



Enchanted by Your Blessing

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KING'S SCHOOL

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Introduction

In a world where power is inherited, loyalty is fragile, and even the gods demand a price, nothing is ever as it seems. Beneath the polished surface of royalty lies a tangled web of ambition, resentment, and secrets long buried in bloodlines. For Prince Dacian, life within the palace walls has always been suffocating—predictable, hollow, and devoid of meaning. But when an ancient curse awakens within him, turning his very blood into something unnatural, his carefully controlled world begins to unravel.

Far beyond the reach of sunlight, in a kingdom hidden beneath the earth, Princess Renna fights a different battle—one against expectation, oppression, and a destiny she refuses to accept. Driven by ambition and a hunger for truth, she seeks answers that could shake the foundations of every kingdom that stands.

As their paths edge closer, bound by fate and a shared defiance against forces far greater than themselves, a dangerous truth emerges: the blessings that sustain their world may also be its greatest curse. And when gods, kings, and rebels collide, survival will demand more than strength—it will require sacrifice.

In a story of power, betrayal, and the cost of defying destiny, one question remains—how far would you go to rewrite fate itself?

CHAPTER ONE

Here I present unto you, His Highness, King Calian. Your undoubted King.”

My eyes looked at the elderly Archbishop merely meters away from me, sunlight passing through the colored windows and onto my face.

“God save the King,” the archbishop muttered whilst he put the crown on a familiar face. Everyone repeated the elder man’s oath with a loud voice, more than once.

Many cogwheels started to move within me, making me feel emotions I could not comprehend or withhold. Words were stuck in my throat; my tongue was unable to repeat the four words. Hate. No, I despised this. It made me feel a little, a mouse compared to a cat, silver compared to gold. I sensed my hands gripping my gloves tightly, out of my control.

Everything felt foggy after the coronation, not that I could remember every single detail of the faint memory, but the strong sensations of hate were spreading through my blood like oxygen, a moment unforgettable and untamable.

I stopped dissociating and put my hands through my tangled hair. “Get a grip, Dacian.” A sigh followed my lips as I continued to tie my shoes. I walked out of my room.

One.

Two.

Three.

Focus. I need to focus, and I need to do it quickly. I cannot let these meaningless thoughts and fleeing memories mess up my actions. I am not an idiot. I made firm steps out of the hallway and onto the maroon-colored carpet.

He proceeded to walk and enter one of the rooms in the palace, which was one of the commonly used dining rooms of the palace, seeing as the maids had already put out plates and silverware on the decorated table. He took a seat on one of many, too prideful to look towards the seat opposite him.

“You’ve woken up early for once, quite shocking for you, Dacian,” said the figure sitting opposite him, resting lazily on the velvety-covered chair with one hand wrapped around a thick cup. Dacian could not see the man’s face and had not greeted him back with any words. The man’s eyes were enveloped with innumerable amounts of jewelry from his headpiece—rubies, red beryl, and much more Dacian wasn’t capable of distinguishing. He didn’t care about pieces of stone either way.

The maids started presenting a variety of nutrients on the table as well as on their plates, including freshly picked fruit from their garden, steaming hot bread, dairy products spread out on the lengthy table alongside two diverse types of meat, each of which started filling the room with a nice, warm aroma.

The perfect, ideal breakfast. Unfortunately for Dacian, he had no desire to have any food; his body was simply not asking for it. He picked up a few pieces of berries with a small pair of tongs and put them on the side of his plate, accidentally making them bleed with the force of the tongs throughout the process. He then carefully put the item back in its place

and started plating up little food; so, did his kin from across the room, except the other had a normal amount of food.

Maids and butlers, with careful steps, made their way out of the dining room. An awkward silence filled the room almost immediately, and no words were exchanged between the two individuals at all; only the clashing of silverware on top of plates was heard. Dacian kept his head low, not out of fear or shame, but simply out of lack of acknowledgment.

After he was done with his meal, he wiped his mouth and his hands with the spare cloth beside his plate. With a sigh, Dacian forced himself out of his seat and walked forward, leaving his older brother without any indication of where he was going or any goodbyes. His fingers lightly touched the round knob and twisted it with force to open the door, stepping outside and leaving the door ajar as he walked away.

