit. Tears slipped silently.

May the Gods have mercy.

Because no one else would.



Prince of Nothing.

The title spread through the dungeons. The guards used it freely now as a taunt, a greeting, a cruel joke to pass the time.

"Morning, *Prince of Nothing*. Still hanging there?"

They brought him food twice a day, if it could be called that. Gray mash in cracked bowls, thin broth barely warmed, but rarely did they place it in his hands. More often, they flung it. The first time, the mush struck Talen's cheek and slid down his face. The second time, they tipped the soup deliberately. It cascaded over his shoulders, soaking into the torn flesh of his back. Gods, the salt burned. The heat sank into the open welts, stinging deeper than the whip had.

They laughed at his attempts not to cry out. The lashes had carved deep. Some were still open, edges angry and swollen. Fae blood healed fast compared to other beings, but fae blood was not invulnerable.

Especially when healing was deliberately denied.

Infection would not kill him quickly. It would take its time.

So he retreated inward. He let the dungeon fade, let the stench of mildew and blood dull into background noise. He focused instead on memory, though memory had become its own blade.

He had failed.

The certainty of it pressed heavier than the chains. Princess Valeria had been seized the moment Zakhar revealed the truth of the prophecy.

Talen had never imagined a mother would offer her own daughter to such a cruel fate.

But Carmilla was not only a mother; she was a Matroness, protector of her coven, and eternal night promised safety and power beyond hunger. Even if it required great sacrifice.

He remembered the moment they dragged Valeria away. She had not screamed. She had not struggled. And Talen had not been able to meet her eyes. Carmilla had watched it all with cold precision, ensuring her daughter was imprisoned to ensure that escape would be impossible.

Necessary, she had called it.

Somewhere above, beyond stone and soil, the world continued—sun and moon rising, kingdoms turning, life carrying on as if prophecy were not devouring its own.

He whispered a prayer, though he did not know if the gods still listened to shattered souls.

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Spring loosened its grip reluctantly before surrendering to summer.

In the weeks that followed, the air grew warmer, the pale greens of new leaves deepening into the rich shade of full-grown forests. Sunlight lingered longer, stretching the days until twilight came.

Yet even this far north, the wind never truly stopped. It blew steadily across the hills and fields, keeping the heat at bay and carrying the scent of pine and water.

Still, Ren learned the hard way that the sun had teeth.

After spending long days helping the villagers rebuild—hauling timber, splitting logs, stacking wood for new roofs—her skin had paid the price. The burn had crept across her shoulders and neck until even the brush of her shirt hurt like hell.

That morning, she stopped by the market stall to buy more herbal cream from a fae merchant for sun balms. Spreading the mint-and-leaf scented salve across her shoulders each morning, Ren appreciated how cool it felt against her skin.

Later that morning, Ren, Kaelin, and Lucan rode out with forty soldiers at their backs, a modest column winding along the northern road. Armor glinted beneath the growing summer sun, horses kicking up pale dust as they traveled.

The journey to the refugee camp outside Pyraelia would take three days. After the dragon attack, they needed to gather an army to face both Sylven’s

forces.

And the dragons themselves.

No one knew how or why the dragons were returning to the skies, but after the devastating attack at Driftwood Bay, protecting their own borders had become their priority.

Ren rode an older bay gelding named Ash, a patient creature with a steady gait. As the horse plodded along, Ren’s mind drifted to what Vortharax had revealed–that the dragons’ grudge was born of a history where mortals hunted their hatchlings to craft dragon armor.

She frowned to herself, the weight of that cycles-old cruelty heavy in her chest.

How could she even begin to solve a history built on such cruelty?

Ash wasn’t fast, but he was dependable—the sort of horse who seemed to understand long roads and did not complain about them. Ren appreciated that.

Kaelin pulled her horse alongside Ren’s, her inquisitive eyes noticing the deep crease between Ren’s brows.

“You're quiet. What's wrong?"

Ren sighed, letting her gaze linger on the horizon. “I'm just thinking about what Vortharax told me–about why the dragons are attacking.”

“And? What did he say??

“He told me they hold a grudge because mortals used to hunt their hatchlings. They slaughtered them to harvest their scales for dragon armor.”

Kaelin went completely still, her reins tightening in her hands. The color seemed to drain from her face as she looked ahead, staring blankly at the road.

“I... I've never read that in any of the history books,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “Not a single one.”

“That's because history books are written by the victors,” Lucan chimed in, riding up just behind them.

They both glanced back at him as he guided his mount closer.

“The old kingdoms probably had scribes rewrite the entire narrative to make themselves look like the heroes. Once Vortharax and the rest of the dragons were sealed away, they assumed the problem was solved for good. They buried the truth, hoping the dragons would sniffle out, and their own dark history would disappear with them.”

“What an awful thing to do,” Ren muttered.

“It is,” Lucan agreed, a bitter smile touching his lips. “But it's how empires keep their hands clean. I grew up with the exact same kind of revisionist history. I was fed stories about how House Vaelaran was the greatest fae house in the continent of Lytherien—maybe even in the entire realm. I was taught that the fae were the most superior creatures in existence. It was a lie, of course. Just indoctrination spoon-fed to a youngling fae to ensure the cycle of arrogance continued.” Lucan let out a relieved sigh. "I’m grateful I was able to break that cycle before I became exactly what they wanted me to be.”

“Whatever the history is,” Kaelin said, her voice snapping them back to the reality of the road ahead, “it’s going to be nearly impossible to reason with a dragon while they’re attacking this brazenly. They aren't exactly looking for an apology. If we suspect more attacks, we need more than just an army to march on Sylven. We need a real defense against the skies.”

Lucan nodded in agreement, his expression grim. “Standard arrows are useless against their scales, but back there, I witnessed your magic, Your Highness. You managed to snap that dragon’s wings mid-flight.”

Ren’s lips twitched, and she looked over at Kaelin with a smirk. “Your Highness, respectfully—that was hot as hell.”

Kaelin laughed softly. She held up her gloved hand, turning it over as if she could still feel the residual hum of the energy she had channeled.

“If I'm going to protect our people, it is time to stop fearing my magic and embrace it,” Kaelin admitted, a newfound confidence in her eyes.

Ren shifted in her saddle, biting her lip. “I could kiss you right now,” she whispered.

Lucan let out a loud, theatrical groan from behind them.

“Not here on the road, you two,” he complained, rolling his eyes as he guided his horse ahead of theirs. “At least wait to have at each other until we actually get to camp.”

They rode from morning until the sun began its slow descent, stopping only briefly to water the horses or stretch their legs beside streams and shaded groves.

Meals were simple–dried meats tough enough to chew for minutes at a time, chunks of cheese wrapped in cloth, and hard bread that would last. Not luxurious, but enough.

At night, Ren shared a cramped cot with Kaelin, the small space only making it easier to do what they had wanted to all day. They could not keep

their hands off each other. Even after the physical longing settled into a quiet warmth, they stayed awake, talking late into the night and losing track of time.

Listening to the soft cadence of Kaelin's voice in the dark, Ren felt herself falling more in love with the fae princess by the minute. It was hard to believe that, at one time, the mere thought of Kaelin possibly becoming Queen of House Vaelaran had made her stomach churn with doubt and apprehension.

Now, seeing the fierce, compassionate leader Kaelin was becoming, it made Ren so very proud.

By the third morning, the dust of the road had settled into their clothes and hair, and the landscape began to change. Forest gave way to broader plains, the horizon opening wide beneath the pale blue sky.

Somewhere ahead lay Pyraelia and the refugee camp waiting just beyond.



The refugee camp came into view as they crested the hill.

It was not much to look at—a scattering of beige tents stitched together from canvas and patched cloth. Thin trails of smoke curled upward from open cookfires, dissolving into the heavy grey sky above.

Ash snorted beneath Ren, tossing his head as if sensing the journey's end. His hooves quickened as they began the slow descent down the sloping plain.

"Easy," Ren murmured, patting his neck.

Truth be told, she shared the horse's eagerness. Three days of dried meat and stale bread had left her dreaming of anything warm and soft. Soup would feel like a miracle. As if summoned by the thought, her stomach gave a loud, impatient growl.

Thunder rolled in the distance. The sky began to darken, thick clouds gathering low and heavy as the convoy approached the outskirts of the camp. The air carried the sharp scent of rain waiting to fall.

Children moved between the tents, small baskets clutched in their hands as they gathered scraps of wood and wild greens. One older boy paused when he spotted the riders.

For a heartbeat, he simply stared.

Then he ran.

“Riders!” his voice carried across the camp as he sprinted toward the nearest tents.

Ren lifted her gaze toward Kaelin. The fae princess rode at the front of the convoy, her posture straight despite the long journey.

People emerged from their tents as the riders approached.

“Is it—?”

“It can’t be…”

“Look—”

Kaelin guided her horse forward through the gathering crowd, Ren riding close behind. Soldiers fanned out carefully, but the people pressing closer meant no harm. They were searching.

Hoping.

The boy who had first spotted them now trailed behind the crowd, pushing desperately between taller bodies to keep the fae princess in sight, always. His eyes were enormous, shining in the dim afternoon light. Ren caught the moment his expression broke. His lips trembled, and tears spilled freely down his cheeks.

But he was *smiling*–a wide, disbelieving smile that seemed too big for his thin face.

The boy could not have been more than twelve yet old enough to understand what had been lost and old enough to remember the city before it fell. To see his princess—*his queen*—alive and riding into the camp after all that had happened…

Ren could only imagine what that meant to him.

Thunder rumbled again overhead as the first drops of rain began to fall. The first figure to emerge from the largest command tent was Elric.

For a moment, Ren almost didn’t recognize him.

The last time she had seen him had been in the training yards months ago. Back then, Elric had been quick-footed, a young fae soldier who had taken sparring very seriously. He had pushed her harder than most during drills, their blades ringing together while the instructors barked corrections.

Now, the fae male stepping into the rain-darkened light looked older. His armor was scuffed and poorly mended in places, the once-polished metal dulled by long use. His hair, once neatly tied back for training, had been hastily bound at the nape of his neck. There were shadows beneath his eyes

that spoke of sleepless nights and far too many responsibilities carried alone.

Yet the moment he saw Kaelin, relief broke across his face.

“Your Highness,” He dropped to one knee in the wet grass without hesitation.

Behind him, more figures emerged from the command tent. Three other fae commanders followed close behind, each wearing the same worn armor, the same look of stunned disbelief.

Commander Sareth, broad-shouldered and stern, who had once overseen the western gates of Pyraelia. Rem remembered him immediately, having met him during one of balls back at the court in Pyraelia. He stood out because he was one of the few men who never touched the wine or alcohol–just watched the room like a hawk.

Next came a female fae with a rain-dampened silver braid, her hand resting on the sword at her hip. Ren had never seen her before. This was Captain Ilyra.

And young Commander Samuel, who looked barely older than the soldiers under his command but carried the same hardened look in his eyes. Ren suppressed a small smile, remembering him from the court balls. Back then, he had been the first to dance and the last to leave, spinning noble ladies across the floor with an infectious energy. It was strange to see that same boyish dancer now wearing the grim armor of war.

One by one, they followed Elric’s lead, dropping to a kneel.

Kaelin swung down from her horse. Rain had begun to fall in earnest, thin droplets pattering against armor and canvas alike.

She crossed the short distance to Elric.

“Commander Elric,” she greeted.

The commander lifted his head, though he remained kneeling. “My princess,” he murmured.

Kaelin reached forward and took his arm firmly, pulling him to his feet. “You need not kneel to me,” she said quieter.

He looked as though he might have argued, but something in her expression stopped him. “Y-You survived.”

Kaelin held his gaze. “So did you.”

The rain ran down the sides of her face now, catching in the pale strands of her hair.

“How many remain?” she asked.

Elric glanced back toward the camp. “Just over six hundred, Your Highness. Civilians and soldiers together.”

Kaelin’s eyes drifted across the tents scattered over the hillside—the patched canvas, the thin fires struggling against the damp wind, the weary faces watching with a mixture of hope and disbelief.

Six hundred.

Once, Pyraelia had held tens of thousands.

Ren shifted where she stood, a sudden shiver passing through her. Before she could complain about the chill, a random fae stepped forward and dropped a heavy fur blanket over her shoulders for warmth. Ren caught the stranger's eye and thanked them with a grateful nod, pulling the thick fur tight around herself.

“Elric,” Kaelin said at last.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“I would like a cup of tea.”

The request seemed to surprise him more than anything else she had said. His brows lifted before he nodded. “Of course.”

“And…” Kaelin’s voice carried just enough to reach the nearby soldiers and civilians who had gathered. “Please ask everyone to assemble. I would speak with them.”

Elric hesitated only a moment before turning. “You heard her,” he called to the other commanders. “Spread the word.”

Sareth and Ilyra moved immediately, stepping into the camp and calling to the people between the tents.

“Gather near the command tent!”

“Princess Kaelin wishes to address us!”

Word spread quickly. Faces appeared from the tent flaps. Children stopped their chores. Worn soldiers rose slowly from where they had been sitting in the mud and damp grass.

Elric stepped into the command tent and returned a moment later with a steaming wooden cup.

“Mint and willow bark. It’s what we have.”

Kaelin accepted it with both hands. “It’s perfect, thank you.”

Ren watched, rain dripping from the brim of her cloak but much warmer with the fur blanket. She scanned the faces assembling before them.

The boy from earlier pushed his way through the crowd again, standing at the front with wide eyes.

When the murmurs quieted, Kaelin stepped forward. The rain began to fall harder, soaking the earth and the firewood, but no one moved.

For a moment, Kaelin simply looked at what remained of her people.

“My people, three months ago, a devastating act of treason was committed within the walls of our home. The city of Pyraelia was betrayed from within.”

A ripple of unease passed through the gathered crowd.

Kaelin’s gaze moved slowly across their faces. “History will remember that night as the Massacre of Pyraelia.”

Thunder cracked overhead as she spoke the name.

“Sylven Draeth betrayed the crown. He poisoned the court, and loyal nobles, advisers, and guards were slaughtered where they stood.”

Gasps broke out among the listeners.

“The king and queen were executed.”

A woman in the crowd choked back a sob. A man nearby drew his small child close against his chest.

“I stand before you alive because I escaped that night. Prince Talen escaped as well. But a usurper now sits upon the throne of House Vaelaran.”

The murmuring grew louder.

“I know what has been taken from you. Your homes. Your safety. Your loved ones.” Her gaze softened. “I see what remains.”

Faces lined with exhaustion. Children clutching their parents’ cloaks. Soldiers standing tall despite worn armor and tired eyes.

“*You* survived, and that matters.” Kaelin drew a breath, rain streaking down her temples. “The road ahead will not be easy. But,” her voice rose, strong and unshakable, “I *will* take back the throne. House Vaelaran does not belong to Sylven Draeth.”

Her eyes flashed.

“It belongs to *you*.”

Thunder boomed again.

“But I cannot do this alone. If you wish to stand with me, if you wish to reclaim your homes, your city, your future, speak with Lucan Brightbane. He will see you recruited and trained.”

Lucan shifted in the saddle behind her, offering a crooked grin and awkward wave to the crowd.

Kaelin turned back at the people. “To those who cannot fight, your survival alone is an act of courage. I am glad you are alive.”

Then Kaelin straightened, her voice rising one final time.

“And let this carry beyond this camp, beyond these hills, beyond the very stars themselves” Her eyes burned with fierce certainty. “We are not the ashes of a fallen kingdom. We are the storm that will *reclaim* it.”

For one heartbeat the camp stood in stunned silence.

Then the crowd erupted. Cheers burst from every side, echoing across the rain-soaked hillside as voices rose together in fierce, defiant hope.

The rain had come down hard now, soaking cloaks, plastering hair to skin, running in cold streams down every face in the camp. From where Ren sat on Ash, she could see the difference between rain and tears.

Kaelin’s shoulders were steady, her spine straight as the cheers roared around them, yet the water trailing down her cheeks did not fall quite the same way. It clung to her lashes, trembled at the curve of her jaw before slipping away.

Tears, hidden in the storm.

Ren watched this fae princess who had just told her shattered people that their world had been stolen from them. That their king and queen were dead. That war was not just imminent; it was *here*.

And still Kaelin faced them with that impossible, stubborn courage burning in her eyes.

Because a queen did not get to break in front of her people.

The rain drenched Kaelin from head to toe, silver streaks sliding down the pale strands of her hair and darkening the fabric of her cloak until it clung to her shoulders like a second skin.

But through it all, Kaelin was smiling.

The kind of smile worn by someone who had lost everything and refused to stay buried with it. Ren felt something tighten painfully in her chest as she watched her.

Gods.

Somehow, Kaelin had given the people hope. Around them the camp had erupted into cheers, voices rising through the thunder and rain.

For the first time since Pyraelia had fallen…

These people were not just surviving. They were ready to fight. And standing at the center of it all was Kaelin.

A queen *forged* in loss.

And Ren realized that the usurper sitting on House Vaelaran’s throne had already made one terrible mistake.

He thought he had killed the kingdom. But kingdoms were not marble walls. They were not crowns. They were not thrones.

A kingdom was its people.

And their queen.

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Carmilla had just closed the door behind her when she murmured, “It is a sign.”

Valeria didn’t turn around. Her gaze remained locked on the sky outside her window, where the blood moon hung over the courtyard.

For two weeks, her world had been reduced to the perimeter of these four walls, but tonight, the sky itself seemed to be bleeding into her prison.

Valeria’s fingers tightened against the stone banister of the balcony.

“A sign of what?”

“That you, my daughter, are the fulfillment of the Night Goddess’ prophecy.”

Carmilla settled at Valeria’s right like a shadow.

“You were born with the Night Goddess’ blessing—a gift I have cherished since your first breath of life.”

For most of Valeria’s life, those words had been a comfort. To have the Night Goddess’ blessing. To be marked with favor, of some great destiny.

Now, the phrase felt like a chain tightening around her throat.

And it very well was.

“What of the fae prince?” Only then did her golden gaze flicker to her mother.

Carmilla’s expression shifted, irritation flickering across her elegant features. “What does that matter?”

“Where is he?”

For a moment, Carmilla said nothing. Then she turned her gaze back toward the blood moon.

“He was sold.”

The words landed with quiet finality.

“To whom?”

Carmilla exhaled slowly, as though the conversation bored her. “To Sylven Draeth.”

“Why not release him?”

“Release him?” Carmilla repeated. She searched Valeria’s face before pressing two fingers to her temples as if the sheer absurdity of the words made her head pulse. “What purpose would that serve?” Her eyes narrowed. “Do not tell me that you have grown attached to the mortal.”

Attached?

No.

That wasn’t the word. Valeria barely knew him.

And yet…

The thought of Talen being tortured or chained sent a sharp, unfamiliar pang through her chest. Valeria briefly wondered how that was even possible; her mother had always told her she lacked a soul, that she was incapable of caring for anyone who didn't benefit her.

Yet, the ache in her chest felt entirely real.

“This prophecy will change everything,” Carmilla murmured.

Her hand rested lightly on Valeria’s arm, her fingers gliding along the curve of her elbow in a gesture that was meant to be comforting.

“We will finally, truly, be free.”

We.

Not *you*.

Them. Her mother, and the coven.

The sensation Valeria felt as a result was agonizing, like the slow press of a blade between her ribs.

She should *want* this. If her sacrifice meant freedom for her coven, then she should give it willingly. Yet a meddling thought clung stubbornly to her mind–a question she had not dared ask until now.

“Mother,” she said quieter.

“Yes?” Carmilla’s hand stilled on her arm.

“When I was taken into the tomb.”

The memory of endless darkness, endless silence, and the weight of time pressing in around her flickered at the edges of her mind.

“Did you search for me?”

Carmilla’s hand dropped from Valeria’s arm.

“Valeria…”

“How long did the coven look for me?”

Finally, Carmilla answered, “We did not.”

The words struck like a hammer. Valeria’s spine stiffened, as if physically struck.

“You must understand,” Carmilla added, her voice smoothing itself into reassurance. “To admit my daughter had been taken would have signaled weakness to our enemies. Your suffering was necessary.”

Necessary?

Carmilla continued. “*You* were chosen by the Night Goddess and protected by her blessing. There was never any doubt in my mind that you would endure.” Her mother smiled softly. “I knew you were all right.”

Valeria finally turned. There was only a sharp, predatory focus that made Carmilla’s smile falter.

“Have you ever been trapped entirely in darkness for centuries?” Valeria asked quietly.

Carmilla paused. She looked away, her voice dropping to a matching whisper. “No. But I knew violence the day I was born, when my parents cursed aloud that they had borne a girl. And I knew violence when I was raped, barely entering adulthood, and then exiled for becoming pregnant. So I, too, know suffering.”

Valeria sighed. She figured her mother would find a way to make this about herself.

But Carmilla leaned in, her voice dropping lower until it was a sharp hiss. “If there is anything worth fighting for in this world, Valeria, it is power. Power so that I can be aligned with the Night Goddess and never know what fear tasted like again.”

Valeria looked closely at her mother's face. Beneath the cold, hardened exterior, she caught a fleeting glimpse of Carmilla's beautiful features. Valeria tried to imagine Carmilla as a young girl—someone whose innocence had been utterly trampled by life, reduced step by brutal step to this power-craving *thing* standing before her.

Carmilla's expression hardened again, the brief flash of vulnerability vanishing beneath an unyielding wall of ambition.

"If bringing the prophecy alive meant you waiting for thousands more years in that tomb, then I would gladly leave you there. This is your primary reason to exist, Valeria. Nothing more. The Night Goddess herself told me that what the night gives, it can also take."

Carmilla took a smooth step back, masking her features into its cool, composed facade.

"I have sacrificed too much to get here. I cannot afford to fall out of favor with her, and I will not let you ruin it." She raised her chin. "Enjoy the blood moon, my daughter." Carmilla cradled Valeria's face, her cool fingers resting along her jaw. The gesture was tender, startling in its softness. For the first time in longer than Valeria could remember, warmth touched her mother's expression.

Or something that resembled it.

Carmilla kissed her once on each cheek.

"Soon, the ritual will begin. The time has come–blessed be, by the Night Goddess."

Carmilla swept from the room.

The room seemed larger now, emptier. Only the red glow of the blood moon remained, spilling through the tall window and washing the stone walls in shades of crimson. Valeria remained there long after her mother's footsteps faded down the hall.

We did not.

The words replayed with cruel simplicity.

Not *we tried.*

Not *we searched.*

Not *we mourned.*

Just—

We did not.

For so many years, Valeria had been trapped in that suffocating tomb where time lost meaning. Days blurred into years, years into something shapeless and endless. And while she had clawed at the walls of her prison, while she had screamed into the dark until her voice failed…

No one had come.

Not her mother.

Not her coven.

Not a single soul.

They had simply gone on while she had rotted in the dark.

Perhaps Carmilla believed what she said–that the Night Goddess' blessing would protect her, and that divine favor would see her through whatever fate had claimed her.

But a mother's instincts wouldn't rely on blind faith unless every single avenue had been exhausted, every stone overturned, every drop of blood spilled. Even as a soulless vampyre, Valeria knew that if anyone ever dared to drag Carmilla into the dark, Valeria wouldn't pray to a silent goddess; she would hunt them to the ends of the earth.

And when she found them, she would tear their enemies apart with her fingers and teeth just to ensure her mother was safe.

But Carmilla had stayed behind the castle walls–safe and unbothered.

For a moment, anger rose sharp in her chest. But it faded quickly. Anger required expectation, and somewhere deep down, Valeria realized she had always known.

The coven had never belonged to her.

She had belonged to *it*.

Her gaze drifted back toward the blood moon hanging in the sky. Very soon, the ritual would begin, and she would fulfill the prophecy that promised salvation for her coven.

Her thoughts drifted then to another memory–emerald eyes, bright, even in the darkness of the dining hall. A fae prince who had stood between the coven and his friends' death.

Yet when the moment came, he had chosen to stay behind. Not for a prophecy, or for destiny.

But for his friends.

He gave *himself* for the people he cared about. Valeria had seen the look in his eyes when he made that choice; she had ascended the stairs, intent on going straight to her bed chambers, but as soon as he spoke, she froze. There had been no calculation or politics in his words to Carmilla when he offered himself as Valeria's blood-bound.

Just conviction.

A *fae prince* raised in a rival court, sworn to protect a kingdom, had sacrificed himself for others. Yet her own coven… her own mother… had never even searched for her.

Valeria withdrew her fingers from the window. The blood moon burned quietly above the world. And for the first time since she had returned from the tomb, something inside her shifted.

The quiet, unsettling realization that loyalty—like love—should not have to be commanded. And yet the only person who had ever freely given it…

Was a fae prince now sold into the mercy of his kingdom's enemy.

Those forest-green eyes flickered in her memory one last time before the night swallowed the thought whole.

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Talen was not granted the mercy of sleep. Each time the world began to soften into the quiet oblivion his body begged for, the guards broke it.

A fist slammed against the iron bars.

“Wakey, wakey, Prince of Nothing. No sleeping on my watch, aye.”

Sometimes the noise alone dragged him back to consciousness, his heart lurching as his body jolted upright against the chains. Sometimes exhaustion won anyway.

Those moments never lasted long.

Just as the black edges of sleep crept inward, a bucket of ice-cold water crashed over him. It soaked through his hair, down his face, across the torn skin of his back. The cold bit into every open wound like a thousand needles. Somewhere through the ringing in his ears, he heard the guards laughing.

The bucket clattered away as they left.

Between the lashings came a different agony. They bound his hands behind his back and hoisted him upward by a rope tied to his wrists. His feet left the ground, his entire weight hanging from joints never meant to bear it.

Pressure turned to strain, then to the sickening pull of bone slipping. With a dull pop that echoed through his skull, his shoulders tore from their sockets.

That hurt.

This was deeper. Endless.

Hours passed this way. Occasionally a healer arrived, but only to keep him alive for the next round. Their faint magic knit his flesh and held the infection at bay just enough so he wouldn't bleed out. The pain dulled, but it never truly left.

So Talen retreated where he could.

His mind wandered to warm, golden sunlight stretching across endless rows of vineyards. He could almost smell the grapes ripening in the summer air. He and Kaelin had raced between the vines, laughter echoing down the rows as Mount Solfira loomed quietly in the distance, its peak crowned in drifting clouds.

Their mother had sat nearby beneath a shaded table, a glass of wine in her hand as she watched them with quiet amusement.

The world had felt vast then. Safe, simple.

Talen clung to that memory now as the chains creaked and the darkness of the dungeon pressed in around him.

Because if he let it go, there would be nothing left of him at all.



At first, Talen had fought the chains, the lash, the humiliation of it all. But pain was patient.

Now, it moved through him like tidewater, ebbing and flowing, dulling the edges of the world until thought itself became slow and distant. Somewhere in that drifting haze, Talen began to understand something strange.

He had spent his entire life learning how to be a prince. How to walk properly. How to speak eloquently. How to sit at council tables without revealing doubt because doubt could be perceived as weakness. A prince carried himself with dignity. A prince endured hardship without complaint. A prince placed his kingdom before his own comfort.

All of it had been drilled into him until it was bone-deep. But none of those lessons helped him here.

Prince of Nothing.

The words stripped him raw at first. Every time a guard spat the phrase through the bars, something inside him twisted with humiliation. Because it

meant he had lost everything that once defined him.

His kingdom.

His people.

His *name*.

But as the hours turned into something endless, the meaning began to shift.

Prince of Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing meant no crown. Nothing meant no expectations. No court watching his every decision. No advisors whispering what a prince ought to be. Nothing meant no lineage pressing down on his shoulders. No legacy demanding he be brave when he was afraid.

Nothing meant *silence*.

What if nothing was *freedom*?

Talen let his head sag forward, chin resting against his chest as the chains above him creaked. His shoulders throbbed where they had been torn from their sockets. Every breath dragged across bruised ribs. The copper taste of blood lingered on his tongue.

All his life, he had been Prince Talen.

Heir.

Brother.

Protector.

Each title had wrapped around him like another layer of armor. But armor was heavy. Armor could suffocate a man. Here in the dungeon, those layers had been torn away piece by piece. The guards did not see a prince; Sylven did not see a prince.

They saw a body. Something to break.

And perhaps that was the truth he had been avoiding.

If they could not see the prince…

Then perhaps the prince no longer needed to exist.

The thought frightened him at first. Without those identities, who was he? What remained?

The chains rattled faintly as Talen shifted his weight.

Prince of Nothing.

Perhaps that was what he needed to become. Not a prince. Not a hero. Not the gallant figure his people believed him to be.

Just a fae who shed everything that made him recognizable, until even his captors overlooked what remained beneath the ruin. Because crowns drew attention.

But nothing…

Nothing could slip through the cracks.

The guards could mock the title all they liked. They thought it was an insult. They did not understand that nothing could survive where princes could not. And somewhere deep within the quiet center of his spirit—beneath the pain, beneath the humiliation, beneath the slow unraveling of who he once was—Talen uncovered a spark buried beneath ash.

If he survived this place, it would not be as *Prince Talen*…

But as something else.



Sometimes, Talen heard Sylven's boots long before he saw him. Other times, Sylven simply appeared in the doorway, as though he had been standing there all along.

The questions were always the same.

"Who lives in the royal court?"

"Which of your commanders remain loyal?"

"Where is your sister?"

But the question that returned again and again—the one Sylven lingered on like a wound he could not stop pressing—was Kaelin.

"Where is she?"

"Where did she run?"

"Who shelters her?"

Each time Sylven spoke Kaelin's name, something feverish overtook him. It had driven him half-mad that she had slipped from his grasp.

At first, Talen said nothing. But pain had a way of hollowing a man out, and something darker had begun to crawl into the empty places inside him.

At Sylven's question, Talen slowly raised his head. Dried blood caked his jaw, and damp, tangled hair fell across his face. His shoulders shook against the chains holding him up.

And he gave a terrible, cracked smile.

"Oh, she lives," he rasped. "She's alive *and* gathering an army."

Talen let the words hang there–let Sylven hear them.

Let them *crawl* beneath his skin.

“She’s coming for you,” Talen whispered. “And when she finds you… she *will* kill you.”

Sylven’s fury came fast.

The whip snapped through the air, tearing into Talen’s back again and again. The sound echoed off the stone walls. Soon, blood ran down his legs and pooled in dark streaks on the floor.

The pain was so bright it swallowed the world. Talen retreated deep inside himself–to that quiet, distant place his mind had begun to build.

A place where the whip could not follow.

Somewhere beyond the agony, he heard Sylven shuffle closer. Sylven crouched in front of him, studying him like something broken that refused to die.

Sylven’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“*I* will kill you.”

Talen barely lifted his head.

“And then, I will hunt her down. And when I find her…”

He gave a pause.

“What I do to her will make this look like mercy.”

For a long moment, the dungeon went still. Then, through the haze of pain and blood and creeping madness…

Talen laughed.

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“He really did a number on you.”

Pain had hollowed Talen out so thoroughly that sounds sometimes arrived before meaning did. But somewhere in the drifting recess of his thoughts, Talen became aware of movement to his right.

That alone should have been impossible. The door hadn’t opened.

Elira leaned against the stone wall with her arms crossed, a dark silhouette in the dim light.

“I fought beside Sylven for years. Somewhere along the way, I started blindly following him and I didn’t know how far gone he was until the massacre in Pyraelia.”

Massacre.

Talen forced his head up an inch, maybe two. Every muscle screamed in protest, but he managed it enough to see her more clearly.

“Elira,” he rasped.

She pushed herself off the wall and took a step closer.

“Come here often?” His lips twitched with something that might have been a smile.

Elira’s face sneered with visible disdain.

“You’re hanging there half-dead and still trying to be clever. I think you’re losing your mind. Which, incidentally, is exactly what Sylven wants.”

“What do *you* want?”

Elira exhaled and dragged a hand through her hair. “I want things to change,” she admitted. Her gaze drifted briefly toward the corridor outside the cell. “I followed Sylven because I believed in him.”

“You’re using past tense.”

She scoffed. “Still perceptive–which is impressive, considering your current situation. Yes. After the massacre… I had doubts. I knew he planned an attack. But I understood it would be a battle between soldiers. I didn’t believe he’d *poison* an entire court. But now that he wants to become allies with vampyres who are fanatic about this prophecy? Sylven’s lost his mind.”

Talen let out a dry, raspy laugh that turned into a cough. “Oh, come on. You’re smart, Elira. You mean to tell me Sylven never told you about the poisoning?”

“No. I made an assumption. I was getting my intel from Ren while he was still figuring out those details. I always thought Sylven was a fae of honor–that he just wanted to bring order back to things.”

She paused, her gaze dropping to the blood-stained stone floor.

“But once I actually met Ren Harper... I began to see humans differently.”

Talen bared his bloody teeth, the movement cracking the dry skin of his lips. “And yet, you betrayed her.”

“I did,” Elira said softly, her shadow shifting against the wall. “I tried warning her a few days before the massacre.”

Talen blinked, the dungeon spinning as a heavy, suffocating wave of exhaustion pulled at his eyelids. The edges of his mind frayed, tilting toward sleep, before a jagged memory from Pyraelia jerked him conscious. He remembered the frantic midnight chaos—Ren shouting that a dark figure had just beaten the living shit out of her in her own bedroom. Ren had mentioned she recognized the assailant's voice, though the shadows had swallowed up any facial features.

It had been Elira.

“I knew things were going to get… bloody,” Elira admitted. “And I didn't think it was fair she be caught up in it.”

“Yet you worked alongside a fae who sees humans as lesser than dirt.”

“He wasn’t always that way,” she argued. “Or at least, he hid it well. The rot only showed itself with time. And by the time I finally saw it… it was

too late. But there was no honor in what Sylven did in Pyraelia or now that he’s working with vampyres. I can’t stand by him anymore.”

Silence filled the cell.

“Where,” Talen rasped, voice barely more than breath, “is honor in war?”

Elira held his gaze for a long moment. Something uneasy flickered across her face, as though she were weighing a decision she already knew she shouldn’t make.

“You’re going to die here if nothing changes,” she said quieter.

Her words weren't meant to be cruel; they were simply factual. Letting her gaze drift, Elira cataloged the damage Sylven had inflicted.

“I’m not a healer, so don’t look at me like I can fix that.”

“Didn’t expect miracles,” Talen muttered.

Elira shifted her weight. “But…there are other things I *can* do. I can work small enchantments. *Glamours*.” She glanced back toward the corridor beyond the cell bars.

Her gaze returned to him.

“If you could see anyone right now… anyone at all… who would it be?”

His mind drifted sluggishly through the wreckage of his memories. Faces passed through the haze—Kaelin’s fierce eyes, the training yards of his youth, the vineyards beneath Mount Solfira. But exhaustion stripped away pride–stripped away the mask of the prince he had been taught to wear.

“My mother,” he whispered.

Elira nodded once.

“Alright,” she murmured and closed her eyes.

A faint shimmer passed over her form, subtle as heat rising from sun-warmed stone. The edges of her silhouette softened, reshaping carefully, as if she were sculpting the memory from his own mind.

When Talen lifted his head again…

The figure standing before him was no longer Elira. Soft blonde hair fell around gentle shoulders. Kind eyes, the exact shade he remembered from childhood, looked back at him with quiet warmth.

His mother.

For a moment, he simply stared. His mind struggled to catch up with what his eyes were seeing. The dungeon walls seemed to tilt. The chains creaked softly as his body trembled.

Then the illusion stepped closer, and she began to hum. The melody belonged to an old lullaby that once drifted through warm summer evenings in the palace gardens–a song she used to sing when he was small and frightened by storms or nightmares.

The sound broke something inside him. A guttural sob tore from his chest before he could stop it.

Talen bowed his head and wept openly in the chains, the sound echoing through the cold stone cell. Not the quiet tears of a prince. Not the silent endurance of a soldier. But the raw, desperate grief of a son who had been holding himself together for far too long.

The dungeon fell away. The stink of blood and mildew dulled. The ache in his bones loosened its grip. He remembered warm evenings beneath the vineyards of Vaelaran, her voice drifting through the open windows–the way she would brush his hair from his face when storms frightened him as a child.

Talen lifted his head. His tears still fell, but the despair that had hollowed him began to shift.

He was not just a prisoner.

He was the son of *Lyra Vaelaran.*

The name rose inside him like a quiet flame.

Lyra, who had ruled with a spine of steel and a heart fierce enough to protect an entire kingdom. Lyra, who had taught him that courage was not the absence of fear, but the refusal to kneel before it.

No.

Sylven could tear his flesh. He could starve him, break his bones, and strip away every comfort and shred of dignity.

But that was one thing Sylven could never take from him.

Talen drew in a ragged breath.

He would not bend. He would not surrender.

And he would never give Sylven the satisfaction of seeing him break.

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Outside Valeria’s window, the sky was still dark, though the first faint light of dawn was just starting to show. High above, the last pieces of the blood moon still hung in the sky.

It had watched the entire night. Valeria wondered if it would watch the end as well.

The sound of footsteps carried through her quiet chamber like a slow drumbeat, counting down the final moments before the ritual began.

Cold air slipped through the narrow stone slit of the window, brushing against her skin like the ghost of a touch. Valeria welcomed the chill; it reminded her that the world was still real. That she was still in it.

For now.

The footsteps grew closer. They moved in perfect unison, leather boots striking the floor with dull precision. Thralls rarely spoke and rarely hesitated. They existed only to obey.

As a vampyre who had lived for centuries, Valeria understood that existence better than most. She had spent the majority of her own life, if you could call it that, simply… existing.

That and nothing more.

She had been born with the blessing of the Night Goddess–a gift, a miracle.

A destiny.

Valeria had heard it whispered in reverence her entire life, repeated in candlelit halls and hushed prayers beneath moonlit skies. The Night Goddess had marked her before she ever drew breath. A child chosen by the darkness itself.

But stories had a way of softening the truth. Her mother had not always been what she was now.

Long before the coven existed, Carmilla was a mortal woman. She had been desperate, with child, and alone under a dark sky. The Night Goddess had come to her then but not to show mercy.

To offer a bargain.

Carmilla might be the oldest being still walking this world. Older than kings long turned to dust and empires that had risen and fallen, she had been born into a far less forgiving time. In those days, a woman pregnant before marriage was was condemned. While her village would have cast judgment swiftly, it was a gamble of cruel fates: penance if she were fortunate, or stones if she were not.

Exile offered no mercy. The wilds beyond the village borders were merciless, thick with beasts, shadowed things, and hungers far worse than starvation. To be cast out was to be given a slow, certain death.

Carmilla had known this.

And so she chose something else.

Two lives for one–for Carmilla had carried twins in her womb. In her fear of time, of frailty, of the slow decay that claimed all mortal things, she had made her choice: one child for the night, and one child for herself.

The bargain had been sealed in blood and shadow.

The child given to the Night Goddess vanished into the dark before ever seeing the sun. Carmilla rose from the earth no longer human, becoming the very first vampyre. While centuries passed around her, she remained untouched by time. To survive, she fed on the life force pulsing through mortal veins, drawing out their breath of life to feed her own.

She did not age. She did not weaken. She endured as a servant of the Night Goddess, and when she bore Valeria, the blessing had passed into her blood as well. But Valeria was the only one born into being a vampyre, rather than created or made.

The only ones with direct blood ties to the Night Goddess Herself.

Valeria had simply been born as a creature from her first breath. There was no childhood spent beneath warm sunlight, no years of innocence

before the hunger came.

Just existence.

Carmilla had not remained alone for long. In the years that followed her rebirth, she had begun to selectively offer her blood, drawing others into her making. Those who accepted it became something new but ultimately, something bound to her. Loyal, if not by choice, then by nature. One by one, she built a coven.

And Valeria had never been given the chance to choose otherwise. The coven had celebrated her birth, their voices lifted in reverent prayer.

The Night Goddess has blessed us.

A daughter of the eternal night.

Valeria had never known anything else. Never known warmth in her veins the way mortals spoke of it. Never known the slow passing of time across her skin. She knew only stillness, only an ever-aching hunger, and the quiet understanding that she had entered the world already shaped by a choice she had never been allowed to make.

And now…

The footsteps outside her chamber door had stopped. The ritual had come to claim what had always belonged to it.

What the night gives, it shall also take.

The child of the Night Goddess.

Even then, she had understood something that no one else seemed willing to acknowledge. A blessing was only a gift if the one receiving it had asked for it.

For a moment, the corridor went silent.

Valeria had done all those things to please her mother and the coven. She smiled when expected, spoken when addressed, stood beside her mother at court like a carefully placed ornament. She had watched kingdoms rise and fall around her while remaining perfectly still at the center of it all.

The metal latch outside her chamber door shifted. Valeria could picture them already—the thralls standing in the corridor to escort her to the ritual chamber.

All her life, she had been told that moment would come. One day, the prophecy would awaken and they would live under an eternal night, never having to hide from the sun.

She just never knew *she* would never be there to see it come to fruition.

The latch turned.

Outside the window, the last trace of the blood moon slipped beneath the horizon. Valeria thought of emerald eyes and a fae prince who had looked at her not as a symbol, not as a prophecy, but as something painfully human.

The memory flickered through her mind like a dying candle.

Then the door opened.



Talen stirred at the sound of the door closing.

The iron latch clanged shut somewhere down the corridor, followed by the echo of heavy boots and the rough burst of laughter.

For a long moment, he did not move. Pain had taught him caution. But something was different. The chains that held his wrists felt… wrong.

Talen lifted his head, breath catching as he shifted against the restraints. The tension in the shackles had loosened, the metal hanging slack where it had once held him fast.

He twisted his wrist carefully. The shackle gave, enough that the lock no longer held firm.

His pulse thundered suddenly in his ears.

Elira.

The realization struck him like lightning through fog. No one else could have done this. No one else would have dared.

Why now?

Was this a trap?

But Talen shoved the thoughts aside before they could take root. There would be time for answers later.

If he survived.

His hands trembled as he forced the weakened iron apart, the metal groaning softly under the strain. Pain screamed through his shoulders as his arms finally dropped free, muscles collapsing beneath their own weight.

He nearly fell with them.

The blood rushed back into his limbs in a violent, burning flood. His vision swam, dark spots bursting across his sight as he fought to remain standing.

But he did not stop. He did not allow himself to think about Elira’s reasons. He did not allow himself to wonder whether she would regret it.

All that mattered was he was getting out.

Tonight.



With a dull, grinding sound, the bolt scraped back. Talen did not lift his head. While guards always expected defiance or rage, it was his complete stillness that unsettled them most.

The door creaked open.

Boots crossed the threshold. The thrall smelled faintly of sour ale and wet leather.

“Well, well, look who’s still breathing.”

Talen remained slumped where he hung, his hair veiling most of his face. Blood had dried stiff across his back and shoulders, his skin mottled with bruises that had long since turned the color of rot.

The thrall stepped closer, carrying a dented tin bowl that sloshed with thin broth.

“Wakey, wakey. Got something special for you tonight.”

The title came with a mocking bow of the man’s head.

“Prince of Nothing.”

Talen’s fingers tightened slowly at his sides. The thrall didn’t notice. He set the bowl down on the floor with a careless clatter, then leaned forward, grabbing a fistful of Talen’s hair to jerk his head upright.

“Come on. Don’t tell me you’ve finally—”

The speed of Talen’s movement shocked them both. His hand shot up like a striking serpent, seizing the thrall’s wrist before he could even react. The weakened shackle snapped fully as Talen wrenched his arm free.

The thrall’s grin faltered.

“What the—”

Talen surged forward. His other hand clamped over the thrall’s mouth before he could shout. The thrall thrashed instantly, trying to wrench free, but weeks of torment had burned something dangerous into Talen’s muscles. He moved with the feral desperation of a cornered animal.

He drove the thrall backward into the stone wall. The thrall’s skull cracked against the rock.

Still, he struggled.

His hand clawed toward the dagger at his belt. Before the thrall could draw breath, Talen seized the dagger himself and drove it upward beneath the thrall’s ribs.

The blade sank deep.

The thrall’s body jerked violently in his grip. Talen twisted the dagger. The scream that tried to escape the thrall’s throat died beneath Talen’s palm. Hot blood spilled across his hands. For a moment, the thrall continued to struggle, his eyes wide with disbelief as life drained from them.

Then his body went slack.

Talen held him there for a long second longer. The only sound in the cell now was the slow drip of blood striking stone. When he finally released the body, the thrall collapsed heavily to the floor beside the bowl of spilled soup. Talen stared down at him. The title echoed faintly in his mind.

Prince of Nothing.

His fingers tightened around the dagger’s hilt.

Not tonight.

The heavy uniform of the thrall fit poorly, but it would suffice. Talen knelt beside the body, his hands moving quickly over the fabric to search for keys to the other cells.

Nothing.

He paused, closing his eyes as he tapped into his magic. He cast his magic outward, letting his mind bleed into the cold stone corridors to listen to the thoughts of the other thralls. The minds of the thralls were weak, brittle things, remarkably easy to penetrate. Dozens of shallow thoughts flooded his consciousness, but he filtered through the noise until he struck exactly what he needed.

“*Too heavy,*” a thrall’s mind grumbled just a few levels down. “*This damn ring of keys… why can't the vampires just use magic wards to lock the cells?*”

He found his target.

Stepping out of the cell, Talen walked into the dim corridor, his posture mimicking the rigid discipline of a guard. When the first thrall appeared at the end of the hallway, Talen didn’t break stride. He didn’t even lift a finger.

Instead, he simply reached into the creature's fragile mind and shattered it.

The thrall gasped, his eyes rolling back as his consciousness tore apart. He crumbled to the stone floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

Talen walked past the body. Another thrall turned the corner, alerted by the sudden collapse. Before the guard could even raise a weapon, Talen’s magic slammed into his mind.

The second thrall dropped instantly, dead before he hit the ground.

He moved through the subterranean passages like a phantom, leaving a trail of collapsed bodies in his wake. No blade, no blood—just the silent, devastating force of a fae prince reclaiming his power.

Finally, he reached the lower level. Standing at the end of the hall was the thrall he had been tracking, a heavy iron ring of keys clinking loudly against his thigh.

Seeing a rogue guard approaching over the bodies of his comrades, the thrall drew his sword and charged. As the thrall closed the distance, Talen merely watched.

The invisible strike was absolute.

The thrall’s mind shattered into pieces. His momentum vanished instantly, his sword clattering against the stone as his lifeless body crashed hard at Talen's feet.

Talen unhooked the heavy ring of keys from the belt. He weighed the iron in his palm, the cold metal a promise of chaos for the vampires above.

He wasn't leaving this dungeon alone.



Walking between the two thralls, Valeria kept her hands folded neatly before her, her fingers resting against the dark silk of her gown. The fabric flowed around her like a liquid shadow, its hem whispering softly against the stone floor with every bare-footed step. It was meant to show humility before the Night Goddess.

Or surrender.

Valeria had not yet decided which.

The entire coven had gathered within the hall. Dozens of faces watched her pass—some reverent, some eager, some trembling with anticipation. Names drifted through her memory as she recognized them.

Old allies.

Former confidants.

Lovers.

There were faces she had once known. Now those same faces gazed at her as if she were something divine. Valeria was no goddess. She was simply an offering walking toward an altar.

At the center of the chamber stood Carmilla. Her mother waited, dark robes flowing around her like the wings of a resting raven. The usual dining table had been cleared away and replaced with a single narrow altar carved from black stone.

Upon it rested a shallow ceremonial bowl. Even from several paces away, Valeria could see the contents—small vials of dark liquid, crushed herbs, moonstones ground to fine dust.

And a slender arrow lay beside the bowl. The metal tip gleamed faintly, polished to an elegant sharpness.

“Tonight,” Carmilla began, her voice rising through the hall, “marks the fulfillment of a prophecy written long before any of us first drew breath.”

As Valeria stood before the table, the coven listened in rapt silence. Lowering her gaze, she stared at the arrow resting there. The weapon seemed almost delicate, its shaft dark, smooth, and deadly.

A faint movement stirred next to her. A thrall stood beside the altar now. His armor was simple, ceremonial rather than martial. A hood shadowed most of his face, and a narrow metal visor concealed his eyes. Yet something about him made her pause.

Even through the thin slits of the mask, she saw them.

Emerald.

The world seemed to tilt. She *knew* those eyes.

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Carmilla spoke of destiny and of ancient promises. The coven listened in reverent silence, every eye fixed upon the altar.

But for Talen, the words were swallowed by the thunder of his own pulse. His entire world had narrowed to one person.

Valeria.

She stood beside him at the altar. The midnight silk of her gown flowed around her. Her posture was calm, her hands folded before her as though she were simply attending a court gathering rather than preparing to die.

Was she truly going to sacrifice herself for a prophecy that would doom the realm?

His heart pounded harder, the rhythm violent in his ears as he forced himself to remain perfectly still. One wrong movement—one misplaced breath—and the illusion of belonging would shatter. Someone might notice the wrongness of his stance, the tension in his shoulders, the fact that this thrall carried himself like a soldier instead of a puppet.