With the steps he took, he looked down at his shiny boots, almost seeing a reflection of his face. He did not have any duties, at least for now, and naturally decided to take a stroll.

As he walked slowly by the castle's gardens, he took a deep breath and abruptly changed his mind, feeling restricted. He decided to go out to the forest. Luckily for Dacian, it was quite near the palace. He could come and go quickly before his duties for the day began.

His eyes stayed fixed and unmoving as he began walking to where the horse stables were located. As he reached them, he saw the stable master, and much to the man's surprise. Dacian barely acknowledged him, moving efficiently to his personal horse stall.

"There you are," he muttered as he spotted his horse in her stall, resting

and eating hay. “Let’s go for a ride, yeah?” The horse neighed in protest, displeased, and wanted to finish her breakfast. Dacian tsked, a small smirk dancing on his lips. “I’ll feed you extra food when we are there. Deal?” The horse seemed to consider for a moment before moving to nuzzle its head against Dacian’s petting hand.

Dacian turned to the stable master. “Prepare her. I’ll be riding into the forest. Pack some food and supplies for her.” He said, taking a linen cloth out of the inside pocket of his suit to wipe the drool off his cheek from where his horse, Vesper, had licked him. The stable master nodded.

“Going on a trip?” He said with a smile, his hands fidgeting with his coat.

“No, we won’t be long, so there is no need for over packing. Just enough for an hour or two,” Dacian replied, already walking out.

“Yes, my Lord. She’ll be ready shortly.”

After about fifteen minutes, Edward, who was the head man responsible for caring for, feeding, and keeping track of all the horses in the stables, brought me my own. I walked to her, gliding my fingers through her mane while she tilted her head.

“Ready, Vesper?” I said beneath my breath before pushing my left foot up on the stirrup and swinging my right leg over her back, landing gently with practiced ease. I patted her back and picked up the reins, nodding at Edward that now was his cue to leave. He scrambled, stuttering out some “Have fun, my lord!” and “See you soon!” I think he might have said more but I was too busy in my thoughts to even pay attention to the small man. I forced a smile at him before taking off with Vesper.

It feels like she's my only source of stability nowadays, the only one who can regulate me after long days of being surrounded by complete idiots. Idiots are what they are. Everyone. It takes a measly smile and one kind word for everyone to fall to your will and look at you like you've hung out on the damn moon. It took barely any effort to have everyone in this kingdom wrapped around my finger. I don't even know what I'm doing here anymore.

Life is repetitive and everyone is predictable and between all my God-awful, boring duties it seems like nothing new is happening. I couldn't be sicker of this life. It's almost too easy and I've been in a constant state of boredom since I was a child.

My thoughts were interrupted by Vesper coming to a halt near the familiar river in the forest. I got off with a sigh, stroking her mane and feeding her a carrot.

"It seems you're the only one in my life who's not grown to be a dull fool, Vesper," I muttered my thoughts out loud almost unconsciously. My hands still tangled in Vesper's silver-shaded mane. I dropped the rest of the food to the ground to allow her to feed herself before walking over to the river and crouching, careful not to get any filth from the ground on me. I dipped my hand in, feeling the soft waves and ripples of the cold water against my palm and fingers. A soft sigh of contentment escaped my lips, the water helping my state of mind despite its ice-coldness.

I fluttered my eyes open after a moment and took in the scenery while straightening my posture. Beautiful. Truly, no matter how many times I come here I never get sick of memorizing every crevice and corner of the place.

Tall trees with an abundant number of leaves, colored in a rich emerald green. Even though it's daytime it feels dusk. It's so crowded with trees that no sunlight reaches them. I should probably send someone to handle this so there won't be any issues with sunlight regarding all the plants and organisms that stay here.

My eyes landed on Vesper, who covered the wet soil in her hoofprints. Oh, right? I forgot to tie her to the tree. Thankfully she's an exquisitely well-trained horse and was too busy eating.

"Forgot to tie you up, how thoughtless, right?" I let out a small huff, walking towards her when I suddenly paused in my tracks upon hearing something.

"What was that?" I muttered underneath my breath, my hand immediately and instinctively moving to pull out my sword. I was careful not to make any noise. I'd just heard the huffing and heavy breathing of a man and I wasn't mistaken. Still, it's good to check.