But no one was watching him. No one was watching the thralls.

Every gaze in the chamber belonged to Valeria.

Including Sylven’s.

Sylven stood at Carmilla’s right hand, tall and composed, dressed in dark finery that caught the candlelight like polished obsidian. His expression carried the same smug satisfaction Talen had come to hate.

The sight gave a feral twist in Talen’s chest. For one terrible moment, he imagined crossing the hall in three strides, tearing the blade from his belt and driving it straight through Sylven’s throat. The thought burned bright.

But he forced it down.

Not yet. Not until the moment mattered.

He dragged his focus back to the altar just as Valeria lifted the arrow from the table, holding it lightly between her fingers as though weighing it, testing the balance of the shaft. The steel tip caught the candlelight, flashing as she turned it.

Beside the altar, a dark bow rested against the table—slender and elegant, its limbs carved with ancient symbols.

Talen knew what came next. He had heard it rustling through Carmilla’s mind; he had been so gentle, she hadn’t noticed his invasion. Valeria would drive the blade of the arrow into her own flesh, and her blood would spill into the ceremonial bowl waiting upon the altar.

Only then would Carmilla take the arrow and nock it to the bow, then loose it toward the moon itself–calling upon the Night Goddess to awaken the prophecy.

Talen watched Valeria standing there with the arrow in her hand, the entire coven waiting for the moment she would turn the blade upon herself.

The shift was so sudden it shattered the fragile stillness of the hall. One moment she stood before the altar, the arrow resting in her palm.

The next—

She spun, the bow already in her hand. The string sang as she pulled it back.

The arrow was not aimed toward the bowl.

Not toward her own flesh.

It was aimed across the hall.

Directly at Sylven.

Thralls began to stir around the room, confusion rippling through the ranks as they sensed something had gone terribly wrong. But Valeria had already released the string.

The arrow cut through the candlelit air with a vicious hiss–straight for Sylven’s throat.

Gasps erupted across the chamber.

Before the arrow landed true, Valeria’s voice cut through the rising chaos.

“*Now*, Talen.”
The name alone shattered the illusion. Heads turned.
Valeria’s final command followed, cold and absolute.
“*Finish* him.”

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The boy from the refugee camp waited patiently in line with the others at the registration table, watching as name after name was recorded by Lucan. But when his turn came, Lucan barely glanced up before shaking his head.

“You’re not of age, boy.”

“That may be so, but I can fight.”

Ren studied his thin shoulders, dirt-smudged face, and eyes that had seen far too much for someone so young. Without a word, she drew the blade from her belt and handed it to him. The boy hesitated before taking it.

The moment the weapon settled into his hand, his shoulders dipped. The weight of it clearly surprised him.

“Go on,” Ren jerked her chin toward the open space beside the table. “Show us your fighting stance.”

The boy stepped forward and spread his feet, gripping the knife in both hands. He raised it like a butcher’s cleaver, shoulders stiff, jaw set with determination. Ren and Lucan exchanged a look.

Lucan sighed. “Enough of this. Move aside and let the others sign their names.”

“But I want to fight!”

Lucan opened his mouth to respond, but Ren stepped in first.

“Come on, kid,” she guided him away from the table with a hand on his shoulder. “Let’s talk.”

She shot Lucan a pointed look over her shoulder. Pinching the bridge of his nose, Lucan let out a heavy exhale. They had gone over recruit after recruit for hours, and with evening fast approaching, his patience was wearing thin. He reluctantly gestured to the next person in line to step forward.

Once they were out of earshot, the boy turned to Ren.

“I can fight.”

Ren leaned back against a nearby tree.

“I don’t doubt you’ve got guts. You’ve been through a lot, haven’t you?”

The boy looked away. But not before Ren saw the shine of tears in his eyes. “Please,” he said quietly.

Ren let out a sigh.

“Alright, let me explain something.” She nudged the blade back toward him. “If we put you on the front lines, you’re likely to die. And worse, you might get someone else killed trying to save you. In battle, every fighter has to hold their own. Otherwise, they become a liability.”

“What’s a liability?”

Ren scratched the back of her neck, thinking. “It means you’re a hazard to the line. You drop your shield, you create a gap. Then the guy next to you has to choose between dying or saving you. Gaps get people killed.”

The boy stared down at the knife in his hands.

Ren pushed off the tree. “But here’s the thing. We’re heading to Driftwood Bay. We’ll be building an army and training soldiers. If you want to help, come with us. I’ll train you how to fight. The first step is training you to hold a sword without it tearing your arm out of its socket. You look like you'd trip over the hilt, let alone survive a swing.”

A small spark of hope flickered in the boy’s eyes.

“And by the time the real fighting starts,” Ren clapped a hand on his shoulder, “we’re going to need every capable fighter we can get.” She grinned. “So, what do you say, kid? Do you want to learn?”

“I don’t want to be helpless anymore,” he admitted quietly. “Teach me, and I swear I’ll fight harder than anyone.”

“I’ve got no doubt. Now, have you ever saddled a horse before?”



The night they returned to Driftwood Bay, a blood-red moon hung heavy over the harbor, coloring the dark water with a strange crimson glow. Along the docks, lanterns burned as the convoy rode in, their horses exhausted from the long journey.

Behind them came two hundred and eighty-three souls willing to take up arms for House Vaelaran. Considering the size of the refugee camp, Ren had expected far fewer. But grief had a way of turning people toward war.

The docks buzzed with activity as they arrived. Word had already spread that Princess Kaelin had returned, and people had gathered to see the riders come in beneath the blood-red sky.

Ren slid down from Ash. Finn, the boy who joined their journey back, managed to slide off after her, nearly tripping over his feet. The gelding huffed as Ren handed the reins over to a stableboy waiting nearby. She gave the horse one last pat along the neck and slipped him a sugar cube from her pocket.

“Earned it,” Ren murmured, giving Ash one last pat before turning back to the boys. To the stablehand, she asked, “What’s your name?”

“John.”

Ren turned to Finn.

“Go with John and help him settle Ash and at least three of the other horses. When you’re finished, go inside the tavern over there and speak with Brenna. She’ll have a room for you. Try to get a few hours of sleep, because tonight, we have the watch.” She pointed toward the building near the docks. “Understood?”

Finn straightened instantly when she addressed him, his small shoulders squaring like a soldier being given orders.

“Got it,” he said.

Ren lingered, watching as John carefully showed Finn how to hold the horse’s reins.

“Not like that,” John adjusted Finn’s grip. “It’s important to be firm, but horses don’t take well to being yanked.”

Finn nodded, concentrating as if the lesson were a matter of life and death. His hands were too hesitant on the leather, but Ren could see the determination burning in his eyes. He wanted to get it right.

Ren found herself smiling. She wasn’t entirely sure what had possessed her to promise to train the boy herself–the idea had come out of her mouth

before she'd properly thought it through. But he wanted to fight for the kingdom, not for glory or for coin.

To matter.

It was a cruel thing, really, that someone so young had already been pushed into that kind of desperation. Still… if the boy was going to stand on a battlefield one day, she'd make damn sure he had a fighting chance. By the end of summer, he'd know how to hold a blade properly.

And summer was coming in full-swing.

The warmth of the new season pressed in early this year, bleeding the cool edge from spring. Even now, the breeze carried a strange heaviness, the kind that promised sweltering days ahead. Lytharien had always been known for its odd weather patterns. It seemed this year intended to skip spring altogether.

Ren stepped out of the stable, brushing dust from her hands, and nearly walked straight into Kaelin. Kaelin caught her by the forearms to steady her.

"I see you've acquired an apprentice," Kaelin glanced past Ren toward the stable where Finn was carefully leading Ash with John beside him.

Ren watched the boy struggle to keep the reins from tangling around his wrist.

"Yeah, well, his fighting stance was so pathetic I figured someone had to intervene before he hurt himself."

Kaelin let out a soft huff of laughter.

"And besides," Ren added, folding her arms, "who knows? Maybe one day he'll save my ass."

"Perhaps," Kaelin murmured thoughtfully.

Then she stepped closer.

Before Ren could speak, Kaelin pulled her close and kissed her. Ren's hand slid to Kaelin's waist, pulling her closer until the space between them disappeared entirely.

When Kaelin finally drew back, she rested her forehead against Ren's.

"I'm thankful to have you by my side," she whispered.

Ren kissed her again—once, then again, lingering just a little longer the second time.

"Watching you turn into a badass queen is honestly one of the best things I've ever seen," Ren murmured against Kaelin's lips.

Kaelin rolled her eyes.

“You are impossible.”

“Yeah,” Ren said, brushing her thumb along Kaelin’s jaw. “But you keep me around anyway.”

“I do,” Kaelin whispered, a small, genuine smile finally breaking through. “Mainly because a badass queen still needs a stubborn pain-in-the-ass to keep her grounded. I’m not letting you go anywhere.”

They went inside, sharing a round of drinks with Lucan and listening to Sir Pindlewhip’s hopeless attempts to finish his rhyming limerick, before they finally ventured upstairs to their bedroom.

Ren pushed open the door and pulled Kaelin inside. She kicked the door shut just as Kaelin slammed her back against the wood. Kaelin’s mouth came down on hers with pure, desperate heat. Ren gasped, her hands moving straight to the fae princess’ waist to pull her close.

“Gods,” Kaelin breathed, her hands tangling in Ren’s hair. “I’ve been wanting this all day. Strip for me, Ren. I want to see you naked.”

“Yeah?” Ren asked, already breathless. She started walking them backward toward the bed, her hands moving over Kaelin’s clothes. “Should’ve said something sooner. I could’ve gone without listening to Sir Pindlewhip’s rhymes this evening, although I think he’s getting close.”

“Shut up and get your clothes off,” Kaelin murmured, nipping hard at Ren’s lower lip.

They tumbled onto the mattress, and Ren pulled Kaelin on top of her. Kaelin’s blonde hair fell around them like a curtain, her eyes glowing bright in the dim lamplight.

“You’re so beautiful,” Ren whispered, tucking a strand behind Kaelin’s pointed ear.

Kaelin leaned down, her lips brushing Ren’s ear as she whispered, “You can whisper sweet things all you want, but I’m going to make you *beg* for me tonight, Ren darling.”

She kissed Ren again, and Ren’s fingers worked the laces of Kaelin’s dress, loosening them easily. Kaelin sat up to pull the fabric over her head and tossed it aside.

Ren’s breath caught. Kaelin’s pale skin seemed to glow in the low light. Ren sat up, pressing her lips to Kaelin’s throat, her collarbone, and then lower.

Kaelin arched her back, her fingers gripping Ren’s hair. “Take off your shirt, Ren. Let me feel your skin.”

Ren pulled back just long enough to rip her shirt off, shedding the rest of her clothes. When they came back together, the skin-to-skin contact was blissful.

Ren rolled them over, settling right between Kaelin's thighs. Kaelin wrapped her legs tightly around Ren's waist.

"You feel so good," Kaelin whispered, her voice dropping into a breathless purr. "Touch me exactly where I want it."

Ren kissed her deeply, swallowing the fae princess' words as her hand slid down between their bodies. When her fingers found Kaelin's center, her hips rolled up against Ren's touch.

"So wet for me already," Ren murmured, her voice rough. She traced slow circles, teasing her.

"Don't tease me," Kaelin growled. "You know how bad I want you."

Ren obliged, sliding two fingers inside her in one smooth motion. Kaelin cried out, throwing her head back against the pillow. Ren leaned down, biting gently at the exposed skin of her neck. Ren set a steady, heavy rhythm, curling her fingers perfectly inside while her thumb circled Kaelin's clit. Kaelin's nails dug deep into Ren's shoulders.

"That's it," Ren encouraged. "Let me hear you."

"You feel so good," Kaelin gasped, her hips moving frantically now, chasing the friction. "Harder, Ren. Don't you dare stop. Fuck me until I scream."

"I've got you," Ren murmured, speeding up her pace. She added a third finger, feeling Kaelin stretch tightly around her. "Come for me, Kaelin. Let go."

Ren pressed her thumb down hard against her clit, her fingers hitting the perfect spot inside with every thrust.

Kaelin shattered.

She screamed Ren's name, her entire body going completely rigid as the orgasm tore through her. Kaelin's inner walls clamped down tight, squeezing Ren's fingers in hard, rhythmic waves. Ren kept up a gentle pressure, holding her through the peak until Kaelin's body finally began to soften.

"By the Veil," Kaelin breathed.

"Yeah," Ren agreed. She grinned, slowly pulling her fingers out. She brought them to her mouth, holding eye contact as she licked them clean.

Kaelin’s eyes darkened immediately. A wicked smile touched her lips. “Get back up here. I’m not nearly done with you. The night is only getting started.”

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“*Finish him.*”

Talen didn't need to be told twice.

He tore his blade free from its sheath and surged forward. Behind him, the coven panicked as their ritual turned into a fight.

The arrow missed his neck. Blood soaked into Sylven's rich coat sleeve from the arrow jutting out of his right shoulder.

But it wasn’t enough to kill.

Closing the distance in three long strides, Talen brought his blade down just as Sylven recovered, his hand flashing toward the hilt at his side.

Sylven snarled as their blades locked between them. Pain twisted his features as the arrow shifted in his shoulder.

“You should have stayed in your cage,” Sylven hissed.

Talen’s answer was a brutal twist of his wrist that forced Sylven’s sword aside. The two fae circled like rival predators, waiting for the slightest twitch to signal the next move.

Behind them, the hall had descended into chaos. Coven members scrambled backward as furniture overturned. Thralls drew weapons, uncertain where to strike. Carmilla’s voice rose somewhere near the altar.

Sylven raised his sword again and barked an order.

“Kill him!”

The command snapped through the room like a whip. Fae soldiers who had once sworn themselves to Vaelaran’s crown surged forward without

hesitation.

Fae Talen had trained beside.

Fae he had called brothers and sisters.

The first rushed him from the left. Talen parried the incoming strike and drove his elbow into the fae's throat, sending her stumbling backward. Another blade swung toward his ribs; he ducked beneath it, pivoting smoothly as his own sword carved across the attacker's thigh.

Blood sprayed across the stone floor.

But more closed in.

Too many.

Raising his free hand, Talen unleashed a surge of magic that ripped through the hall in a blinding pulse of green light.

The soldiers froze as darkness swallowed their minds.

Talen tore through them like a storm. His cuts were precise and merciless, taking down every soldier before they could fight back.

But the magic did not reach everyone. Across the hall, Carmilla moved with terrifying grace as she closed on Valeria, her golden eyes blazing with fury.

"You dare defy the Night Goddess?" Carmilla hissed, her claws flashing toward her daughter's throat. Valeria barely twisted aside in time, the attack slicing through the air where she had stood.

With another blow from Carmilla, Valeria staggered. Seizing the advantage, the queen drove Valeria backward across the ritual circle, until a bowl shattered under Valeria's stumbling heel.

Carmilla's hand closed around her throat.

"You were *born* for this," she snarled. "You will not ruin what we have built for centuries!"

Valeria clawed at the iron grip cutting off her breath.

"I never asked to be *born*!" she spat. "I never asked for any of this!"

Carmilla sneered, her lips curling back to reveal her fangs in a display of pure contempt.

"You should be grateful I even gave you life," Carmilla whispered, her voice dropping to a dangerous, icy purr. "You think you were wanted? You were nothing more than the vile consequence of a mortal man's violence. I wanted nothing more than for the Night Goddess to take you away. Yet the shadows spared you, leaving me to bear the burden of your wretched existence. So you *will* serve your purpose."

Valeria went eerily still in Carmilla’s grasp.

“You want me to be a consequence?” Valeria whispered back, her voice suddenly echoing with a heavy, terrifying authority. “Fine. I shall be the mistake that is going to tear down everything you built!”

The air in the hall dropped several degrees. Shadows began to crawl across the stone floor. Carmilla’s grip faltered as the darkness thickened behind Valeria.

A dark shape began to form.

A creature tore its way into the world behind Valeria—a towering demon of horn and claw, its body wreathed in black flame. Its jaws split open with a roar so deep the walls trembled.

The blinded soldiers screamed. They staggered backward in panic, clawing at their useless eyes. Talen whirled, and with a small flick of his hand, the magic lifted.

Talen granted them their sight back just so they could watch their new foe tear them apart.

The soldiers’ vision returned, and the demon loomed over Valeria like a nightmare given flesh.

Eyes burning with hellfire.

One man dropped his sword. “What the hell is *that*?”

Another began screaming. Sylven’s men faltered, terror rippling through their ranks as the monstrous thing raised its neck and roared.

And in the middle of it all remained Valeria, not as the pawn they had tried to create.

But the one they should have feared.



The floor trembled.

A deafening roar tore from the demon towering behind Valeria, vibrating through the very rafters of the hall. Its skeletal face was crowned by a crown of protruding horns, while great, velvet-textured wings unfurled from its back. It flexed its gangly, unnaturally long arms, revealing fingers tipped with curved talons.

The darkness deepened and spilled across the floor like liquid shadow, pooling beneath the altar and crawling outward in twisting tendrils.

From that blackness came movement, then more shapes–smaller than the first.

But no less horrifying.

Clawed creatures crawled out of the dark rift behind Valeria. One stepped into the hall with a hiss, bending its spine and showing off rows of sharp teeth.

Another followed.

Then another.

A tide of smaller demons spilled into the room, eyes gleaming.

The line of soldiers that had once pressed toward Talen broke as fae stumbled backward.

Talen didn't stop. He drove forward, cutting down another soldier who tried to intercept him. But even he faltered for half a heartbeat as one of the creatures lunged towards a fae soldier near the far wall. Its claws sank into the fae's shoulders, then it wrenched.

The soldier's head tore free in a spray of crimson, rolling across the stone floor.

Several of Sylven's men ran. Others tried to fight, but the battle turned into madness.

Another tremor shook through the foundations. Stone cracked along the walls in jagged fractures. A section of the ceiling splintered, wooden beams collapsing and sent shards of timber scattering across the hall.

Through the unfolding chaos, Talen fought his way toward Sylven until their eyes met across the wreckage. The change in Sylven's face was total; with his smug confidence gone, only raw calculation remained.

And fury.

"You've doomed us all," Sylven snarled.

"Then we'll all burn," Talen sneered, closing the distance. "But I promise you, Sylven—you will die by *my* hand long before the smoke clears."

Talen lunged, but Sylven parried the blow and immediately spun into a counter-strike. Talen ducked and swept his leg out in a brutal arc.

Sylven leaped back, clearing the sweeping kick, and thrust his sword forward in a vicious sequence of stabs. Talen deflected each one.

Talen feinted left, drawing Sylven's guard down, then drove his hilt directly into Sylven's jaw. Sylven stumbled back, spitting blood, but as Talen raised his sword for the killing blow—

CRACK.

The ceiling above them began collapsing.

The massive demon Valeria had summoned swept a claw through a cluster of soldiers, sending bodies flying.

Carmilla’s voice rose above the carnage.

“Enough!”

She reigned near the edge of the ritual circle, her dark robes whipping around her.

Suddenly, Sylven retreated, his hand slicing through the air as reality tore open. A jagged portal split the air behind him to expose a swirling void.

“Fall back!” Sylven roared.

His soldiers didn’t hesitate. Those still living scrambled toward the portal, shoving one another in their desperation to escape the nightmare swallowing the hall.

“Move!” Sylven barked again.

Carmilla’s gaze flicked once toward Valeria before she vanished through the portal.

Talen surged forward.

But Sylven stepped backward through the swirling rift, his gaze locked on Talen with cold promise.

“This isn’t finished,” Sylven seethed.

The portal closed shut.

The hall fell into a strange, echoing silence, broken only by the distant screams of the remaining demons and the groan of the castle as another section of stone collapsed inward.

Sylven was gone.

Again.

And the castle was coming apart around them.

Another violent tremor ripped through the hall, sending cracks racing across the stone floor. A section of the ceiling groaned above him before part of it gave way, stone blocks crashing down in a thunderous collapse that shook the room.

Dust swallowed the air.

The great demon still loomed in the center of the chamber, its massive claws dragging across the broken floor as the smaller creatures skittered through the wreckage like scavengers unleashed.

The magic that had birthed them trembled in the air like a storm beginning to unravel.

Talen lowered his sword, his chest still rising and falling with the remnants of battle.

Sylven had escaped.

Carmilla had fled.

And Valeria…

A hand settled on his shoulder.

Valeria stood beside him. The glow in her eyes had dimmed, though traces of that unnatural gold still flickered beneath the surface.

Her dark hair had come loose around her shoulders, strands drifting across her face. For a moment, they simply looked at one another.

“You’re alive,” Talen managed.

Valeria’s lips curved faintly. “So are you.”

Another violent shudder rocked the castle.

A massive crack split the far wall. Stone blocks began to tear loose, tumbling down as the structure slowly surrendered to the chaos tearing through its foundations.

One of the smaller demons shrieked somewhere behind them as part of the ceiling crushed it beneath falling stone.

“This castle is coming down.”

Valeria followed his gaze toward the collapsing arches and splintering beams.

“Yes,” she murmured.

She lifted her hand. The shadows coiled toward her palm like obedient serpents.

A thin line of darkness tore open in the air before them. At first it was only a fracture, no wider than a blade.

Then it widened.

The tear stretched outward into a swirling portal of black and silver light, the edges rippling like water disturbed by unseen currents. Through it, Talen glimpsed nothing but shifting darkness and distant stars.

Valeria lowered her hand. The portal stabilized instantly.

Behind them, the castle gave another violent groan. Stone pillars began to buckle. The floor tilted beneath their feet as deeper fractures spread through the foundations.

They did not have time to linger. Valeria’s hand slipped down from his shoulder. Then she reached for his wrist. Her grip was firm.

“Let us go, Talen.”

Together they stepped toward the swirling darkness.

Just as another section of the ceiling collapsed behind them with a deafening crash, the two of them crossed the threshold of the portal.

The moment they passed through, the rift sealed behind them with a quiet snap.

And the collapsing castle disappeared from sight.

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Finn and Ren rode side-by-side along the narrow trail bordering Driftwood Bay's outer fields. Ren rode Ash, while Finn trotted beside her on a much smaller pony named Tilly.

The small pony looked tiny next to Ash, but Finn rode with more confidence, sitting up straighter in his saddle.

Ren suspected the shorter fall helped.

They crested a gradual hill that overlooked the outer edge of town, where lanterns had begun to glow faintly as evening settled over the harbor. The sea breeze carried the scent of salt and wood smoke across the grasslands as they continued their patrol along the perimeter. Ren secretly enjoyed patrolling at that time of day. It felt almost peaceful.

“Tomorrow, you’ll start running messages between different parts of town.”

Finn glanced up at her.

“You’re quick on your feet,” Ren added. “And we’ll need someone reliable to pass along information. You’ll also help in the stables by readying horses for patrols.”

Finn nodded before his attention shifted back to Tilly. The pony had drifted sideways toward a thick patch of grass.

“Tilly,” Finn muttered, tugging on the reins.

Tilly ignored him. She lowered her head and tore off a mouthful of grass.

Finn pulled again. “Come on.” Tilly lifted her head just long enough to chew before attempting to wander back toward the greenery.

Ren snorted. “Stubborn creature. If there’s grass within a mile, she’ll find it.”

Finn tugged harder this time, but the pony simply planted her hooves and leaned toward the greenery.

“Don’t fight her like that,” Ren advised.

“But she won’t listen.”

“She will, but not if you ask like you’re hoping she’ll agree.” She nodded toward the reins in his hands. “Ponies like this will test you. The moment they think you’re unsure, they’ll do whatever they please. Shorten the reins a bit, then give her a clear pull and push her forward with your heels.”

Finn adjusted his grip and tried again. Tilly tossed her head in protest but shuffled forward a few reluctant steps.

“There you go,” Ren praised. “See? She needs you to be a confident rider.”

“What if she still doesn’t listen?”

Ren shrugged. “Then you remind her who’s steering.”

Tilly flicked her ears back at that.

Still, Finn looked more comfortable riding Tilly than he had before. Despite the pony’s constant attempts to graze, he handled her with growing confidence.

“We’ve also got new recruits arriving,” Ren continued as they began descending the other side of the hill. “You’ll stick close to Lucan Brightbane while he handles that.”

“What will I be doing?”

“Mainly, you’ll help keep things moving. You’ll collect practice weapons, reset the training dummies after drills, and keep score during sparring matches. And you’ll fetch them water between the spars.”

“When do I get to fight?”

“Soon. When we have time in the evenings, maybe.”

Finn’s shoulders slumped.

Ren sighed. “Listen, every army needs soldiers. But just as important are the people behind the scenes keeping everything running. They’re the ones who make sure the soldiers can keep fighting.”

Finn nodded. And when Tilly tried drifting toward another patch of grass, he caught her before she could get there.

They continued along the ridge in silence. The hill rose higher than the surrounding land, and from its crest, the world seemed to open around them.

Ren lifted her gaze. A Blood Moon hung low over the horizon, swollen and red, bathing the fields in a strange crimson glow. She had never seen the sky look so vast before. Out here, it felt as though the heavens themselves had stretched wider. For a moment, the sight held her, quiet and eerie and beautiful all at once.

Then her thoughts drifted to the small rider beside her. Finn sat stiffly on Tilly, concentrating hard on keeping the stubborn pony from wandering toward another patch of grass. In the moonlight, Ren could see him more clearly than she had earlier.

His clothes hung loosely on his scrawny frame, and there were faint shadows beneath his eyes that no child his age should have carried. Yet when he spoke, there was a weight behind his words, a kind of quiet maturity that only came from seeing too much, too soon.

He had never mentioned a family. Which meant he had either lost them…

Or never had one at all.

Her nostrils flared as anger stirred in her chest.

Sylven.

This war over bloodlines and dominion had carved scars across the entire kingdom. The Pyraelia Massacre alone had wiped out families by the dozens.

Children like Finn were what remained afterward. The war left only orphans, broken homes, and graves that would never be marked.

None of it was fair.

Something shifted in the corner of Ren’s vision. Movement came to her right and near the brushline where the open field met the thicker edge of the woods.

Ren straightened in the saddle. Two shadowy figures moved slowly across the field. Her hand instinctively dropped toward the hilt of her sword.

Finn noticed the shift in Ren’s demeanor.

“What is it?” he asked.

Ren squinted. “I’m not sure.”

The figures were still far enough away that she could only glimpse silhouettes moving through the grass.

Ren swung one leg over Ash and slid down from the saddle.

“Stay here,” she told Finn. “And don’t move unless I tell you.”

Finn nodded.

Ren approached the figures slowly. The wind shifted, carrying faint sounds across the field.

Footsteps.

Labored breathing.

The shapes grew clearer as they drew closer.

Two figures.

One taller.

One…

Ren stopped.

“Gods above,” she breathed.

Because standing in the moonlight ahead were Talen and Valeria.

Alive.

Ren’s fingers went slack. Her sword slipped from her hand and fell into the grass.

“Talen?” she whispered.

Then, she ran across the meadow, boots tearing through the tall grass as she nearly lost her footing twice on the uneven ground. Her breath caught in her throat, her chest burning as she pushed harder, faster.

She almost tripped outright when her heel caught a rock hidden in the dirt, but she caught herself, stumbling forward before forcing her legs to keep moving.

The world blurred around her.

All she could see was *him*.

In her mind, in the quiet corners of her thoughts, she refused to let anyone see that she had accepted that he may never return.

But there he was.

Still standing.

Still *breathing*.

By the time she reached him, she crashed into him with enough force to nearly knock them both off balance, her arms wrapping around him. Talen staggered a step backward under the impact.

Then his arms came up around her.

Ren's fingers dug into the back of his coat, her face pressed into his shoulder as tears she hadn't even realized were there began spilling freely down her cheeks.

"You're alive," she managed. "You selfless bastard," she whispered hoarsely. "I thought you were as good as dead."

Talen let out a soft breath above her, one hand coming up to rest gently against the back of her head.

"There were several moments where that seemed like the more likely outcome," he admitted quietly.

Ren pulled back just enough to look at him. The sight of him up close made her chest tighten painfully. He looked thinner. Harder somehow. There were new scars across his face and throat, and his eyes carried a weight that hadn't been there before.

But they were still his.

Still Talen.

Ren's hands came up to his face before she could stop herself, gripping his jaw like she needed to confirm he was real.

"Gods," she breathed.

Then she pulled him into another fierce hug, holding him so tightly it hurt.

Behind them, Finn stood frozen near the hill, staring wide-eyed at the reunion unfolding in the moonlit field.

But Ren didn't notice. All she knew was that her friend—someone she had already mourned—was alive in her arms.

And she wasn't letting go anytime soon.

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The door of the Splintered Siren opened.

Lucan glanced up from the table where he had been leaning over a map with Brenna. When he saw who stepped through the doorway behind Ren, he froze.

For a moment, his brain refused to understand what his eyes were telling him.

Talen, standing in the doorway.

Alive.

Lucan's face drained of color so quickly he had to grab the edge of the table to steady himself.

"By the Gods…" he breathed hoarsely, staring as though he were witnessing a ghost rise from the grave. He may as well have.

Ren helped Talen further inside, guiding him toward one of the empty tables near the hearth. Now that the lamplight struck him fully, his injuries were impossible to ignore. Blood had dried in dark crusts along his arms and collar. His clothes hung torn and stiff with grime. Bruises shadowed his face and throat, and his movements were labored.

"Brenna!" Ren called toward the kitchen. "We could use some soup, bread, and water!" She eased Talen into a chair, steadying him as he sank down.

A moment later, Kaelin appeared from the upper stairway, drawn by the commotion.

“Talen—”

Kaelin rushed across the hall and threw her arms around her brother. The force of it nearly knocked the chair backward, tears spilling down her cheeks.

“You’re alive,” she whispered.

The entire tavern had gone quiet. Conversations dropped to murmurs. Dockworkers turned in their seats, whispering to one another as realization spread through the room.

Ren stood nearby, arms folded tightly across her chest as she wiped quickly at the corners of her eyes. Gods, he looked terrible. He needed a bath, a healer, and at least a week of uninterrupted sleep.

Near the doorway, Valeria lingered like a shadow, clearly uncertain of where she belonged. Her golden eyes moved across the tavern, measuring the unfamiliar faces. Ren noticed her watching. Her brow lifted. Still wary but trusting Talen enough to allow it, Ren jerked her chin toward the table.

Valeria crossed the room and took the seat opposite Talen.

Brenna set down a steaming bowl of soup, a thick roll of bread, and a goblet of water. Talen wrapped his hands around the bowl like a man rediscovering warmth.

Brenna paused, shoulders squaring as her gaze locked onto Valeria with open hostility.

“Your Highness, care to explain why that blood-sucking vermin has been invited into our company?” she growled.

Brenna’s glare could have split stone, but Valeria held the orc woman’s gaze.

“She’s with us,” Talen muttered as he raised the broth to his lips, though the tension in the room had not eased in the slightest.

“I am here to help,” Valeria stated.

Ren’s eyes narrowed. “That’s rich. You vanished the moment things turned and left us to deal with your mother after swearing you’d protect us.” Her lip curled. “And now you expect us to trust *you* want to help us?”

Valeria did not flinch. If anything, she seemed to draw herself taller, chin lifting.

“I gave you my word that I would do what I could to ensure your safety. As you can see, you are all very much alive.”

“Alive?” Ren snapped. “Talen walks back to us like that, and you call *that* protection? Step outside, and you and I can settle this *right now*—”

“Enough.”

Talen’s voice cut through the room.

“Her kind didn’t do this,” he said quieter.

Ren went speechless, and the entire tavern followed.

“I thank the Gods for surviving,” Talen murmured, “But there is information you must hear.”

Kaelin pulled back just enough to study his face.

“You need rest,” she murmured.

Then the fae princess’ expression darkened as her gaze moved over the bruises and cuts scattered across his skin.

Her voice dropped. “Who did this to you?”

Talen met her eyes. “Sylven.”

Kaelin went still.

Ren felt her stomach drop like a stone.

Sylven.

Talen recounted everything—the coven, the prophecy, and Sylven’s alliance with the vampyres. He told them of the ritual meant to bring eternal night and of Carmilla’s willingness to sacrifice her own daughter to fulfill it. He told them of the dungeon and the torture he endured by Sylven.

Lucan’s knuckles whitened against the table as he listened.

“How did you escape?” he asked.

Talen glanced at Ren. “Elira.”

Ren hadn’t heard that name spoken since the Massacre of Pyraelia.

“Elira…” Ren repeated. Her expression darkened. “I didn’t think I’d ever hear that name again.”

“She no longer approved of what Sylven had become. I believe she loosened my chains.” He glanced at Valeria. “From there, we escaped together. Unfortunately, Sylven and Carmilla also escaped.”

“Of course they did,” Ren muttered, clenching her fists.

Talen sighed. “We don’t have time to dwell on it.”

“You have time to wash and sleep,” Kaelin insisted.

“No,” Talen said firmly. “You don’t understand. The final piece of the Prophecy was never an object. It was the blood of a descendant of the Night Goddess.” His voice lowered. “And she sits right there. If they get a drop of her blood, they can enact the prophecy.”

Ren’s breath hitched when Talen looked at Valeria.

“So Carmilla would hand over her daughter… for the sake of a prophecy?” Lucan asked, brow furrowing.

Talen nodded. “She’ll do whatever it takes to bring it to fruition.”

“I overheard a mage known as Zakhar informing Sylven of your whereabouts.” Valeria’s eyes flicked back to them. “They know where you are. As quaint as this refuge may appear, it will not shelter you past tomorrow’s nightfall.”

“For what?” Ren asked.

Valeria’s golden eyes lingered on her. “For their attack.”

Valeria’s words had barely settled before Ren choked, “Zakhar?” Her eyes snapped to Valeria, something volatile igniting behind them. “No—” Ren shook her head once, as if rejecting it outright. “No, that’s not possible. He hasn’t made an appearance in all of this time; why would he show now?”

“*He’s* the one who translated the book. The only one who could,” Talen answered.

“Zakhar thrives on chaos; he always has. And this is exactly the kind of mess he would set in motion,” Ren conceded.

“They will come with everything they have,” Valeria continued. “Sylven and my mother will not allow this prophecy to slip through their fingers, especially not when they were so close to bringing it to fruition.”

Lucan leaned forward. “And what exactly is their goal?”

“The end of life in Aetheria… starting with House Vaelaran,” Valeria answered. “And those deemed worthy of survival will exist only to be fed from.”

Silence fell between them.

Ren straightened. “Then open a dark portal and leave. Go into hiding—somewhere so deep and lost they’ll never track you down.”

Lucan raised his glass with a bitter, hollow grunt. “I’d drink to that.”

“It would not matter,” Valeria countered calmly. “They will tear this place apart searching for me regardless.” Her golden gaze shifted toward Talen, meeting his in a look that fractured with unspoken troubles.

Ren’s skin prickled. His instincts screamed that something heavy had transpired between the two of them.

“I have spent my entire existence feeding on the life force of others,” Valeria continued softly, the confession heavy in the air. “Just once, I want my actions to mean something. This battle will be my line in the sand. I

want to fight alongside you. But… if they gain the upper hand, if the tides turn completely against us…”

She trailed off, pausing.

“I will erase myself from existence.”

Ren’s jaw dropped, the air vanishing from her lungs. “You’d… kill yourself?”

“Without hesitation,” Valeria replied, her golden eyes burning with absolute, chilling resolve. “If it means preserving Aetheria, I will do what must be done. Without my breath, the prophecy dies with me.”

“Then we accept your aid,” Kaelin said calmly, her tone devoid of pity or panic. “And we are thankful for it. A tethered prophecy is only dangerous to those who let fate pull the strings. We intend to break them.”

Silence settled over the room once more.

Ren dragged a hand down her face, releasing a long, ragged exhale that sounded half like a laugh and half like a surrender to the madness. She rolled her shoulders, her jaw setting as the doubt bled out of her amber eyes, replaced by a dangerous spark.

“Well,” Ren muttered, slumping back against the wall with a lethal grin. “If we’re all agreeing to lay our lives on the line today, we might as well make it a nightmare for the bastards trying to kill us.”

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Tilly’s hooves hammered against the packed dirt road as they tore through the narrow streets of Driftwood Bay. Lantern light flickered across the buildings as morning crept closer.

“Come on, Tilly,” Finn urged, leaning low over her neck.

The pony’s ears flattened as if she resented the sudden urgency, but she kept moving, weaving between fishermen hauling nets and townsfolk carrying baskets of morning goods.

Finn brought her to a halt in front of the first door. He slid halfway out of the saddle and pounded his fist against the wood.

A moment later, the door cracked open, revealing an older woman wrapped in a wool shawl.

Finn straightened back on the saddle. His hands trembled against the reins.

“An attack is coming tonight. Your King and Queen summons you to war.”

The woman blinked at him in stunned silence.

“Will you fight for your kingdom?” Finn asked.

Behind her, a man appeared in the doorway, wiping flour from his hands. “What are you shouting about, boy?”

“Go to the Great Hall and bring whatever you can use to fight. Swords, axes—anything. Tonight we fight, or we die.”

Finn didn’t wait to see what they chose. He dug his heels into Tilly, and she surged forward. They galloped down the next street, hooves striking against loose stones. The wind whipped past Finn’s face as he rode.

He had never done anything like this before. Never shouted orders. Certainly never called people to war.

He stopped again in front of another small house and hammered on the door.

“Open up!”

A young father answered this time, a baby balanced against his shoulder. The baby blinked sleepily in the fading light.

“Your king and queen summons you to war.”

“What? No, my family—”

“An army is coming tonight. If you can fight, you’re needed. Go to the Great Hall.”

The father looked down at the child in his arms. Finn’s fingers tightened on the reins. A woman rushed in from behind, resting her arm on the father’s elbow. Her eyes were glossy, but she said firmly, “What about the children?”

“Children and the elderly will be evacuated somewhere safe. Take those who cannot fight and children to the Salt-Keep as soon as you can. But if we don’t hold the line, there won't be a home left to come back to!”

The man stared at him for a long moment. Then, he nodded. “Aye, I’ll be there.”

Finn didn't waste a second to breathe. He spurred Tilly back into a gallop. He rode like a demon was chasing him. Street after street. Door after door, until his knuckles bleed and his throat felt like sandpaper.

“Attack coming tonight!”

“Your queen and king summons you!”

“Will you fight for your kingdom?”

His voice grew hoarse from shouting. People began stepping into the streets as word spread.

Every time Tilly skidded to a stop, Finn’s body shook with fear. But every time a door opened, he forced the terror out of his throat and turned it into fire.

“Go to the Eastern Gate. Bring whatever you can fight with!”

An old fisherman lifted a rusted spear from beside his doorway. A young woman appeared with a woodcutting axe. A blacksmith, face black with

soot, reached for his hammer.

Finn kept riding. The sun broke over the horizon, blurring morning into afternoon in a haze of sweat and adrenaline.

What if the enemies came sooner?

What if they were already marching?

What if…

Tilly stumbled, slowing down. Finn blinked, realizing his vision had gone blurry around the edges. Hot tears slipped down his cheeks. He viciously wiped them away with the back of his dusty hand.

Not now. Do not break down now.

He threw himself forward in the saddle, charging directly into the crowded marketplace, screaming until his lungs felt ready to burst.

“Your king and queen summons you to war!”

People turned. Doors opened with heads peering out at the boy’s shouts. More and more figures began walking toward the distant Eastern Gate. Finn drew in a ragged, shaky breath. His hands were still trembling against the reins. He was still terrified.

But when he opened his mouth, his voice didn't shake.

“Will you fight for your kingdom?” he called into the streets. “To arms! To the Great Hall! Stand for your sovereignty and for your home!”

And he rode on.

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Inside the Splintered Siren, Lucan stared into the crackling hearth, the firelight dancing across his face. His mug of ale rested loosely in his hand, forgotten for long stretches as the flames shifted and snapped.

He had studied the map of Driftwood Bay until the lines blurred–scrutinizing every inlet, every narrow road winding between the cliffs, and every choke point where an army could land, march.

Or slaughter.

Talen had finally ventured upstairs to steal time of rest. The fae prince had looked like death walking. The poor bastard needed a lot more than an hour’s rest.

But none of them had the luxury of time.

The quiet murmur of the Splintered Siren drifted through the air, but none of it reached him. His mind was far from the tavern.

Lucan sighed.

How had it come to this?

The loud pop of the fire pulled his mind decades into the past, back to battlefields fought under very different banners. He had been younger then, prouder, and fiercely loyal.

Fighting right beside Sylven.

There was a time when Lucan admired Sylven as the ultimate commander: strong, fearless, and decisive. He rarely barked orders from the

rear; he stood at the front of the battle, looking after his soldiers like a fae who actually valued their lives.

His soldiers.

Now, Lucan understood the ugly truth behind that loyalty. Sylven hadn't cared for his soldiers out of mercy; he cared for them because they were fae, believing theirs were the only lives that mattered. The rest of the world—humans, orcs, ogres—were merely insects to be crushed beneath fae boots.

And once… Lucan had been blind enough to believe the same.

Most of Sylven's soldiers had; it was how they were raised, how they were trained–it was how the world had always been explained to them. Fae were superior. The others were lesser. That belief had remained unquestioned for many decades, if not centuries.

Lucan shifted in his chair, staring down into the amber surface of his ale as old memories clawed their way back.

He had worked the prison carts and the executions, originally soothing his conscience with the easy lie that they deserved it–they were criminals, rebels, traitors to the crown.

But the truth had slowly bled through.

Lucan remembered a farmer who had only stolen grain to feed his starving children. He remembered a human girl caught stealing firewood during a freezing winter. He remembered an old orc who could barely stand, thrown on the prison cart because she couldn't hear the command to kneel when the vanguard marched past.

None of the crimes fit the punishment of execution. None of it felt like justice. Lucan lasted a single, miserable year watching innocent beings loaded into iron cages like animals–bound for execution.

After that, he submitted a transfer.

It was denied.

Returning to Pyraelia against Royal Orders would get him killed for desertion. So, Lucan orchestrated incompetence. He repeatedly "failed" his duties in ways that look like a total loss.

When confronted, he didn't fight back; he just stared blankly. After 3 weeks, he was put in for a transfer. Gods, his father had been furious. Lucan hadn't slept a wink his first night home, the physical ache of the beating was nothing compared to the memory of his father's voice—cold with rage and seething with disappointment.

“A dishonor,” his father had sneered, looming above him. “When your King commands you, you *obey*.”

Lucan had endured the blows without fighting back, absorbing the bruises and the deep disgust in his father’s eyes.

In the Crown’s eye, his punishment had been swift. Demotion. He was ordered to repeat years of military training to regain his competence.

And it was back in the training grounds of Pyraelia where he met Ren Harper.

She had been one hell of a stubborn human. She was brazenly sharp-tongued and completely unimpressed by him. Lucan had spent years perfecting the mask he wore before the world to portray the confident soldier. Most people saw only that.

Ren had looked straight through the carefully crafted image he presented to everyone else.

She saw *him*.

And somehow… she hadn’t turned away.

It was then that Lucan finally understood how wrong fae like Sylven truly were.

Because in the end, they were all the same.

Fae.

Human.

Orc.

Ogre.

All of them were born into a world where death waited eventually.

So what did it matter what blood ran through your veins when a blade pierced your chest?

The world was divided by lines—territories, noble houses, bloodlines. But none of that meant anything when steel met flesh on a battlefield.

Tonight, Aetheria would remember that truth.

Because tonight…

Driftwood Bay would become the line between life and death.

Lucan lifted the mug to his lips and took another long swallow of ale. The fire crackled.

And somewhere beyond the dark horizon, Sylven’s army was coming.

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When Brenna was a child, her clan was so large that she could not count them all. The clan had felt endless then.

During a *Gruth'vak*, an Orc clan's call to battle, many warriors met around the fires to prepare for bloodshed.

Now, Brenna counted the remaining members of her clan easily. Thirty-eight souls stood beneath the darkening sky. The warriors formed a wide circle around the bonfire, and drums pounded deep and steady. Ember sparks spiraled into the evening sky, drifting toward the rising stars.

Beyond them, the forest loomed.

This was sacred ground.

Long before Brenna had drawn her first breath, a great battle had raged here. Her grandmother, High War Chief of their people, had led the clan through great strife in that very clearing. When the battle ended, the earth had been soaked with the blood of the fallen.

It was here that Brenna's grandmother had the tavern built—The Splintered Siren.

Now the clan returned to the same ground to prepare for another battle.

The bonfire's flames rose from ashes kept alive for decades, salvaged from the soil of that ancient battlefield. Her father, Varok, had guarded them all this time, saving them specifically for a *Gruth'vak*.

Brenna felt the weight of history pressing down on her chest as she gripped the hilt of her sword.

Bonebreaker.

The blade rested easily in her hands, its worn grip shaped by years of battle. The weapon had belonged to her grandmother once, and before that, another chief whose name was spoken only in songs.

The drums grew louder.

At the head of the fire stood Velgra, their elder shaman. Age had carved deep lines into her green-gray skin, but her presence still commanded silence. Bones and carved charms hung from her staff, clattering as she raised it toward the flames. Her voice rose in a low chant–ancient words carried through the evening air.

The warriors answered, their voices blending with the drumbeat. Brenna found her lips moving instinctively, reciting the ritual she had learned as a child.

One by one, the warriors stepped forward. Velgra dipped her fingers into the sacred ash. Ulag went first. When Brenna's turn came, she bowed her head. Velgra's fingers were cool against her skin as the shaman drew a line of ash across Brenna's eyes.

"I do not fear death."

The words rolled through the circle in a quiet murmur. Then Velgra pressed her ash-covered palm against Brenna's chest, leaving a dark handprint over her heart.

"My heart belongs to the warband."

The drums pounded once more. Finally, Velgra traced a final streak of ash across Brenna's throat.

"If I fall," Brenna whispered with the others, *"sing my name."*

The fire roared. And around her, the thirty-eight remaining warriors of her clan lifted their weapons toward the night sky.

Silence.

Then, the next drum struck the night.

A deep, hollow boom rolled through the trees as the shamans lifted their great war drums—massive frames carved from ancient bone, their faces stretched tight with cured animal hide. The sound vibrated through the clearing, through the earth beneath Brenna's boots, through the marrow of her bones.

Velgra lifted her staff toward the sky as the other two shamans joined her. Their arms rose and fell in unison, heavy drumsticks striking the hides in unison.

One by one, they stepped into motion around the fire, boots stomping against the dirt in time with the drums. The circle tightened as the clan marched around the flames, shadows flickering across their scarred armor and painted faces.

The fire crackled and surged. Brenna joined the circle, Bonebreaker resting against her shoulder as she moved in unison with the others.

Velgra's voice rose above the drums.

"Gorak!"

The warriors answered in a thunderous roar.

"WATCH US FIGHT!"

"Thren!"

"WATCH US FIGHT!"

The circle stomped harder now, boots striking the earth with growing force as the chant built in their throats.

"Valdrum!"

"WATCH US FIGHT!"

Each name carried the memory of warriors who had once stood in this very circle. Warriors who had carried the same blood, fought beneath the same sky, and fallen on distant battlefields.

Their spirits were not gone. Not tonight.

The drums grew louder.

Brenna felt the rhythm climb into her veins like fire.

"Rogar!"

"WATCH US FIGHT!"

"Drakka!"

"WATCH US FIGHT!"

Her father's voice joined the chorus now, deep and fierce as Varok strode through the firelight.

"Skarn!"

"WATCH US FIGHT!"

Brenna could almost see figures moving in the spaces between the living—ghosts of warriors who had once worn the clan's markings.

Their ancestors were walking with them.

The stomping grew faster, the circle tightening around the fire as sparks burst upward in a storm of embers.

Velgra slammed her staff into the dirt.

The drums stopped.

Thirty-eight warriors stood around the fire, their weapons raised toward the dark sky. Then Varok stepped forward.

“Ancestors!”

The clan answered as one. “STAND WITH US!”

The fire surged higher. Brenna stepped forward into the firelight, Bonebreaker rising in her hand as the steel caught the glow of the flames. Her gaze swept over the thirty-eight warriors who remained of her clan.

She lifted the blade toward the dark horizon where their enemy would soon come.

“Let them bring their armies.” Her grip tightened around Bonebreaker’s hilt. “Tonight, we fight for the living.”

Her eyes burned with fierce resolve as she looked toward the distant dark of Aetheria.

“And if death waits for us on that battlefield—” Brenna bared her teeth. “Then let the world remember that the last warriors of our clan died standing *together*. *Gruth’vak!”*

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Veylan stood alone among the towering shelves. The silence pressed in on him from every side, broken only by the soft rustle of turning pages and the distant groan of wind against the stone walls.

The world beyond the library was preparing for war, and he was looking for a written word that might stop it.

Books covered the long oak table now, more than he could reasonably manage. Some lay open with their spines groaning in protest, others stacked in precarious towers that leaned dangerously to one side. Scrolls unfurled across the surface, their ink faded but still legible.

Treaties. Histories. Accounts of wars long forgotten by the living but preserved here in ink.

Veylan flipped another page. Nothing. Always the same.

Oryn left hours ago. Time had begun to stretch in strange ways this afternoon. Oryn had kissed Veylan’s temple before leaving, murmuring something about the soldiers needing hot food before nightfall.

Practical things. Necessary things.

Veylan had barely heard him. He had already been halfway inside the books. Now he paced the length of the table again, skimming lines, eyes racing across paragraphs that refused to offer what he needed.

There had to be something. A precedent. A negotiation. A compromise that had once worked before.

The conflict between Sylven's forces and the vampyres could not be the first of its kind. Civilizations had clashed since the first kingdoms had risen. Someone, somewhere, must have found a way to stop it without drowning the land in corpses.

His fingers brushed another page. He leaned closer to the candlelight. The words swam.

"…the third night of the siege…"

"…the southern battlements collapsed…"

"…none survived the surrender…"

Veylan exhaled slowly through his nose.

Another war.

Another failed peaceful resolution.

He pushed the book aside with more force than he intended. It slid across the table and struck another volume with a dull *thud*.

No. That one was useless, too. He moved to the next stack.

An account of the Elven War.

He had high hopes for that one when he'd pulled it from the shelf earlier. The margins were thick with notes from scholars centuries dead. Surely they had considered diplomacy.

Veylan flipped pages quickly, scanning the ink like a man searching for air underwater.

"…ambassadors sent…"

"…terms rejected…"

"…the city burned for three days…"

"…the rivers ran black with ash…"

"…estimated deaths….."

He stopped reading. The numbers were too large. His gaze drifted toward the far wall where the shelves rose high enough to disappear into shadow. Shelves of books slept there, silent witnesses to centuries of bloodshed.

Every war had a reason. Every war had someone who believed it was justified.

Veylan rubbed his eyes, suddenly aware of the pounding behind his temples.

Think.

He dragged another book closer. *Treatise on the Balance of Power Between Species.*

He had read a tome on this one before, years ago. Back then, he had believed knowledge could change the world. Back then, he had believed most conflicts came from misunderstanding.

If people simply understood one another… If someone explained the cost… If someone reminded them of the consequences…

The wars would stop.

Wouldn't they?

His fingers hovered over the page.

"…diplomatic compromise requires mutual interest in survival…"

He frowned. Mutual interest. That phrase appeared again several paragraphs later. And again on the next page.

Mutual interest.

Veylan leaned back slowly. The chair creaked beneath him. His eyes drifted toward the open books spread across the table.

Treaties that had failed. Negotiations that had collapsed. Cities that had burned. Every one of them had something in common.

The same ending. Someone had refused peace. Someone had *chosen* war.

Because sometimes… survival was not enough. Sometimes people wanted more. The right to rule over everything beneath the sky.

Veylan stood abruptly, the chair scraping across the stone floor behind him.

"No," he murmured to himself, pacing now. There had to be something he was missing. He moved to another book, flipping through pages faster now, almost frantic. He turned pages faster. Ink blurred beneath his eyes.

Peace talks failed.

Armies marched.

Cities burned.

The pattern repeated so many times that the words began to lose meaning. His breathing grew shallow. Because the truth was beginning to take shape in the quiet spaces between the pages. A slow, creeping thought that refused to be ignored.

Not every enemy wanted peace. Not every war could be negotiated.

Some people, some creatures did not *want* coexistence.

They wanted submission.

Or extinction.

Veylan rested both hands against the table, staring down at the scattered books. He had spent his life believing knowledge could solve anything. That every conflict had a solution hidden somewhere in the past. But the pages were telling him something else now. Something far more terrifying.

The library was full of answers.

Just not the ones he wanted.

His gaze drifted toward the candle flame trembling beside the nearest book. Outside these walls, Sylven's forces prepared for conquest. And the vampyres prepared to join them with blood.

Perhaps the problem was not misunderstanding. Perhaps the problem was something much simpler.

Some people—some beings—did not want peace.

They wanted the world kneeling beneath them.

And if that meant slaughtering thousands…

Then so be it.

All those histories. All those warnings. And none of them had stopped what was coming.

For the first time that night, the librarian felt something inside him begin to crack. Because the truth, he realized, was written on nearly every page before him.

Evil did not always misunderstand.

Sometimes… It simply *chose* to rule.

No matter how many bodies it had to climb over to reach the throne.

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Wildflowers had just begun to bloom across the meadow, late to the season as they always were in Driftwood Bay. There were flowers in scarlets, golds, and pale blues that swayed in the wind between Driftwood Bay and the forest beyond.

The field looked almost peaceful.

Then figures emerged from the shadow of the forest. Their boots crushed the fragile flowers beneath them as they marched forward. Even from the stone wall surrounding Driftwood Bay, Ren could hear boots striking the earth in brutal cadence.

The soldiers emerged in immaculate rows.

More came.

Then more.

And more.

From above, they looked like ants spilling from a broken nest. Ren felt the blood drain from her face as the grey tide swallowed the field.

“By the Gods…” Lucan breathed beside her.

Ren clenched the stone parapet. Two figures broke from the mass. Riders cut down the center of the formation, galloping across the flattened meadow toward the eastern gates.

Ren spun from the wall and sprinted down the spiral staircase. By the time she burst into the courtyard below, Kaelin already swung onto a black horse.

“I’m going with her,” Ren barked to the stableboy.

“There’s not another horse ready—”

Ren didn’t wait for permission. She vaulted onto the nearest horse—a white mare tethered nearby—swinging onto its back bareback as the startled animal tossed its head.

The great wooden doors creaked apart, and Ren and Kaelin galloped out onto the meadow.

The sky above them had begun to darken, clouds drifting across the fading sun.

As the distance closed, the messengers slowed, drawing Ren’s scrutiny. She looked for Sylven or Carmilla, but found only fae soldiers. The sigil on their armor belonged to House Vaelaran.

They stopped several paces away. The meadow fell eerily quiet. Behind the riders, the army stood waiting.

One of the messengers leaned forward in his saddle.

“Yield Lady Valeria, and the night passes in peace. Withhold her, and nothing will remain of Driftwood Bay.”

Ren could hear the distant shifting of armor from the army behind them. Kaelin did not respond immediately. Instead, she studied the messenger with quiet calculation. When she spoke, her voice carried across the field with the cold authority of a queen.

“If you value your lives, you will turn your army around. Submit, and I will consider allowing you to leave this field alive.”

For a heartbeat, the wind was the only sound.

Then the messenger sighed.

“War it is, then. Let the dark have the rest of you.”

Behind him, thousands of spears lifted as one.



Ren stood atop the stone wall of Driftwood Bay.

Sylven’s army waited just beyond the ruined flowers–a grey sea of armor and steel. Spears rose like a forest of iron, banners snapping in the evening wind. Torches burned among the ranks now as twilight deepened.

Behind Ren, Driftwood Bay buzzed with frantic movement.

Soldiers ran along the wall carrying bundles of arrows and crates of spears. Blacksmiths hammered hastily at the forges below. Somewhere in the streets behind them, civilians were being ushered into cellars and stone buildings.

Lucan tightened the straps of his gauntlet beside Ren, his expression grim as he studied the army gathering outside the gate.

“I count at least four siege lines,” he muttered. “Maybe five–spanning maybe a mile wide.”

Too many.

Beside them, Kaelin’s hair whipped in the wind as she watched the enemy ranks forming beyond the field.

Boots thundered up the stone steps behind them. Ren turned as a broad-shouldered man in battered armor approached, his cloak snapping behind him. Jarl Harek stopped beside them, resting both hands on the wall as he surveyed the approaching army.

“Well, that’s unpleasant.”

Lucan gave a humorless huff. “That’s one way to describe it.”

Harek nodded toward the massive gate below them.

“Driftwood Bay was built to hold.” He tapped the stone beneath his hand. “The gate is reinforced with ironwood from the southern forests and can withstand a battering ram for some time. Took an entire reign to build it. Unfortunate as it was, the dragon attack a month ago took more homes than it did our defenses. It left us wounded but not exposed.”

Lucan’s eyes tracked the skyline.

“That’s because the beast didn’t need to breach the gate. Walls don’t matter much when your enemy can fly over them.”

Ren glanced down toward the enormous wooden gates set into the wall below. Thick iron bands ran across the planks, and a portcullis waited just behind it, its spikes sharp as teeth.

Harek continued. “Our strength isn’t in numbers. It’s the wall.” He pointed toward the parapets where rows of archers were already positioning themselves. “And the gate.”

Ren followed his gesture.

Boiling oil cauldrons had already been dragged into position above the entrance. Crates of stones and javelins lined the battlements.

If Sylven’s army wanted Driftwood Bay, they would have to bleed for every inch of it.

Lucan remained silent for a moment. “There’s a problem with that plan.”

Harek studied Lucan. “Let’s hear it. Say it plainly.”

“The wall is strong, and the gate is stronger.” Lucan’s gaze shifted toward the crashing waves beyond the far cliffs. “But the ocean is right behind us.”

Beyond the rooftops of Driftwood Bay, the sea stretched into darkness. The harbor curved tightly against the city’s edge, jagged rocks and steep cliffs hemming it in on either side. White waves crashed against the shoreline below.

There was no open escape. No wide harbor to flee through. No distant road winding away from the city.

Only the sea.

Lucan rested his forearms on the stone wall. “If they storm the gate,” he continued quietly, “we can’t retreat. We’d be trapped between an army and the ocean.”

Just the cliffs, and the roaring black water below.

Lucan’s voice was calm, but the truth of it hung heavy in the air.

“This city is a fortress, and a coffin.”

For a moment, none of them spoke. The wind whipped along the wall, snapping banners and rattling armor.

Then unexpectedly, Talen brushed past Ren, strapping on his final piece of leather armor. He rested one gloved hand against the stone, looking out across the approaching army with steady focus.

“Then we don’t let them break the gate.” Ren glanced at him. Talen’s green eyes burned with quiet resolve. “No retreat,” he continued. “No surrender.”

Kaelin stepped up beside Talen, her gaze lifted toward the endless ranks of soldiers across the meadow. “Let them come.”

Lucan leaned forward, squinting at the enemy formation. “They’re moving.”

Sure enough, the distant army had begun shifting. Lines of soldiers advanced slowly across the field, shields locking together as they prepared their first assault.

Ren’s hand tightened on the hilt of her sword just as a sound tore across the heavens. Every soldier on the wall froze.

Ren’s head snapped upward.

The clouds above Driftwood Bay split apart as a massive shape descended from the darkening clouds, wings spreading wide.

Fryphessyrth's roar shook the city walls.

"Is that a *fucking dragon*?" Harek breathed as Fryphessyrth swept low over Driftwood Bay, his face appearing two shades paler.

Kaelin's lips curved. "Right on time."

Soldiers along the battlements ducked instinctively as Fryphessyrth passed overhead. Fryphessyrth banked sharply above the harbor, her tail carving through the air as she circled back toward the city walls.

Lucan tore his gaze from the sky long enough to look at Kaelin. "You expected this?"

Kaelin folded her arms behind her back, completely unbothered by the panic spreading along the wall. "I'm pleased by it."

"That beast could level the entire city," Harek sputtered.

Ren tilted her head. "She could," she mulled.

Lucan's brow furrowed as he watched the dragon wheel back toward them. "If that's our defense, I'm starting to feel slightly better about our odds."

Fryphessyrth landed behind them.

Harland grabbed the parapet to steady himself. "Gods—"

Fryphessyrth stretched her wings' immense span across nearly the entire width of the battlements before tucking them against her sides. A heavy shake of her massive head broke the silence. Below, soldiers stared up in open-mouthed shock; one man let his spear clatter to the stones.

Fryphessyrth lowered her head behind them, her enormous golden eye turning toward the army gathering beyond the ruined meadow. A low rumble vibrated deep within her chest.

Ren crossed her arms. "Our defenses are not just the wall," she declared. "Imagine their surprise when they realize the city they came to conquer has a *dragon* waiting for them."

Her eyes flicked to the shifting ranks beyond the meadow.

"That will be a *very* unpleasant discovery."

Harek stepped forward along the wall, raising his voice so it carried over the chaos of soldiers preparing for battle.

"Listen up!" he bellowed, pointing a gauntleted hand toward the massive shape looming behind them. "That dragon fights for Driftwood Bay!"

Ren cut in, "Her name is Fryphessyrth."

Archers froze mid-motion, arrows half-drawn as they stared at the enormous creature perched along the battlements.

“Do not loose a single arrow at Fryphessyrth,” Harek continued. “If you see wings and fire, aim for the men beneath it, not Fryphessyrth from above.”

A ripple of uneasy murmurs spread through the line of soldiers, but reluctantly, bows lowered.

Harek watched them for a moment, making sure the message had settled, before stepping closer to Kaelin. His voice dropped low enough that only she could hear it.

“I truly hope that you’re right about this.”

With another huff, Fryphessyrth launched from the stone, taking back to the air with a flap of her wings. Fryphessyrth circled once above the city before turning toward the field.

The perfectly ordered ranks wavered as thousands of Sylven’s soldiers looked up.

Fryphessyrth dove.

Flames burst from her jaws in a blazing torrent, streaking across the front line of the army. Fire slammed into shields and armor, scattering soldiers as the inferno tore through their formation.

Ren felt a fierce grin spread across her face.

“Well,” Lucan said, watching the chaos unfold below. “*That* should make them reconsider their life choices.”

Fryphessyrth soared back into the sky, her enormous wings beating hard as she prepared for another pass.

Harek let out a low whistle. “Never thought I’d see the day a dragon defended Driftwood Bay.”

Ren rested her forearms on the stone wall again, watching the enemy army scramble beneath the burning sky. “It’s a new dawn,” she said quietly. “Let them keep the ground. The sky belongs to us now.”

Above them, Fryphessyrth roared.

And the battle for Driftwood Bay had begun.

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As Fryphessyrth rounded about for another aerial assault, Talen climbed atop the rampart and turned to survey their army.

Hundreds had gathered. Fishermen had traded their nets for spears, and dockworkers gripped axes that once split only driftwood. Beside them stood the city guard, bows strung and ready. Beyond them all, lining the walls and towers, the defenders of Driftwood Bay waited for the storm gathering outside their gates.

“People of Driftwood Bay!” Talen’s voice rang out, sharp and clear above the restless murmur of the crowd. The courtyard fell quiet. Helmets turned and faces lifted toward him.

Talen rested one hand against the stone railing beside him. “I first came to this city when I was barely more than a youngling who thought the world ended at the edge of the sea.”

Talen allowed himself the faintest smile.

“My tutors brought me here to study trade routes and naval defenses. But as a restless one, I remember very little about the structured lessons. What I do remember are the people. I remember fishermen who rose before the sun every morning, no matter how cruel the weather. I remember dockworkers who hauled cargo through storms that would have sent most men running for shelter. And I remember a city that *never* bent.”

Below, Harek’s shoulders stiffened in pride.

“You were not trained for war. You are merchants, sailors, and craftsmen. Mothers and fathers.” He gestured toward the walls surrounding them. “But Driftwood Bay has never needed a standing army to defend it. Because it has something stronger.”

The wind whipped through the courtyard.

“I have seen cities crumble when the enemy appears at their gates. Kingdoms themselves have collapsed because their people lost faith in one another.” His chin lifted. “But not you. *You* stayed when others would have fled. You stayed when you saw the size of the army waiting beyond that meadow. And that is why Driftwood Bay has stood for generations while greater cities have fallen!”

Talen took a step down the stone staircase, closing the distance between himself and the soldiers below.

“The army outside those walls believes they are marching toward an easy victory. They believe this city will break.” His voice dropped, quieter now but far more dangerous. “They believe you will surrender.”

Talen’s gaze moved slowly across the faces in the courtyard.

“They are wrong, because they do not understand the people of Driftwood Bay. Where they see a fishing city, I see a wall of iron.”

A soldier raised his spear. Then another. The sound of weapons striking shields echoed across the courtyard.

“Tonight, that army will learn what I learned all those years ago. That the people of Driftwood Bay do not break. They do not kneel.”

The soldiers roared in response, the courtyard erupting with the thunder of shields and blades.

“And when the enemy comes through that field,” Talen finished, his voice carrying above the rising storm of sound, “they will find a city that *refuses* to fall and whose people will fight for the realm to their very last breath.”

The courtyard erupted. Steel struck against shields in a rolling thunder that echoed off the stone walls, the sound building until it felt as if the entire city were breathing as one. Voices rose from the gathered soldiers.

At first, scattered. Then stronger.

Then unified.

“One will!”

“One crown!”

More voices joined, the sound swelling as the words passed from soldier to soldier along the walls and towers.

“One House!”

And then the roar came.

“VAELARAN!”

The name of the House thundered through Driftwood Bay.

Again.

“One will!”

Shields slammed together.

“One crown!”

Spears lifted toward the dark sky.

“One House!”

“VAELARAN!”

Talen stepped down from the stone stairs. The crowd parted as he descended, soldiers striking their weapons against their shields in rhythm as he passed.

Kaelin stood waiting at the base of the steps. She watched the defenders of Driftwood Bay prepare for war.

Talen stopped in front of her. For a moment, the noise of the courtyard seemed to fade. He reached up and gently cupped the side of her face, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear before pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“This night may belong to war, but dawn belongs to the living. Let’s make sure we’re there to see it,” he murmured.

Kaelin’s lips curved slightly.

The chant rose again behind them.

“VAELARAN!”

Ren pushed through the crowd toward them, her expression already burning with the restless energy of someone eager to draw steel. Before she could say anything, Talen grabbed her and pulled her into a crushing hug.

Ren let out a startled grunt.

“Careful,” she muttered into his shoulder. “Armor’s not exactly comfortable. And you’re still injured.”

Talen laughed under his breath and released her, gripping her shoulders firmly.

“Try not to get yourself killed.”

Ren snorted. “And ruin my perfect record? Never.”

He gave her one final squeeze before his expression hardened.

The fae prince turned toward the gathered soldiers.

“Positions! Archers to the walls!” he commanded. “Spearmen to the gate!”

Soldiers broke into motion, rushing toward the stairways and battlements.

“Shield lines to the inner streets!” Talen continued. “No one fights alone tonight!”

Weapons were lifted. Armor tightened. Torches were raised along the walls. Talen turned toward the gate one final time, his voice carrying like a blade through the air.

“Prepare for battle!”



Sylven’s army moved as one.

The gray mass surged forward across the ruined meadow.

“Archers, draw!” Lucan shouted.

Along the battlements, bows rose in unison. Dozens of archers stepped forward to the edge of the wall. The creak of drawn bowstrings filled the air as they pulled back–arrows nocked and ready.

They waited.

Lucan’s eyes narrowed as he studied the advancing formation.

The front ranks of Sylven’s army lifted their spears in a dense forest of steel, shields interlocked in a moving wall. The formation advanced with terrifying precision, every spear angled forward to break a cavalry charge before it ever reached them.

Their archers would come first. A long-distance assault meant to thin the defenders before the real attack began.

Lucan waited, calculating the distance.

Closer.

Closer.

“Loose!”

Hundreds of arrows launched from the walls, their feathers whispering as they cut through the night. The volley arced high over the field before plunging downward into Sylven’s ranks.

Several soldiers staggered as the arrows struck, but far fewer than Lucan would have liked.

Sylven's soldiers moved in heavy armor—steel breastplates and layered mail designed to deflect a volley. Many shafts clattered harmlessly off shields or glanced off hardened metal. Their best hope lay in the narrow gaps between helmet and collar, or the thin slits of a visor. But those targets were no wider than a finger, and most of Lucan's defenders were fishermen and dockworkers who were untrained to hit a target that slim. To bring the heavy infantry down, they would need to strike behind the knees.

And that meant close combat.

Still, the volley had its effect. In the front line, several fae collapsed as arrows slipped between armor plates. Others faltered as shafts struck joints or exposed gaps.

But the formation did not stop.

More soldiers surged forward to fill the gaps, spears raised as they advanced toward the city walls.

Lucan's gaze swept across the enemy ranks.

There.

In the third line of formation, some soldiers struggled beneath the weight of long wooden ladders carried across their shoulders.

Farther back, in the fifth line, a cluster of heavily armored soldiers staggered forward under the weight of a battering ram.

"Your Highness," Lucan called.

Talen stepped beside him. The prince's armor clinked softly with each step, though Lucan couldn't help but notice the strain behind the movement. Even that short climb left Talen breathing harder than it should have.

Lucan frowned. "Are you alright?"

"Never mind me. What do you see?"

Lucan pointed toward the advancing army.

"They brought ladders as we suspected, and a ram."

Talen followed his gesture. Lucan could almost see the moment the prince spotted it. His nostrils flared. "Indeed."

Above them, Fryphessyrth descended from the clouds in a blazing dive as she plummeted toward Sylven's army.

A torrent of dragonflame tore through one of the rear formations, engulfing soldiers in a roaring inferno.

Fryphessyrth soared upward again. Even from the wall, Lucan could feel the heat. Talen watched the destruction below with hard satisfaction.

“We continue the archery assault,” Talen said. “Between the volleys and Fryphessyrth, we can break their formation. A ground charge is the last choice I want to make, but if we let them bring those ladders to the stone, they'll be over the walls. So, once that front line splinters, we charge.”

“And the ram?”

Talen’s eyes hardened. “I’ll see to it personally.”

Lucan studied him for a moment. “You’ll want someone with you.”

“I’ll take Ren and a few others.”

Lucan gave a short nod. He turned back toward the archers lining the wall. Below them, the enemy army continued to advance closer now.

The ladder carriers moved forward through the ranks, raising the heavy beams upright as they approached the walls.

Lucan lifted his hand. The archers drew back again.

“Loose!”

Another storm of arrows ripped through the air. Several enemy soldiers collapsed as the shafts struck exposed joints. Others stumbled beneath the impact, shields dropping as the barrage rained down upon them.

Then the sky roared again. Fryphessyrth swept back across the battlefield, her wings beating thunderously as she dove once more toward Sylven’s advancing army.

And the night lit with fire.

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Ren’s horse stamped a restless hoof against the dirt.

Around them, riders adjusted in their saddles. Beyond the thick wooden doors ahead, the muffled thunder of battle echoed.

Ren tightened her grip on the reins. Her heart hammered so hard she could feel it in her throat.

This was it. The moment before the storm broke.

This was bigger than anything she had ever faced. She had fought in bloody pit fights against massive opponents, opponents with twice her muscle, and she had lost some of those matches. But those fights were for her own coin.

This was different.

This was for the balance of the realm. If Carmilla’s army unleashed the prophecy, they wouldn't just lose a battle—they would all be damned to an eternal night.

Beside her, Talen sat steady astride his dark horse. He appeared composed, but his eyes never stopped moving, tracking the men and the gate as tension coiled tight enough to snap.

Then his gaze settled on her.

For a moment, he simply watched her, his fae eyes taking in the way her shoulders were set too rigidly, the way her fingers clenched the hilt of her sword just a little too tightly.

“You’ve never been in a battle like this before,” he stated quietly.

“This is another first for me, yes,” Ren admitted.

Talen’s gaze softened beneath the shadow of his helmet. “Then listen carefully,” he murmured. The wind rustled through the tunnel as he leaned toward her. “Once that gate opens, the world becomes noise and blood. You won’t hear half of what’s happening around you. You’ll see things you won’t have time to understand. But don’t stop moving. If you hesitate, someone will notice. And when they do, they’ll take your head before you even realize what happened.”

Ren nodded, absorbing every word.

“These are *fae soldiers* who have served the crown for decades, possibly longer. Sylven trains them well. Gods, I wish we’d had more than a few weeks to prepare our own people for this, but we'll have to make do. They’ll fight in tight formations, and they’ll try to overwhelm you with numbers. So *you* break the rhythm.”

“How?”

“Speed,” he answered. His gauntleted hand tapped lightly against the pommel of his saddle. “You move faster than they expect. Strike and keep moving–never stay locked with one opponent longer than you have to.” He paused. “And if you see one fall, don’t assume they’re dead.”

Ren grimaced. “That comforting, huh?”

A faint smirk touched Talen’s mouth. “War rarely is. It is a shame I have depleted much of my magic. That would have been useful in this battle.”

Ren looked down at the sword in her hand. The leather grip felt rough beneath her fingers. Her mouth had gone dry.

“I figured, but thank the gods you escaped alive,” she muttered. “Talen?”

“Hm?”

“Thanks for everything.” She looked up, her gaze steady despite the chaos around them. “You were the first real friend I ever had here. I’d die protecting you, Talen. I mean it. I’ll give everything I have to keep you alive.”

He smiled softly. “Do you remember the day we first met?”

“How could I forget? You spent your time sending me flying onto my ass, proving exactly how terrible my sword fighting was.”

“You had a ways to go,” Talen murmured. “But I knew right then that you had the heart of a soldier. It wasn't about your skill, Ren. It was because you didn't shy away from the challenge—even though you knew damn well you were going to lose. You have that same fire now. Don't forget it.”

Fryphessyrth’s distant roar echoed across the night sky beyond the gate.

Ren glanced sideways at him. “How old are you?”

“Two hundred years old.”

Ren’s brows lifted. “That’s… old.”

“For a human, perhaps. For a fae, it’s early adulthood. Some of our kind live thousands of years.”

“And you’ve been doing this—fighting—for how long?”

Talen’s gaze drifted toward the gate. “Long enough.” He rolled one shoulder beneath the weight of his armor. “I’ve seen battles before,” he admitted. “More than I’d like.”

Ren studied him. “But nothing like this?”

“No. This is something else. This isn’t a border skirmish or a dispute between houses. This is conquest. Sylven is fighting for dominion over Aetheria. If we lose this battle tonight, it can make way for many other losses around the realm.”

The chains above the gate rattled. The massive wooden doors began to groan open. Talen straightened in the saddle.

“Stay close to me when we break through.”

Ren nodded.

Outside, the roar of battle waited for them.



Ren had fought the undead before. They were creatures of mindless impulse, staggering forward without fear and entirely devoid of skill.

But fighting Sylven’s fae soldiers was nothing like the undead. These enemies were alive, and they fought like it. Talen had been right to call it carnage. Ren had thought she understood what that word meant.

She hadn’t.

Not until she stepped into it.

The gate burst open behind them, and the charge became chaos.

Steel clashed with steel in a deafening roar as the defenders of Driftwood Bay slammed into the advancing ranks. Horses screamed. Soldiers shouted. Ren barely registered the moment her horse collided with the enemy line.

Then she was *in* it.

Bodies pressed from every side. Shields slammed together. Spears stabbed forward. Ren swung her blade. Her blade crashed against a soldier’s raised shield, the impact jolting up her arms. Before the soldier could recover, she twisted the blade and drove it into the narrow gap beneath his helmet.

The steel slid in with sickening ease. Hot blood sprayed across her gauntlet as the fae soldier collapsed.

Another stepped into his place instantly. Ren didn’t have time to think; she swung again. The other soldier caught her strike, their blade sliding down hers. The soldier moved far faster than the lumbering undead she had fought before.

Too fast.

His sword slashed toward her ribs. Ren barely twisted aside in time, the blade scraping against her armor as it passed.

Gods—

They were strong and trained. They fought in disciplined pairs and clusters, covering one another’s blind spots. One soldier lunged while another struck from the side, their movements practiced and deadly. In the chaos of the scuffle, Ren lost her balance on her horse and went pitching forward, crashing to the ground. Desperate, she lunged upward, her fingers reaching for the leather reins, but the panicked beast was gone.

Ren gritted her teeth and kept moving. Talen’s warning echoed in her mind.

Don’t stop.

Don’t hesitate.

If you pause, you die.

She shoved forward, shoulder-checking one soldier aside before swinging again. Her blade crashed into another enemy’s knee joint, the blade biting through the weaker armor there. The soldier screamed as his leg buckled.

Ren didn’t wait to see him fall. She pivoted, striking again.

And again.

The world became noise.

Steel.

Shouting.

Blood.

A shadow fell as Fryphessyrth bellowed from above, unleashing a torrent of flame that tore through Sylven’s back ranks. The fire lit the battlefield in blazing orange light as soldiers scattered beneath the inferno.

Ren screamed as she fought, her voice raw and feral. If this were carnage, then she would become something worse.

Pure, unbridled malice.

A soldier lunged from her blind side. Ren turned too late–the blow struck her shoulder hard enough to send her sprawling into the dirt.

The world flipped violently.

She hit the ground with crushing force, the breath exploding from her lungs. For a moment, everything blurred. Boots thundered around her. Someone screamed nearby. A shadow loomed above her. Ren’s vision snapped into focus just as an enemy soldier raised his spear over her chest.

The spear came down.

Rolling frantically to the side, Ren avoided the weapon as it slammed into the dirt where her heart had been a second before. A sharp upward kick drove her boot into the soldier’s knee, twisting the joint.

As the fae howled and stumbled, Ren scrambled to her feet, ripping her blade from the mud just as the soldier lunged again. Meeting him head-on, she drove her blade through the gap beneath his arm, burying it deep into his chest. The soldier's scream died in a choked gasp. Wrenching the sword free, Ren staggered back, her chest heaving.

Her armor was slick with blood. Some of it hers.

Most of it was not.

The battlefield roared around her. Fire rained from the sky. Another soldier charged toward her. Ren lifted her blade again.

She would not die today.

Not while Talen still fought.

Her mission burned in her mind like a brand.

Stay close.

Protect Talen.

Destroy the ram.

Ren threw herself back into the carnage.

Their formation was finally breaking.

The battlefield had dissolved into chaos beneath the roaring sky. Bodies lay scattered across the churned mud—some wearing the armor of Driftwood Bay, others clad in Sylven's steel. Dragonfire rained from above in savage bursts as Fryphessyrth tore across the night, her flames carving burning paths through the enemy ranks.

And still the battle ram advanced.

Talen saw it through the shifting bodies—a knot of eight soldiers forcing their way toward the gate through the carnage.

Two soldiers in front. Six hauling the ram.

Talen spurred forward. His horse crashed through the thinning enemy line as he leapt over a pile of corpses, boots slamming into the mud as he dismounted in one fluid motion.

He hit the ground running. The first fae barely had time to turn before Talen's blade punched through the seam beneath his shoulder plate.

Talen ripped the blade free and moved. The ram-carriers staggered as their formation faltered. The massive iron-tipped log slipped from their shoulders and slammed into the mud.

"Replace him!" one of them shouted. "Get it moving!"

They were willing to die for it. One by one, if necessary.

Talen broke over them like a storm. His sword carved through the chaos, striking low at exposed joints and armor gaps. One soldier dropped as Talen's blade sliced behind his knee. Another reeled back when the prince slammed his elbow into the fae's throat before driving his sword through the visor slit.

Across the ram, Ren descended on the remaining soldiers. Her blade rose and fell in brutal arcs as she crashed into the enemy line, forcing two soldiers away from the ram.

And then Talen saw Commander Ivan, braced at the front of the formation.

The world narrowed around the two of them. Ivan stepped forward, drawing his blade with a long metallic whisper. The older fae looked exactly as Talen remembered–broad-shouldered, scarred, and every inch of the fae who had once stood behind Talen in training yards for decades.

The fae who had taught Talen most of the techniques he now carried into battle.

"Of all honorable fae," Talen hissed, "*you* had to become a traitor."

Ivan’s lips curled into an ugly sneer. “*You* are the true traitor,” he snarled. “I have endured a lifetime of disgrace under your parents. Your mother’s foolishness, your father’s pathetic leniency—they bled this kingdom dry with their mercy.”

“They built a peace you were too blind to understand.”

“They built a *graveyard*!” Ivan spat, taking a heavy step forward. “Sylven is the true king now. He possesses the steel this realm actually needs to survive. If you have a single shred of loyalty left for your people, you will drop your weapon and bend the knee.”

Talen bared his teeth. “My parents ruled with honor, Ivan. They were trying to build a balanced world where we didn't have to thrive on the bones of others. I will never bow to a usurper, and I will certainly never bow to a coward who hides behind him.”

Ivan’s expression didn't flinch; instead, his sneer smoothed out into a mask of chilling, absolute indifference.

“A balanced world,” Ivan murmured, the words dripping with quiet contempt.

A balanced world with other races was a concept Ivan could never stomach. Talen looked at the jagged white lines mapping across the commander's face—the brutal reminder of the weeks Ivan had spent captured behind enemy lines, tortured by a clan of orcs during a 30 year-conflict between House Vaelaran and the banding orc clans 120 years ago. Ivan had returned with those scars and a hardened soul, convinced that the only race deserving of life, or trust, was the fae.

“Your parents were fools, Talen. I have never felt a greater sense of relief than the day I watched them die. Watching their pathetic little dream burn with them was a mercy to this kingdom.” Ivan raised his blade. “And I am going to feel that exact same joy when I open your throat and finish their bloodline myself.”

“You can try,” Talen retorted coldly. “But remember who taught me how to kill.”

Their blades met with a thunderous clash. The impact rang up Talen’s arms as Ivan pressed forward, his strikes fast and brutal.

“Sylven is more of a ruler,” Ivan spat between blows, “than your foolish father ever was.”

Blind rage surged through Talen’s chest. The mention of his father again sent fire racing through his veins. He lunged forward with a savage strike

meant to split Ivan’s guard.

Ivan parried effortlessly.

The older fae twisted Talen’s blade aside and slammed the pommel of his sword into the prince’s ribs. Pain exploded through Talen’s side. He staggered back a step.

Ivan advanced.

“You were always talented,” Ivan sneered coldly, circling him. “It’s a shame that talent went to waste.”

Talen drove forward with a flurry of strikes—high, low, turning his wrist to slip past Ivan’s guard. But Ivan anticipated every movement, every feint, and every shift in stance.

Ivan twisted aside and struck Talen across the back. The blow landed directly over the wounds that still burned beneath his armor. Agony tore through him. Talen sucked in a sharp breath as his vision swam.

Ivan sensed it immediately.

“You’re hurt,” Ivan noted, almost amused.

He pressed the attack.

Their blades crashed again and again, Ivan forcing Talen backward through the mud. The older fae moved like a seasoned killer, every strike calculated, every motion efficient.

Talen blocked high, Ivan kicked his leg out from under him.

Talen hit the ground hard, his sword nearly slipping from his grasp. Ivan stepped forward, raising his blade for the killing strike.

“Any last words before you cross the Veil?”

Then a blur of motion slammed into him from the side.

Ren.

She crashed into Ivan like a charging bull, tackling the commander full force.

The two of them hit the ground in a violent sprawl of armor and mud. Ivan barely had time to react before Ren twisted her body, hooking one leg behind his and flipping him hard onto his back in a brutal pit-fight maneuver.

Ren planted a knee squarely into his chest, pinning him down as her blade flashed to his throat. She grinned down at him through streaks of blood and dirt.

“Ever wrestled a *human* before, Ivan?” she sneered, her voice dropping to a dangerous, low growl. “Didn’t think so. That was your fatal mistake.

You never underestimate a *human* who has nothing left to lose."

She leaned in closer, the malice in her eyes matching his own.

"And Talen is twice the leader your pathetic usurper will ever be. *Talen* belongs to this kingdom, and you are going to die today. Do *you* have any last words?"

Ivan snarled and tried to rise, but Ren drove the blade through his throat before he could move. Blood spilled hot across her hand.

"When you finally meet Sylven Across the Veil, do me a favor," she snarled. "Tell that *pompous bastard* to go fuck himself. And make sure you let him know that a *human* just kicked your fae ass."

Ivan's body went still beneath her.

She ripped the blade free and shoved his body aside.



Talen had miscalculated.

He had assumed Sylven would dedicate a single legion to hauling the battle ram, an organized unit that, once broken, would collapse the assault. But Sylven's strategy was entirely devoid of military elegance. He hadn't built his vanguard on rigid ranks, iron-clad order, or predictable tactical formations.

He had built it on bodies.

And bodies were expendable.

Every time one fae hauling the ram fell, another stepped forward to take his place. They dragged the massive iron-tipped log through the mud with relentless determination, shouting to one another over the roar of battle.

It didn't matter how many died–the ram kept moving. And now Talen's strike force was being swallowed whole. The soldiers who had charged with them lay scattered across the churned battlefield, their armor dark with blood. Of the group that had followed him beyond the gate, only two remained standing.

And Ren.

More enemy soldiers closed in from every direction.

They were being surrounded.

Talen cut down another soldier, his sword sliding through the gap beneath the man's arm before wrenching free. His chest burned with every

breath, the wounds across his back screaming beneath his armor.

This had gone wrong. Terribly wrong.

“We need to fall back to the gate,” Talen realized aloud.

Another soldier lunged at him. Talen parried and drove the pommel of his sword into the fae’s jaw before finishing him with a quick thrust through the throat.

“Fall back!” Talen shouted over the chaos.

Ren finished her own opponent with a savage slash before sprinting toward him.

The retreat was worse than the charge. They ran through a graveyard of bodies, boots slipping in mud and blood alike. Ren nearly tripped over a fallen soldier, catching herself just in time as a blade whistled past her shoulder. Enemy soldiers poured through the broken battlefield now, their numbers spreading outward like a tide closing in.

To reach the gate again, they would have to fight their way through the lines. A soldier rushed Talen from the side. He twisted, blocking the blow, and drove his sword forward—

The ground shook hard enough that several soldiers stumbled.

Slamming into the mud only a few yards ahead of them, Fryphessyrth snapped her massive jaws around one of Sylven’s soldiers. The fae was dead before a scream could leave his throat, his body flung aside like discarded meat. Simultaneously, her tail lashed out in a brutal arc behind her, sweeping through a line of enemy soldiers and sending them crashing to the ground.

Several soldiers lunged with spears and blades, targeting Fryphessyrth’s towering frame. Their steel scraped harmlessly across her scales, as ineffective as striking solid stone.

Fryphessyrth roared.

“Let’s move!” Talen shouted, grabbing Ren by the elbow and hauling her toward the open path that Fryphessyrth had carved.

Talen shouted to every soldier he passed.

“Fall back!”

“Back to the gate!”

At this rate, they would lose too many. Sylven’s numbers were too overwhelming.

Behind them, Fryphessyrth advanced. Any soldier who dared approach was torn apart by claws or swept aside by her tail.

Step by step, the defenders pulled back. The walls of Driftwood Bay rose ahead of them like salvation.

“Inside!” Talen shouted as they reached the gate.

The defenders rushed through just as the portcullis slammed downward with a thunderous crash behind them. The heavy wooden gates followed, sealing the city once more.

For a moment, Talen bent forward, bracing his hands against his knees as he fought to catch his breath. That was when he noticed Valeria standing in the mouth of the gate.

“What the hell are you doing out here?” Ren snapped. “You’re supposed to stay inside.”

That had been the plan. If Sylven’s forces captured Valeria, the realm would be finished. But the look in Valeria’s eyes stopped Talen cold.

“I must speak with you,” she hissed. “This cannot wait.”

Talen straightened. He ushered them aside from the gate as soldiers rushed past. Above them, Fryphessyrth leapt back into the sky, her wings snapping open as she soared once more into the throat of battle.

“Pray tell,” Talen said, wiping blood from his brow. “What is it?”

Valeria held his gaze with those fierce golden eyes. “This is only the first wave. Carmilla’s vampyre army comes next.”

“Yes, we figured that,” Ren muttered.

Valeria’s gaze flicked briefly toward her.

“One vampyre is worth five trained fae soldiers in strength and speed.”

Talen ran a hand through his blood-damp hair. “Yes, that is certain.”

“I can help.”

Ren’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah, you can help by staying the hell inside. If they catch you, we’re all fucked.”

Valeria didn’t flinch. “Your army cannot stand against Carmilla’s,” she insisted. Her voice dropped. “She and I share similar magic. We can summon creatures not of this world. Creatures that belong in the pits of hell.”

Before anyone could respond, everything went quiet.

Eerily quiet.

The battle beyond the walls seemed to pause.

“Prince Talen,” a soldier called down from the wall. His voice carried an uneasy edge. “You need to see this.”

Every head turned upward. Talen exchanged a brief glance with Ren before climbing the stone steps. He reached the battlements and looked out across the battlefield.

Behind Sylven's army, Carmilla's vampyre legion had arrived.

They stood in perfect rows across the darkened meadow, their armor black and crimson beneath the rising moon.

But it wasn't the soldiers that caught Talen's attention. It was the line in front of them.

Ren reached the wall beside him.

"By the Gods," she breathed, gripping the stone as if to keep herself upright. "What the hell is *that*? Are they wearing chains?"

Valeria spoke from behind them. "Carmilla does not care about the fae soldiers' lives, so she sent them first to weaken your defenses. She also does not care about the blood-bound or the feeders."

Talen's stomach dropped because now he could see them clearly.

Three long lines of bodies marched before the vampyres.

Not soldiers.

Slaves. Feeders. Blood-bound. Creatures of every kind.

Placed at the front of the army…

For slaughter.

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The front row staggered forward, chained together at their wrists and necks in miserable lines.

Their clothing hung in tatters. Many were barefoot, stumbling over the churned mud of the battlefield.

“Clearly, they are not here by choice,” Kaelin murmured, stepping up behind them.

Talen’s gaze hardened as he looked out over the field.

“They’re slaves to the vampyres. They exist only to feed them. Blood-bound servants, feeders…whatever name you give them–it all means the same thing.”

Lucan swore under his breath. “Carmilla knows what she’s doing. She’s counting on our sympathy to slow us down.”

Ren’s stomach twisted. “They’re not our enemy,” she snapped. “They’re *victims*. We need to break their formation to create a gap and give them a chance to escape.”

Talen sighed. He sank onto a nearby barrel, suddenly looking far more exhausted than the fae prince who had rallied an army only minutes earlier.

“Is it the right thing for the realm?” he asked quietly.

Ren and Kaelin both turned toward him.

“What the hell do you mean?” Ren demanded. “Of course it is.”

Talen dragged a hand through his hair. “We need to defeat Carmilla tonight, at whatever cost. If we focus on freeing the front line, we divide

our forces.” His gaze lifted to meet Ren’s. “And while we’re doing that, Carmilla’s true army will advance behind them.”

Ren bared her teeth. Let’s call this what it is.” She stepped closer to him. “It’s a *slaughter*. Would you truly butcher *slaves* to win?”

“If the alternative results in Carmilla and Sylven enacting this prophecy? Perhaps,” Talen fired back, though his voice cracked on the last word. “If we hesitate, she kills them, she kills us, and she kills everyone else. A tactical sacrifice isn’t murder, Ren. It’s the most likely way anyone survives.”

“A tactical sacrifice? They are *chained*, Talen! They can’t even run! If we cut through them, we are no better than the monster we're fighting.”

“Being better than her won't matter when we're all in the ground!” Talen snapped. “Think for one second with your head instead of your emotions. If we mobilize our resources on a distraction, who stops her main line?”

“I would rather die trying to save innocent people than live knowing I left them for dead!” Ren’s eyes blazed. “Look me in the eye and tell me your perfect logic accounts for the blood on your hands tomorrow morning.”

Talen opened his mouth to argue, but the words died in his throat.

“It doesn’t,” he whispered, the cold logic finally fracturing. “But I’d rather carry the guilt of their deaths than the failure of losing the realm.”

Nearby, Lucan sighed, assessing the approaching horror.

“Don't bother arguing,” Lucan muttered, his voice hollow. “There’s no winning this predicament. We either march forward and become monsters, or we stay good and become corpses.”

“Both of you have a valid path to victory,” Kaelin mulled. “Save the slaves, preserve our humanity, and gain a vanguard of liberated allies. That is Ren's positive. Push through them, maintain our momentum, and strike Carmilla before she can deploy. That is Talen's. Both are valid.”

She paused, shifting her gaze out toward the waiting army.

“But we must weigh the probability of success. If we mobilize to break that formation, we slow down, we exhaust our front line, and we lose the element of surprise. Charging therefore yields the least likely positive result, Ren. In all variations of that choice, the delay ensures Carmilla flanks us.”

“Your Highness!” A soldier’s voice called a few feet from their right. The young woman stood beside the archers, bow drawn but trembling. Her

eyes darted between the approaching slaves and the vampyre army behind them. “What shall we do?” Her voice cracked.

Ren’s glare snapped back to Talen. Her voice dropped to a whisper only he could hear. “You know it’s wrong. We cannot kill innocents.”

Talen closed his eyes. For a moment, he looked every bit the fae prince carrying the weight of a kingdom on his shoulders.

“If we lose this battle,” he said through clenched teeth, “we may be responsible for more deaths.”

“But if we do this,” Ren insisted, “then we’re no better than *them*.”

Just then, a guttural roar ripped across the battlefield.

A terrible chorus of monstrous bellows rose together in perfect, bone-rattling synchrony. Ren felt the sound in her chest before she fully heard it. The soldiers along the wall fell silent.

No one spoke. No one needed to.

Without another word, Ren, Talen, Kaelin, and Valeria rushed up the stone steps to the battlements. When they reached the top, Ren stepped forward, looked out across the battlefield, and felt her stomach drop.

Beyond Sylven’s army—

Beyond even the vampyre ranks—

Something enormous stirred in the darkness.

The creature’s massive shape towered above the armies. Its wings folded against its body, and a long, serpentine tail curled across the churned earth behind it.

But then it lifted its heads.

Three of them. Each head crowned with jagged horns, each mouth filled with rows of teeth. Three pairs of glowing eyes turned slowly toward Driftwood Bay.

Ren’s breath caught in her throat. “What the fuck…”

“That,” Valeria murmured behind them, “is Murghôm, one of the great beasts of the Soul Realm. I have no doubt my mother conjured her presence for this battle. Murghôm is a fierce foe.”

Ren stared at the monstrous creature across the field.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

“Carmilla summoned Murghôm to fight Fryphessyrth,” Talen breathed beside her.

Ren turned to him. But he wasn't looking at the battlefield. He was staring at the beast.

And in his expression, for the first time tonight, Ren saw fear.

"Fryphessyrth will not stand a chance against Murghôm," Valeria's golden eyes tracked the creature's movements with grim certainty. "She may survive the fight for a time… but she will fall. Murghôm's strength is too great."

The beast across the meadow roared again, all three heads lifting toward the sky. Ren's mind raced.

For the first time since the fighting began, none of them spoke. They simply stared out at the impossible creature waiting across the field.

Then Valeria broke the silence. "I can help."

The three of them turned.

Valeria's expression darkened with resolve. "Cast me into the center of their ranks, and I shall summon a nightmare they cannot wake from."

Kaelin's brows furrowed. "In the center of their army?"

"My magic can call forth beings from the Soul Realm." Valeria's golden eyes flicked toward the battlefield again. "But, they are creatures bred of chaos and hunger. Once summoned, they act only on instinct." Her gaze returned to them. "If I release them inside the enemy ranks, they shall tear Sylven's army apart."

"So dropping them in the center of the formation would shatter their lines," Talen said slowly.

Valeria nodded once.

Ren crossed her arms. "But they could just as easily attack us."

"Indeed. They will kill anything they see."

"How exactly do we get you into the middle of their army?" Ren asked.

Overhead, Fryphessyrth's cry tore across the sky as she climbed higher into the clouds, her massive wings beating hard against the darkening heavens. She was preparing to meet Murghôm in the air.

"With me," Kaelin declared suddenly.

Both Ren and Talen turned toward her.

"I can lock the soldiers in place just long enough for us to reach the center of their formation."

Her gaze flicked toward Valeria.

"You summon your hellish beasts," she finished quietly. "Then, we ride back."

Talen studied her carefully. “Kaelin, can you control that much magic?”

“Oh, you missed quite a lot while you were imprisoned with the vampyres,” Ren jerked her chin toward Kaelin. “Last time we fought a dragon, she crushed its wings, tore the damn thing out of the sky, and slammed it into the ground.” She shrugged. “She’s been practicing.”

Talen’s eyes widened. “You… did *what*?”

Kaelin didn’t look away from the battlefield. “It was necessary.”

“And you’re certain that you can hold an entire line of soldiers long enough for Valeria to summon those creatures?” Talen asked.

Below them, the armies continued to shift and roar as the battle prepared to erupt again.

Time was running out.

Kaelin’s eyes flicked toward the monstrous shape of Murghôm. When she spoke again, there was iron in her voice. “I will do what needs to be done. I’ve preserved my magic until now, and I intend to spend it wisely.”

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Seven months ago, Kaelin had stood in her own halls, powerless–a fae princess whose magic couldn't save anyone from Sylven's betrayal.

She used to thrive in a world of ballroom dancing and music. She orchestrated lavish balls and drank wine from crystal goblets while her nobles danced, ignoring the coming tide of change.

She had thrived in revelry then.

And when war had come, she had been unprepared for it.

Now the wind whipped through the battlements of Driftwood Bay, carrying the scent of smoke and blood from the battlefield beyond the walls.

The world *had* changed.

And so had she.

Kaelin swung into the saddle of the horse waiting beneath her. Behind her, Valeria mounted in one smooth motion, settling onto the horse behind Kaelin. Kaelin’s fingers tightened around the reins.

Seven months ago, she was impotent. Tonight, she would do what needed to be done.

A flash of red caught her eye.

To her left, Ren drew her sword from its sheath. The steel slid free with a low metallic whisper, catching the firelight along the edge of the blade. Kaelin felt pride swell in her chest as she gazed at Ren.

If Ren Harper was the last time the fae princess would ever see, then she intended to remember everything–every stubborn line of her posture, the

scuffed leather of her boots, the constellation of freckles scattered across her cheeks.

And the fire in her eyes that never once seemed to dim, no matter how dark the world became.

Ren also studied Kaelin like she was memorizing the shape of the fae princess' face, the curve of her jaw, the strands of hair whipping in the wind.

Ren's mouth curved into a wicked grin.

"Are you ready to win this battle?"

Kaelin returned the smile as she gathered the reins in her hands. "Let's shake the heavens and make them remember our names."

Ren barked a short laugh. Kaelin's smile softened. Of course, Ren hadn't been willing to leave the front-line slaves to their fate. She was stubborn as ever. It was an impossible decision, really. Where Talen weighed strategy and political fallout, Ren always led with her heart–making impulsive, emotion-driven choices.

Yet, it only made Kaelin love Ren more, knowing that Ren would always choose what was right.

Damn the consequences.

Kaelin would break the enemy formation. Ren would ride through the chaos and free as many of the chained slaves as she could. It would create a distraction large enough for Valeria to unleash the hellish creatures of the Soul Realm upon what remained of Sylven's army.

If she succeeded, this might just work.

If it didn't, well…

Kaelin didn't intend to think about that.

"Not without me, you aren't." The rough voice came from behind them.

Brenna rode up behind Ren like a war spirit given flesh. Leather armor wrapped around her broad shoulders, reinforced with steel plates. Weapons hung from nearly every strap and belt across her body.

She looked ready to charge straight into the underworld.

"It would be an honor to fight beside you," Brenna declared to Ren.

"I couldn't ask for a better ally at my back." Ren reached out, gripping Brenna's armored forearm. "The honor is mine, Brenna. Let's go give them hell."

Kaelin turned toward the towering wooden gates of Driftwood Bay. The battlefield waited beyond them.

Murghôm roared in the distance. The chained slaves marched unwillingly toward the walls. And the vampyre army followed close behind.

Kaelin lifted her voice.

“Open the gate!”

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Kaelin leaned low over the horse's neck, and they tore across the battlefield at a gallop. Kaelin guided the horse with brutal precision—leaping over fallen bodies, wrenching the reins hard when enemy blades slashed toward them, twisting past soldiers who lunged too slowly to stop them.

To her left, Ren rode like a living blade, cutting down anyone who tried to close the gap behind them. To her back, Valeria remained silent.

But Kaelin had no attention to spare for them. Her focus turned toward the army ahead.

As she raised her hand and curled her fingers, the magic answered, surging through her veins like a torrent of ice flooding her blood.

There.

She felt them–hundreds of heartbeats. All were pounding, racing. Frightened, furious. She felt the pulse of every soldier around them as if their hearts beat inside her own chest. She tasted their fear. Tasted the sharp metallic edge of death as some nearby took their final breaths in the chaos.

They were all moving. Soldiers trained never to stop moving, never to pause because hesitation meant death.

But to Kaelin, they were no longer soldiers.

They were flailing pieces of flesh rushing toward her.

Her magic lashed outward, and invisible talons seized those bones and gripped those frenzied hearts.

And held.

All at once, the soldiers in their path froze. Eyes widened as their bodies refused to obey them.

Kaelin’s horse burst through the center of the frozen formation.

Her magic surged again. With a violent sweep of her will, the soldiers were shoved aside by an unseen force—creating a narrow corridor through the heart of the enemy army.

They rode like lightning through the path she had carved.

Frozen soldiers blurred past them on either side–faces twisted in confusion and terror. Some tried to fight the invisible grip holding them, their muscles trembling with the effort.

None of them could move. Beyond the corridor of frozen bodies, the battle still raged. And somewhere high above, two colossal shapes collided with a thunderous roar as Fryphessyrth met Murghôm in the sky.

Kaelin did not look. She couldn’t.

At first, her magic came easily. It felt powerful, endless. Her magic surged through her veins, strong and bright.

But the deeper they rode into the formation, the more soldiers she felt.

More bones.

More hearts.

Too many.

Her magic began to strain. The frozen soldiers grew harder to hold. Their bodies trembled beneath her grip as they fought the invisible force locking them in place.

Kaelin gritted her teeth.

Hold.

Her vision blurred.

Hold.

The magic flickered.

Thankfully, they had reached the center. Valeria slid down from the saddle, stepping forward before Kaelin could even register the movement. When Valeria spoke, the language was foreign to Kaelin—a harsh stream of guttural consonants and hissing syllables.

The ground trembled. Darkness split open like a wound in the world.

Kaelin caught a glimpse of shadows twisting, shapes moving within the blackness, and a chorus of hissing rising from the pit.

“Go,” Valeria urged as soon as she swung back on the horse.

Kaelin wrenched the reins hard and kicked her legs. The horse spun and bolted back down the corridor she had created.

But Kaelin's magic was fading. Kaelin felt it slipping through her fingers like water. Dark spots crept into the edges of her sight as the frozen soldiers began to shudder under the strain.

Hold.

She clenched her teeth so hard her jaw ached.

Hold.

They raced through the battlefield, the path collapsing behind them as soldiers began to break free from her weakening grip.

One unfrozen enemy lunged, and their desperate hands clawed at their horses, trying to drag them down. Suddenly, a soldier tore loose right beside them, his mud-stained fingers snapping closed just inches from Kaelin's arm.

Before they could touch the fae princess, Valeria intercepted–a flash of lethal movement cutting the threat down.

The walls of Driftwood Bay loomed ahead.

The gates stood open.

Almost there.

Almost—

The moment they crossed the threshold of the gate, Kaelin felt her magic snap inside her like a breaking thread. The world tilted. The reins slipped from her numb fingers. Her body swayed in the saddle, and then the ground rushed up toward her.

Strong arms caught her before she fell.

Talen.

He pulled her from the horse as her knees buckled beneath her, catching her weight as her vision dimmed.

"Kaelin!" he shouted.

She barely heard him.

But beyond the walls, from the battlefield…

Came the first screams of Carmilla's army as Valeria's summoned horrors began their work.

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Death had surrounded Ren on every side—bodies strewn across the battlefield, armor twisted and broken, limbs tangled in the churned mud.

Some were still.

Some were not.

Ren's horse thundered across the open field.

Ren's gaze stayed locked ahead–on the row of slaves forced to march at the front of the vampyre army.

Behind her, Brenna rode hard to keep pace.

"Looks like iron chains!" the orc woman shouted.

Ren swore under her breath. Of course they were iron, so they would be difficult to break without tools or magic.

How sick do you have to be to send slaves into the front line of a war? But then again, war rarely had honor.

"These bastards are going to regret pulling this shit," Ren snarled.

"We won't have much time to free them."

"We don't need much time," Ren shot back. "We just need to give them a chance to run like hell."

One chance. That was all she could give them.

"I'll take the far right!" Ren shouted over her shoulder. "Start freeing them from the left!"

Brenna nodded grimly. "May the Gods watch over you, Ren Harper."

Ren clicked her tongue against her teeth and urged her horse forward. “And may they guide your blade, Brenna Thornell.”

She rode straight into the line of slaves. They were worse up close. Much worse. Many had already stumbled from exhaustion, dragging the chains behind them. Ren’s stomach twisted as she passed a young woman who looked barely alive, her ribs pressing sharply against thin skin, her eyes sunken and empty.

Fury flared in Ren’s chest like wildfire. When she got her hands on Carmilla, she would personally remind the vampyre matroness what pain felt like.

There was a brutal order to the world, a relentless rule of survival where the strong climbed by crushing the weak beneath their heels. While humans like Ren had always languished near the bottom of that ladder, the vampyres had ascended higher than anyone else–establishing themselves as predators ruling over prey.

And now they were using prey as shields.

Ren’s grip tightened on the reins. There was so much they didn’t understand about the vampyres yet–their true origins, their weaknesses, their true goals.

But right now, all that mattered was giving these people a chance.

“Hold up your wrists!” Ren shouted. She thrust out her hand, and flame bloomed in her palm.

Golden fire danced across her fingers as she swung down from the saddle in one smooth motion, landing beside the first slave, an elderly fae. His hands trembled as he raised them. Ren pressed the fire to the iron chain. The metal shrieked as it heated, glowing red before snapping apart.

The old fae gasped as the shackles fell away. “T-Thank you, my lady.”

Ren crouched, burning through the chains at his ankles as well.

“No problem,” she grunted, already turning toward the next prisoner. She squeezed his shoulder once. “Now run like hell while I handle the others.”

The old fae didn’t hesitate. The moment his legs were free, he bolted toward the treeline at the edge of the battlefield.

A few nearby vampyres shouted in alarm. Ren cursed under her breath.

She moved faster.

The next slave was a boy, barely thirteen. His wrists shook as she burned through the chain.

“Go!” she urged.

He ran.

Next came a massive male orc.

“Run!” she barked, but before she could reach the next prisoner—

A blur of movement slammed into her.

“What do you think you’re doing, mortal?”

A vampyre lunged from the darkness.

He was fast.

Too fast.

His clawed fingers seized Ren’s arm, nails digging into her elbow as he yanked her off balance.

Ren swung her hand upward, and the flame in her palm exploded forward; fire blasted across the vampyre’s face. The creature screamed as his skin blistered beneath the heat, staggering backward and clutching his burning eyes.

Ren wrenched her arm free and raised her fire again. Flame roared up her arm and burst outward in a violent surge. The blast slammed into the vampyre’s chest, driving him backward several paces as his armor ignited in a hungry blaze.

He screamed as fire crawled across his pale skin.

Ren advanced.

“How's that for a mortal?” she growled.

The vampyre ripped the burning armor from his shoulders with inhuman speed. Beneath it, his skin smoked but did not crumble the way Ren expected.

Her flame alone was not enough.

He grinned through charred lips, revealing long, gleaming fangs. “Dragonfire,” he rasped. “How interesting.”

One second he stood ten paces away; the next, he was in front of her. Ren barely threw her arm up in time as his claws raked toward her throat. Steel rang as she drew her blade and deflected the strike.

The impact rattled her bones.

Gods, he was strong. He drove forward relentlessly, forcing her back across the muddy ground.

Claw. Slash. Kick.

Ren twisted aside, flames snapping from her palms as she hurled them toward his chest. The vampyre spun clear with impossible grace, the fire

missing him by inches.

“Too slow,” he purred.

Ren’s eyes narrowed.

“Oh yeah?”

She slammed both hands into the earth. Fire erupted outward in a sweeping arc, a wall of golden flame racing across the ground toward him. This time, he couldn’t dodge. The blaze struck his legs and climbed upward, devouring him in a roaring pillar of heat.

The vampyre howled. Ren pushed harder, feeding the fire, forcing it hotter, brighter, wilder.

“Burn,” she snarled.

For a moment, it looked like she might actually do it. The creature staggered, skin blistering as the flames engulfed him—

Then he vanished.

Pain exploded across her ribs as something slammed into her from the side. She hit the ground hard, breath tearing from her lungs. The vampyre stood over her, smoke curling from his burned skin.

“You mortals always assume we fight with honor.”

Ren rolled just as his claws struck where her head had been. Mud sprayed as she scrambled to her feet. Flame surged into her hands again.

“Honor?” she spat. “I’m trying to kill you. Not *marry* you.”

He lunged. Ren met him head-on. Fire blasted outward as she drove a blazing punch into his chest. The impact sent him skidding backward across the churned battlefield. He crashed into a shattered wagon, splintering the wood.

Ren advanced through the smoke.

The vampyre rose, flicking debris from his hair, and laughed. “You are quite the entertainment, human.”

Ren blazed her fire again just as a new voice drifted through the battlefield.

“Oh, she’s more than that.”

A second figure stepped through the smoke. The vampyre woman moved with terrifying grace, long dark hair whipping behind her as she drew a curved blade from her hip. Her eyes gleamed crimson.

“Well now, a human who fights like this… You almost make me regret that I am about to kill you.”

Ren’s stomach dropped. *Great. Another one.* Behind her, slaves were beginning to scatter—some freed, some still chained. But Ren couldn’t retreat now. She had to take these two down so she could free the rest.

“Now it’s a party,” Ren sneered, raising her fire again. “I was starting to think this fight was getting boring.”

The male vampyre chuckled. “She’s mine,” he said to the female.

The woman tilted her head. “Then keep up.”

She moved faster than the male. Ren barely saw the blur before steel flashed toward her throat. She threw herself backward, flames exploding outward in a desperate blast.

The woman vampyre twisted through the fire like smoke, her blade slicing across Ren’s shoulder as she passed. Pain burned hot. Ren spun and hurled a blast of fire. The male vampyre struck from behind at the same time. Claws raked across Ren’s back as she staggered forward.

The two of them circled her now.

Ren wiped blood from her lip. Flames erupted around her in a violent ring.

“Two against one? I like those odds,” Ren purred.

She thrust both hands forward. A torrent of fire roared across the battlefield, slamming into both vampyres at once. The blast hurled the male backward again.

The woman vanished into the smoke.

Where—

Movement flashed beside her.

The vampyre woman appeared at her flank.

Ren turned as steel slid forward.

There was a strange, quiet moment where Ren felt nothing.

And then the curved blade drove straight through her chest.

The impact lifted her slightly off her feet. Her breath stuttered. The silver curve of the blade protruded from her, fresh blood already spreading across the metal.

The vampyre female leaned close behind her, lips brushing Ren’s ear.

“You were magnificent, human… but this was never a fight you could win.”

The blade twisted.

Agony exploded through Ren’s chest.

Her fire flickered. The battlefield spun.

And then everything went dark.

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The world had fallen strangely distant, like Ren had sunk beneath the surface of a deep lake.

Her eyes drifted upward.

The sky stretched wide above her, endless and black, pricked with thousands of stars. The stars shimmered in and out of focus, their light blurring together.

She hadn’t noticed how beautiful the night was before.

Something warm pooled beneath her ribs, soaking into the earth. She could feel it spreading slowly through her armor, thick and heavy.

She knew what it was.

Blood.

But the realization came without fear. The battle felt far away now. Even the pain had dulled into something distant, like a memory rather than a sensation.

Ren drew a shallow breath. Her gaze drifted across the sky again. There—that crooked little cluster. She knew that one.

A faint smile tugged at her lips. Eve used to swear those stars were a dragon. Ren had always told her she was ridiculous.

It looks nothing like a dragon, Eve.

You just don’t have any imagination, Ren.

The memory floated through her mind. Suddenly she wasn’t lying in cold battlefield mud anymore. She was six years old again. The grass

beneath her back was warm from the day's sun, and the air smelled like pine and smoke from a nearby cooking fire. Crickets chirped softly in the dark while Eve lay beside her, their shoulders touching.

"See?" Eve had whispered, pointing at the sky. "Those three are the wings."

Ren had squinted up at the stars. "Those aren't wings. That's just a crooked line."

"You're just jealous because I saw it first."

"I'm not jealous."

"You are."

Ren had rolled her eyes, but she hadn't moved away. Because even then, she liked lying there beside her sister and watching the sky stretch forever above them.

The battlefield slowly seeped back into the edges of Ren's vision. Smoke drifted across the stars, thin gray ribbons carried by the wind. Somewhere far away, someone screamed.

Ren's chest rose weakly. Then fell.

Her limbs felt heavy, like they belonged to someone else. She wondered absently if Eve was somewhere beneath this same sky tonight, maybe looking up at the same stars.

Sorry, Eve.

The words formed quietly in her mind.

Sorry I wasn't stronger.

Her eyes traced the crooked dragon constellation again. Ren huffed a faint breath that might have been a laugh. Her vision blurred again, the stars stretching into streaks of silver light. For a strange moment, she felt like she was floating–like the battlefield below her had loosened its grip.

The mud no longer felt cold.

The pain no longer felt sharp.

Everything was soft now. Weightless.

The stars seemed closer than they had before. Closer than they had any right to be.

Is this what dying feels like?

The sky above her shimmered. But somewhere deep inside her chest, beneath the fading warmth and the quiet lull of sleep, a small, furious spark flickered.

Because Ren knew with sudden, bone-deep certainty that she wasn’t done yet.

There was still one more thing she had to do.

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The ground beneath Ren’s feet stretched into nothing but an all too familiar black expanse. For a moment, she tried to breathe, but her chest felt tight, hollow, like something vital had been ripped away.

Ah. Right. The blade. A distant awareness of it flickered through her mind.

She was dying.

“Slowly.”

The voice rumbled through the cavernous darkness. Ren lifted her head. Vortharax unfurled from the darkness. The dragon lowered his great head, smoke drifting from his nostrils.

“You are dying.”

“Yeah. I gathered that.”

“I expected it would take longer.”

Ren barked out a hoarse laugh. “Sorry to disappoint.”

Silence settled between them. Vortharax watched her with those burning eyes.

“You understand that if you die… I die with you.”

“I know. I really tried to free as many of them as I could.”

The dragon’s enormous head lowered. *“You should have fled. You are indeed reckless.”*

“Yeah, well,” Ren muttered. “Running hasn’t exactly been my style.”

Vortharax studied her for a long moment. Then the molten glow behind his eyes dimmed into something that looked suspiciously like resignation.

Ren stilled. A slow grin spread across her face.

“Well,” she said, tilting her head, “there was just one more thing I wanted to do before crossing the Veil. Well, assuming I don’t bleed out in the mud first.”

“*And what is that?”*

“I’m going to free you.”

Vortharax went still.

“It is unlikely to break ancient fae bindings while dying.”

“Since I’m already dying, I may as well try. Figured it’s worth a shot.”

“Why do you wish to free me?”

Ren sighed.

“I’ve taken so much from you. Every time I’ve needed your magic, I just reached out and took it, as if it belonged to me all along.” Her mouth twisted. “And the whole time you’ve been bound down here. It’s cruel, really. You recall what the fae recorded about you?”

“That I am a destroyer.”

Ren nodded. “Yes, the great terror that had to be sealed away to protect the world.” She folded her arms. “And yet here I am–trusting *you*.”

Silence fell again.

“Gods, when I say it out loud, it sounds ridiculous.” She ran a hand through her hair. “But the thing is…” she muttered. Her voice softened. “I don’t believe you’re the darkness this tale claims you to be. You were protecting your kin, and the fae, well… History tends to favor whoever wins.” Ren sighed again. “So, here’s the deal.”

She looked up, meeting his eyes.

“I *will* free you.”

The words echoed in the darkness. Ren lifted a hand before he could move so much as move.

“On *one* condition. You help my people win this fight. You burn the vampyres and shatter their armies. You save the ones who can still be saved.” She swallowed. “And after that…” Her voice grew quiet. “You *don’t* burn the world.”

Vortharax let off a low rumble.

“Crazy request, I know.” She managed a crooked smile. “But I figure if I’m going to bet my life on something, I might as well bet it on you.”

She folded her arms again.

“So, that’s the deal.” She lifted her chin. “You help us win this battle, and then you go find somewhere in this big, ridiculous world where you can actually be *happy*.”

“You would free me,” Vortharax reiterated slowly.

“Yes.”

“You would trust me with the fate of your friends.”

“To be fair, humans trust worse people every day.”

“You would die.”

“If it saves everyone I love? Hell, yeah. I don’t regret my decision of saving the bound slaves. The only regret I have is not being able to save more and help my friends win this battle.”

Vortharax lowered his massive head until his burning eyes were level with hers.

“You were a child when the bond first awakened. I have watched you grow.”

Images flickered–a little girl staring up at the stars. A teenager swinging a fist at a roll of flour. A young woman patching her own stitches on an open wound leaking far too much blood with a bottle of whiskey nearby.

“You were even stubborn then.”

Ren huffed. “Still am.”

Vortharax’s eyes burned brighter. *“Yes. And I admire that.”*

Ren blinked. “I didn’t think I’d live long enough to hear that.”

“Your soul burns brighter than any star I have ever seen. It has always been so. You have ever walked the path you believed to be right, even when that path twisted beneath your feet. Right and wrong are rarely so clean as mortals wish them to be. They blur. They fracture. They become… difficult to bear. And still, you choose to carry the weight of others. You seek to lessen their suffering. To take it upon yourself, if you must. You have always done so. And that… is why you endure.”

His words caught Ren completely off guard. Heat rushed to her cheeks in an embarrassing blush.

“You make it sound a lot more impressive than it feels. I don’t… I’m not trying to be anything like that,” she added, quieter now. “I just… do what I can. That doesn’t exactly make me special.”

“Flameborne, you carry my fire, yet it is your own spirit that makes it burn. I have watched kings cower and empires crumble, but I have never

seen a heart as fierce as yours. I see you now, Renaria Harper. You are indeed worthy of the title Flameborne."

The sound of her full name sent a shiver straight down her spine. Ren swallowed the thick lump in her throat, her chest aching with overwhelming warmth.

All her life, she had been fighting just to survive and was told she was nothing but a lowborn human at the bottom of the world's ladder.

But here, he was telling her she *was* enough.

Vortharax's voice deepened.

"If you truly mean to free me…"

His molten eyes flared.

"Then let us burn."

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Lucan wrenched his broadsword free from the ribs of a fae soldier, the wet shriek of tearing metal drowned out by the deafening roar of the battlefield. Before the body could hit the mud, a sound pierced the din.

It was Ren.

And she was screaming in agony.

Panic, hot and sharp, ignited in his chest. Blind to the chaos around him, he sprinted toward the sound, throwing his weight directly into the teeth of the enemy lines. Overhead, Fryphessyrth plummeted through the smoke, her scales reflecting the hellish fires below as it locked claws with the grotesque, asymmetric beast summoned by the vampyres that shrieked with a demonic, discordant howl.

The air tasted of copper, ash, and ozone. In Lucan’s gut, a cold certainty settled.

This was the end.

Lucan vaulted over a pile of tangled corpses, his blade a silver blur as he cut down a charging vanguard. He didn’t look at their faces. Friends, enemies, men he had trained with.

They were nothing but obstacles in the mud separating him from Ren Harper.

Then, a single figure loomed through the haze of burning sulfur, causing Lucan’s boots to skid in the bloody mire. He would know that silhouette in the dark of the Underworld. It was the man who had shaped his nightmares.

His father.

Slicked in the gore of the battlefield, Alistair Brightbane's towering frame cut a jagged silhouette against the bruised, darkening sky. Through the slit of his ornate steel helm, those familiar, suffocatingly icy blue eyes narrowed, locking onto Lucan.

"You throw away your birthright, your legacy, and instead, you choose to die in the mud," Alistair sneered, raising his ancestral sword.

"You chose a traitor," Lucan retorted, his knuckles turning white as he gripped his hilt. "A coward who usurped a crown that was never his."

He bared his teeth, the agonizing lifetime of living in Alistair's oppressive shadow narrowing down into a single, white-hot point of fury. The endless years of being molded into a weapon, of swallowing his own conscience to please a man who felt nothing, shattered in an instant.

"It is a disgrace to bear your blood," Lucan snarled. "You talk of legacy as if it excuses the rot in your soul. I would rather be a dead man with honor than live another second as a reflection of you. Today, the line of your blood ends—by my hand, or with my death."

Lucan charged.

Their blades collided with a deafening clang. With the effortless grace of a master swordsman, Alistair deflected Lucan's wild, rage-fueled follow-up, parrying the blade aside and delivering a brutal kick to Lucan's chest.

Lucan stumbled back.

"Rage makes you sloppy," Alistair mocked, advancing with slow, predatory steps. He swung his blade in a lethal arc, forcing Lucan to throw up a desperate block. The sheer force of the blow drove Lucan to one knee. "I raised you to be a lord of the High Fae. Instead, you grovel in the dirt for a broken kingdom."

"I learned how to grovel by watching you bow to a tyrant!" Lucan snarled.

Using every ounce of his strength, Lucan redirected Alistair's blade into the earth and surged upward, driving his armored shoulder into his father's chest. Alistair grunted, stumbling back. Lucan pressed the advantage, raining down a barrage of heavy, frantic strikes.

Steel clashed against steel—a frantic rhythm of hatred and survival.

Catching Lucan's blade in a tight bind, Alistair twisted his wrist, ripping the sword from Lucan's grip and sending it spinning into the darkness.

Before Lucan could recover, Alistair's gauntleted hand slammed into his jaw. Lucan hit the ground hard, his vision swimming with stars as the shadow of his father loomed over him, sword raised for the killing blow.

"You were always weak," Alistair seethed, his icy eyes devoid of any paternal mercy. "Die here, with your broken alliance."

As the blade descended, Lucan didn't reach for his sword. He scrambled forward, throwing himself inside the arc of the strike. The blade sliced through his shoulder guard, biting shallowly into his flesh, but the momentum carried Lucan right into his father's guard. With a desperate, feral surge of adrenaline, Lucan hooked his leg behind Alistair's knee, driving his weight forward.

They both crashed into the blood-soaked mud, rolling.

Alistair scrambled to find his discarded hilt, but Lucan was faster. Lucan threw himself onto his father's back, straddling his torso from behind. Before Alistair could throw him off, Lucan locked his forearm beneath his father's chin, his other hand clasping the back of the steel helmet. He pulled back with everything he had, pinning Alistair's head against his collarbone.

Alistair thrashed, his fingers clawing uselessly at Lucan's arms, gasping for air that wouldn't come. For a fraction of a second, the icy certainty in his father's eyes shattered, replaced by a sudden, desperate terror.

"This is for the kingdom you broke," Lucan hissed into his father's ear, his teeth gnashing. "And this is for me."

With a brutal, violent wrench of his entire upper body, Lucan twisted his hands in opposite directions.

A sickening CRACK reverberated beneath the steel helm.

Alistair went limp. The towering frame of Alistair Brightbane collapsed forward into the mire, his unseeing, icy blue eyes staring blankly at the night sky.

Lucan tumbled off him, chest heaving.

He didn't hesitate to grieve.

He grabbed his sword from the mud, turned his back on the corpse of his lineage, and ran toward the sound of Ren's voice.

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Brenna breached the treeline just in time to see Ren crumble into the mud, a jagged blade driven straight through her abdomen. Time fractured. Brenna's gaze locked onto the dark, rapid pooling of blood beneath her friend's torso.

It was a killing blow.

The closer vampyre ripped his blade free, his pale nostrils flaring as he caught Brenna's scent. A cruel, blood-slicked sneer bared his fangs.

"Looks like an orc came to join the slaughter. I always did favor the heavy taste of orc blood."

Brenna rolled shoulders broad, and she raised her chin.

"My name is Brenna. I hail from the Iron-Skaab Clan." She leveled a fierce, unblinking glare at the vampyre, then nodded to his companion. "I name you both my opponents. And I will claim your skulls once you are defeated."

The first vampyre let out a mocking laugh, while the second casually delivered a brutal kick to Ren's ribs, rolling her limp body onto her back. Brenna's breath hitched in a snarl as the vampyre callously dragged his boots through the widening crimson pool, splashing the fresh blood across the grass.

"Why are orcs always so dramatic?" the first vampyre sneered, rolling his wrists to spin his slender, crimson-dripping blade. "You shall die here, anyway. Why waste your breath on a speech?"

“Because the beasts believe in honorable deaths,” the other purred, her eyes glinting. “Which is perfectly fine by us. It just means dinner is served.”

Brenna unhitched the twin iron maces from her belt in a single, fluid motion. The heavy, spiked spheres whistled through the air as she charged, a tempest of muscle and scarred armor. The first vampyre lunged, his rapier darting forward like a striking viper, aiming for the seam in her shoulder guard.

Brenna anticipated the sting.

Twisting her torso, she deflected the blade with her left mace, the screech of steel on iron throwing the monster off balance. With her right hand, she brought her second mace down in a brutal, crushing arc. The spiked head caught the vampyre squarely in the shoulder, shattering his collarbone with a sickening crunch. He screamed, black blood spraying from the wound as he stumbled back.

Before she could press the advantage, the second vampyre blurred into her peripheral vision. Her twin daggers hissed toward her throat.

Brenna threw herself backward, her heavy boots skidding in the bloody mud. She parried one dagger, stepped inside the guard of the second, and drove the heavy pommel of her mace directly into the female’s jaw. Fangs snapped and shattered. The vampyre staggered.

For a breathless moment, the Iron-Skaab warrior held the line, matching their supernatural speed with raw, devastating power.

But the first vampyre, maddened by the ruin of his shoulder, ignored the pain. As Brenna swung wide to crush his companion’s skull, he dropped low, sweeping his legs beneath hers. Brenna’s footing gave way in the slick mud, and her massive frame crashed heavily into the earth. The impact rattled her teeth, sending one of her maces flying into the fray.

Gasps of air escaped her as the second vampyre threw her weight onto Brenna’s chest. Her cold, dead fingers locked around her remaining wrist, pinning her weapon hand to the ground. Above her, the first vampyre loomed, his face distorted in demonic rage, raising his jagged blade high with his good arm.

“No honor,” the monster hissed, his eyes wide and bloodshot. “Just *blood*.”

Brenna bared her throat, straining against the crushing weight on her chest, refusing to close her eyes or look away as the blade began its descent.

Thwip.

Before the vampyre's blade could land its blow, a heavy, black-fletched war arrow exploded through the center of the vampyre's skull, bursting directly between his eyes. His eyes rolled back, the sneer freezing on his face as his body instantly went rigid, then tipped forward like a felled tree.

The remaining vampyre on Brenna's chest gasped, her head snapping up in sheer disbelief.

She never got the chance to scream.

Out of the smoke-choked sky, a shadow descended like a plunging hawk. Lucan hit the ground, his boots slamming into the earth just inches from Brenna's head. The momentum of his fall carried his broadsword down in a blinding, vertical arc.

The heavy blade sheared clean through the neck of the remaining vampyre.

The monster's head bounced into the blood-soaked grass, her headless torso collapsing sideways off Brenna's chest.

Lucan stood over them, his chest heaving. His face was a mask of unadulterated, lethal fury, his eyes wild as he ripped his blade from the dirt. He didn't look at the dead monsters. He didn't look at Brenna.

His gaze locked instantly onto the crumpled, bleeding form of Ren.

"Grab her," Lucan choked out. Tears tracked through the layer of ash and blood on his face, leaving pale, trembling smears as his eyes locked onto Ren's shattered form.

Brenna scrambled over, her thick hands shaking as she reached for Ren. But the moment her fingers brushed Ren's tunic, she flinched back with a sharp hiss. Ren's skin was scalding hot—an unnatural, blistering heat that scorched right through the heavy leather of Brenna's gloves.

Beneath them, Ren's dry lips moved, but the words were entirely lost to the roar of the battle. Her eyelids fluttered, her pupils rolling back into her head until only the stark, terrified whites remained.

"We need to take her back to the Keep—surely there are healers, there have to be healers," Lucan rambled, his voice rising to a frantic, pitchy panic he had never shown in his life. He reached out to haul Ren into his arms, completely blind to the danger, his tears spilling over his lashes.

"Lucan, *look* at her." Brenna assessed the catastrophic wound in Ren's abdomen, the rhythmic, horrifying pulse of crimson pumping out into the

dirt, and the terrifying, white-gold light suddenly beginning to glow in the veins beneath Ren's skin.

They had seconds, and those seconds were bleeding away.

The world slowed to a sickening crawl.

From the corners of Brenna's vision, the shadows of the woods began to writhe. Dozens of fresh vampyre warriors were breaking through the smoke, their ruby eyes glinting with predatory glee as they smelled the fresh feast of a dying woman and two stranded soldiers.

But then, the light inside Ren erupted.

Gold and blinding silver fire began to bleed from her eyes and ears, her skin turning into a translucent canvas of pure, liquid star. The sheer heat radiating off her body forced Lucan back, his arms thrown up to protect his face as his tears literally evaporated on his cheeks.

Brenna, leaning over her, caught a fraction of a sound. A desperate, final breath rattling through Ren's throat.

"...let us burn."

Every instinct drilled into Brenna's warrior blood screamed a single word: *RUN*.

Brenna lunged. She wrapped her massive, armored arms around Lucan's chest, lifting him clean off his feet.

"Lucan, now!" she roared, spinning on her heel.

With the explosive power of a charging beast, the orc sprinted toward the tree line, dragging a thrashing, screaming Lucan with her.

They just made it ten yards and dove over a boulder for cover when the world went white.

A concussive blast of pure solar heat slammed into their backs, throwing them both face-first into the dirt. A pillar of blinding, ethereal light shot straight into the heavens, detonating against the clouds in a shockwave of gold and orange. The blast radiated a catastrophic wave of heat that turned the surrounding battlefield into a scorching oven.

Behind them, the triumphant hisses of the advancing vampyres dissolved into agonizing, blood-curdling shrieks. Brenna risked a glance over her shoulder, shielding her eyes from the glare. The vampyres who had been closing in were incinerating where they stood, their flesh blackening and turning to ash before their bones even hit the ground.

As the embers settled, a heavy, suffocating silence fell over the clearing, broken only by the crackle of burning grass.

Where Ren had lain, the earth was scorched. Standing directly over her limp, unmoving body was a massive black dragon, its scales like polished obsidian. The beast's massive wings partially unfurled. It slowly lowered its horned head, its crimson eyes turning away from Ren to lock directly onto the two survivors in the mud.

Lucan pushed himself up from the dirt, his breath hitching in his chest as his tear-streaked face went completely pale. The terror in his eyes gave way to a profound, disbelieving shock.

"Vortharax...?" he whispered.

The great dragon gave no sign of acknowledgment. Instead, with agonizing, heartbreaking care, the beast lowered its head to the molten earth and parted its teeth, gently curling its mouth around Ren's waist.

With the delicacy of a dragon cradling its own hatchling, the dragon lifted her broken body from the dirt.

With a single, deafening beat of its colossal wings that sent a gale-force wind whipping through the trees, the black dragon surged upward, breaking through the smoke and disappearing into the darkening sky.

Leaving Lucan and Brenna alone in the battlefield.

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“Vortharax.”

The name was a ragged breath on Talen’s lips, spoken just as a massive, suffocating shadow blotted out the stars above. The colossal black dragon swept over the stone battlements of the keep. Below in the courtyard, panic erupted like a kicked anthill; high-ranking soldiers shouted panicked commands, the frantic scrape of drawing steel echoing off the walls.

But Valeria didn’t look at the dragon’s claws, nor the smoke curling from its nostrils. Her gaze locked onto the small, limp shape dangling precariously from the beast’s massive jaws.

It was Ren Harper.

“He carries your friend,” Valeria said, her voice taut. Beside her, Talen went completely rigid, the blood draining from his face.

“Ren? By the Gods…”

Talen vaulted over the stone balcony railing, dropping down into the chaos below. In a thunderous crescendo of dust and displaced air, Vortharax slammed down into the center of the cobblestone square. His massive, obsidian frame barely fit within the high walls of the keep; the great beast tucked his spiked tail tight against his ribcage to avoid crushing the stone pillars.

A dozen eager vanguard soldiers surged forward, spears leveled. Vortharax bared a row of curved teeth, unleashing a low, vibrating growl

that sent the soldiers scrambling backward.

But as Talen broke through the front lines, his hands raised, those burning crimson eyes narrowed. Recognition flashed through the ancient beast's gaze.

With deliberate grace, Vortharax lowered his massive snout and gently deposited Ren's blood-soaked form onto the stones. For a fraction of a second, the dragon maintained a stare with Talen. Valeria, watching from above, could have sworn the dragon dipped his horned head in a silent pact before he surged upward, the force of his launch shattering the nearby cobblestones as he shot back into the sky—likely to join the battle with the other dragon.

"I need a damn healer *now*!" Talen's voice tore through the courtyard as he fell to his knees beside Ren.

From the shadows of the barracks, an elderly, disheveled man came stumbling out, clutching a half-empty skin of wine. But the moment his rheumy eyes landed on the smoldering wound torn through Ren's midsection, the stupor vanished from his face.

The healer slid into the dirt on the other side of Ren, his hands suddenly steady. He tore open her scorched tunic, his expression hardening into a mask of grim professionalism.

"Hold her shoulders down. The skin is hot enough to blister, but the bleeding is deep. If she jolts, she's dead."

Talen complied, his massive hands trembling as he pinned Ren's shoulders, his eyes wide and pleading as he watched the healer work. Every drop of focus in the courtyard seemed to narrow down to the agonizing rhythm of Ren's shallow, rattling breaths.

Up on the balcony, Valeria's attention was entirely consumed by the tragedy below. She leaned over the weathered stone, her fingers gripping the edge so hard the rock bit into her palms. But it wasn't just her eyes tracking the horror.

As a predator of the night, her senses were a curse in a moment like this.

The air was heavy, thick, and suffocatingly sweet with the scent of pouring blood. It coated the back of her throat, a metallic phantom taste that made her stomach twist. She didn't just see the dark pool spreading across the courtyard cobblestones; she felt the sudden, violent vacuum it left behind. The steady, vibrant hum of a living human essence was gone.

In its place was an echoing, hollow stillness.

There was no tether left. No lingering spark. Valeria knew, with the absolute finality of her immortal lineage, that Ren Harper was gone. The body on the stones was nothing but a broken vessel.

Her soul had already departed into the veil.

Talen desperately begged the healer for a miracle that was impossible.

Valeria was so hollowed out by the realization that she never heard the boots behind her.

Before she could even register the shift in the air, a cold, slender hand clamped brutally over her mouth, pulling her head back by her hair. In the same terrifying heartbeat, the icy kiss of a silver blade pressed hard against the soft flesh of her throat.

“Not a sound, your Highness,” a venomous, familiar whisper hissed directly into her ear.

Sylven.

His breath was hot against her neck, but his grip was unyielding, the edge of his dagger biting into her skin.

He was alive? Surely the heavy war arrow Talen had struck through his chest earlier had been true. But as her nostrils flared, she did not scent the familiar, crisp essence of a High Fae. No, she sensed something thick, metallic, and stagnant.

It cannot be.

Her mother, Carmilla, had clearly intervened—turning Sylven to snatch him from the very jaws of death. The hand clamped over Valeria’s mouth was ice-cold, pressing with a terrifying, unnatural force. Had he remained Fae, he would never have been able to pin her so effortlessly. But even Valeria’s centuries of immortal strength waned against his brutal, chaotic grip.

He possessed the volatile power of a *newborn vampyre*.

It was the apex of a vampyre’s physical might, a temporary window where the dark magic ran completely feral in the veins.

Sylven dragged Valeria backward into the deep, arched recesses of the balcony, pulling her out of the line of sight of the vanguard soldiers below. Down in the courtyard, the world remained entirely focused on the tragedy of Talen and the dead human girl.

Nobody was looking up at the high stone rafters.

Valeria thrashed against him, her boots skidding against the stone. She tried to scream, to tear her throat open and alert the courtyard, but her voice

was instantly smothered into a muffled, desperate hum against his cold palm.

Sylven let out a dark, vibrating chuckle right against her ear.

“Save your breath,” he mocked.

With a violent twist of his hips, he spun her around and shoved her hard against a stone pillar. Valeria stumbled, blinking through the gloom, only to find herself staring directly into the frigid, beautiful face of her mother.

The backhand strike exploded across Valeria’s cheek, the force of it cracking her head back against the stone pillar.

“You selfish, ungrateful daughter,” Carmilla hissed, stepping out of the shadows like a wraith woven from malice. Her golden eyes burned with searing disdain as she glared at Valeria. “You should be groveling at my feet, gladly offering up your wretched life so that *our* people can finally have what is ours. A world without a sun to burn us.”

Carmilla reached over her shoulder and unsheathed the legendary ash bow. If that arrow drew Valeria’s blood, it would be the end.

Tapping into the deepest, most forbidden well of her magic, Valeria ripped open a tear in reality, calling upon the three entities she had communed with in the dark for centuries.

A jagged, pitch-black portal tore open in the air between them.

From the void, three colossal shadows slipped out into the physical world, their forms shifting like smoke and liquid obsidian.

The creatures moved with terrifying speed. Two of the shadow-beasts lunged directly at Carmilla, their ephemeral claws tearing at her regal gown and forcing her backward into a defensive crouch as she snarled in outrage. The third shadow slithered across the floor like a striking serpent, wrapping its freezing, vaporous tendrils tightly around Sylven’s legs.

Sylven shrieked as the demonic frost bit into his flesh. His iron grip slackened for a fraction of a second, and Valeria wrenched herself free from his grasp, lunging toward the stone railing. She drew in a massive breath, her eyes locking onto the massive form of the warlord in the courtyard below.

“*Talen*!”

But before the sound could even fully register in the chaotic courtyard, a mass of violent, crimson-tinted shadows erupted from Carmilla’s silhouette. Like living whips, her mother’s ancient magic surged across the balcony, wrapping brutally around Valeria’s throat, wrists, and ankles.

With a vicious jerk, the shadows slammed Valeria flat against the stone wall, pinning her arms above her head. A thick tendril of dark magic snaked up her neck and bound itself tightly over her mouth, choking back her next cry into a suffocating silence.

Above her, through the veil of dark magic, her mother's eyes glared with murderous intent.

Carmilla bared her pearl-white fangs, her flawless face contorting into an expression of profound, imperial rage.

"I have sacrificed centuries for you. We would not have been forced to waste our finest resources on a crude war, if you were not such an insolent, sentimental *creature*."

A few feet away, Sylven snarled, kicking wildly at the freezing, vaporous shadow still coiled around his ankle. He stamped his boot down, finally dissipating the demonic smoke into nothingness.

At the same time, Carmilla's ancient, crimson-tinted shadows surged forward. Like an encroaching tide of spilled blood, they aggressively chased away Valeria's remaining demons, forcing the shadow-beasts back into the weeping fissure of the portal until the portal snapped shut.

Carmilla tightened her grip around the shaft of the Ash Arrow.

"Hold still."

Valeria fought with every fiber of her immortal being, thrashing violently against the suffocating shadow-binds pinning her to the stone wall. Her eyes were magnetically drawn to the dark, cursed wood of the arrow as its jagged tip hovered over her abdomen.

She braced for pain.

She went rigid as the point pierced her skin, sinking shallowly into her flesh.

But as soon as the tip struck, the pain abruptly vanished.

When Valeria forced her eyes open, Carmilla was already drawing the weapon back. The Queen stared in rapt, religious fascination at the single drop of royal, first-generation vampyre blood dripping from the glowing tip of the Ash Arrow.

No… Valeria's mind reeled in horror. It had never been a killing blow.

It was a harvest.

Before Carmilla could relish her triumph, a thunderous *crash* rattled the balcony.

Talen descended upon them like a fae god of war. Having heard Valeria's cry from the courtyard, the fae prince had vaulted up the stone architecture, his broadsword already swinging in a lethal, silver arc.

Sylven hissed, his newborn fangs bared as he intercepted the blow. Driven by the volatile, chaotic strength of his recent turn, Sylven managed to redirect Talen's blade, launching himself into a frantic, hyper-fast flurry of strikes. Steel clashed against steel in a deafening, claustrophobic rhythm within the narrow confines of the balcony.

Valeria thrashed against her bindings. She could see what Talen couldn't. Carmilla was stepping away from the duel as she glided toward the open edge of the balcony.

Valeria tried to scream, to warn him that the fight with Sylven was a mere distraction, but the shadow-tendril over her mouth reduced her warning to a desperate, strangled gasp.

Carmilla stood at the precipice, the night wind whipping her velvet gown around her like a shroud. With chilling serenity, she raised the legendary Ash Bow, nocking the blood-slicked arrow against the string.

She aimed directly at the full, brilliant moon shining high above the battlefield.

With a smooth, practiced pull, Carmilla drew the string back to her ear.

"With royal blood, the debt is paid," Carmilla whispered to the heavens, a triumphant, terrifying smile stretching across her face. "Let the sun be forgotten."

She released.

The arrow shot skyward. It struck the center of the moon.

For a terrifying beat of silence, nothing happened. Then, a sound like tearing parchment echoed across the horizon. A hairline fracture of deep, bruised red split across the center of the lunar surface. Within seconds, the crimson fracture expanded, bleeding outward until the entire sky was stained a horrific, apocalyptic blood-red. The battlefield below fell completely silent as soldiers from both sides stared up.

Darkness followed.

It wasn't the natural darkness of a cloud covering the moon; it was a physical, consuming void that aggressively swallowed the red light, erasing the stars, the sky, and every trace of luminescence from the world.

A suffocating, eternal night settled over Aetheria.

The sudden, absolute sensory deprivation caused the battle on the balcony to cease. Sylven let out a breathless, euphoric laugh in the dark, stepping back into the shadows.

As the shadow-binds finally melted off Valeria’s body, she collapsed weakly to her knees, her hands pressing against the shallow wound in her abdomen that was already beginning to heal.

Beside her, a heavy clatter echoed through the dark as Talen’s broadsword slipped from his numb fingers, ringing hollowly against the cobblestones. The fearsome fae prince, who had stood unbroken against armies and death itself, sank to his knees.

The world had gone dark.

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Acknowledgements

Bound in Night and Ember is, at its heart, a story about grief—about the ways it changes us, breaks us, and asks us to find the strength to keep moving forward. While writing this second installment, I was experiencing grief of my own. Through these characters and their journeys, I found a place to process emotions I didn't always have the words to express. In many ways, writing this book helped me heal alongside them, and because of that, this story will always hold a deeply personal place in my heart.

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Your enthusiasm has meant the absolute world to me.

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Now, it is time for me to embark on the final installment of the Flameborne Trilogy. I cannot wait to share the conclusion of this journey with you.

Be sure to follow me on TikTok and Instagram at **@sarahprimianobooks** for updates along the way.

Until we meet again,

Sarah Primiano

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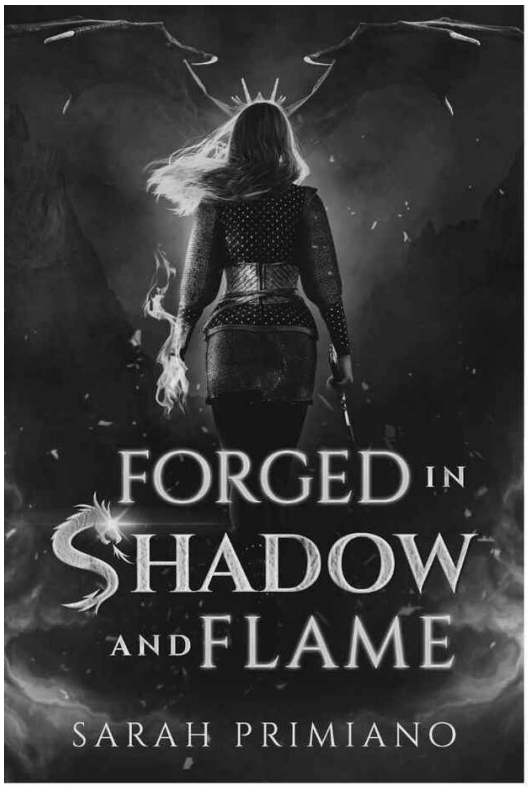
About the Author

Sarah Primiano is an indie fantasy author and speech-language pathologist based in Texas. She holds a bachelor's degree in English from Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi. Her debut novel, *Forged in Shadow and Flame*, was released in February 2026, with the sequel, *Bound in Night and Ember*, releasing in November 2026. Her upcoming Flameborne Trilogy audiobooks will be produced by Podium Entertainment. When she isn't writing about dragons, fae courts, and morally complicated heroines, she enjoys baking, reading fantasy, and chasing after her busy toddler.



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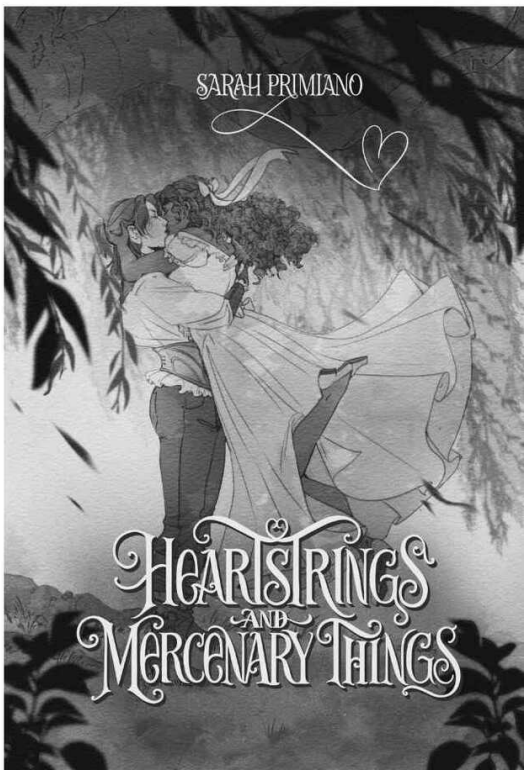


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