"Is there anyone there?"

My eyes scanned the place carefully. Could it be one of my guards? But they would alert me of their presence and are very well trained, athletic and physically fit. I doubt they'd be out of breath unless it was truly serious.

"I heard you. Show yourself immediately, that's an imperial order." My voice demanded an answer yet received no.

Whoever this person was, they were apparently good at camouflage. Not well enough though, thanks to my frequent visits to this place I

had the background, scenery, and the littlest details one could think of memorized in the back of my mind and had spotted the man about forty-five seconds ago.

He seemed to be hiding on a huge branch, bow, and arrow in hand. A sigh escaped my lips. The one place I come to have some peace of mind and some dull-headed nobody is disturbing me.

I wasn't too worried about the arrow hitting me since the nuisance himself looked shaken up and wouldn't be able to aim well from that height. Just as I was about to take action, I heard the tree rumbling and shaking, and the man's face twisted into fear and panic. This can't be good.

He collapsed almost instantly, his weight was too heavy for the branch and landed right in front of me. I pinned him down immediately, twisting his hand behind his back.

"State your name, age and purpose before I stab you through the lungs." My voice was final and authoritative before I turned the man's head to discover it to be a boy who seemed to be barely a teenager. Fourteen. Maybe fifteen. Why was a child hunting me down in a forest? Why is he here anyway? It's too early for this.

"L-look I didn't want any trouble your highness I promise I was just- I didn't mean to you see I-" The boy stuttered and struggled to form his sentence, and I cut him off, releasing him. He's not in danger.

"You shouldn't be out here. It's dangerous and not allowed for a reason." I stood back up, dusting off my coat as I spoke again, "Forgive me, I think I bruised you thinking you were a threat."

“No, it’s completely fine! Thank you for your highness. Yes, I won’t come here. I was just curious, and it seemed really fun, and I really wanted to practice my archery so I—” before the boy could continue his pointless rambling, I cut him off once again, smiling gently.

“I already told you, it’s fine. Just go back home, alright? I’m sure your family is worried about you by now.” I ruffled the boy’s hair as he ran off, accidentally tripping in the process but getting back up and waving once again.

Children. So innocent, carefree, and purposeless. The last thing I needed during my rare times of uninterrupted silence, peace, and solidarity was a brat who can’t follow basic regulations ruining it.

Nevertheless, I still had some time left and wanted to enjoy it, uninterrupted this time. But before I could take one more step towards the river a small creature hurried by my feet, ran straight into the crossbow that was hanging on a tree branch opposite me and I barely ducked. It struck badly against my side, and it’s undoubtedly caused some sort of gash. I groaned quietly from the pain.

Leisure time was the perfect time to investigate, to find out more, and to gain more knowledge. Time cannot be used so carelessly, yet he felt he was wasting all his time at that very moment.

He used this opportunity to look at the bark of the trees nearby, using his eyes and fingers; he used it to his advantage and learned more about the certain tree he was observing.

Maybe it was him being too focused on observing, or perhaps the weather had taken a toll on him, maybe the huge wound on his left rib,

but he had not realized that he had a nosebleed, quite a severe one at that.

He had only noticed when he saw a shiny liquid on his boots, shifting his focus from the tree's bark to his shoes; he saw gold. Golden liquid. The sun. It seemed to resemble the sun the way it emitted light. The same eyes that were being observant were now widened in surprise. He reached his fingers to his top lip and saw more golden liquid, or to be more specific, golden blood.

And his side? More golden blood. A lot of it at that. He was bleeding directly out of his tailored navy-blue suit and onto his shoes and the soil.

He held his ground by gripping the tree near him and messily tried to wipe off the golden liquid off his lips and even his chin. He could not properly think; it was a sticky situation for him.

Being anemic did not help. Frustration took over him, and he tightly gripped his nose to help with something, anything. But it was to no avail; the bleeding suddenly worsened. Slowly but surely Dacian felt his body weakened. He gripped harder on the tree and on the bridge of his nose, but none of it worked. Eyesight blurry and thinking gone, he couldn't hold his stance and almost tripped over his feet, before he fell immediately with a heavy clunk, collapsing onto the floor.

Vesper, his faithful horse, immediately moved to him, nudging his head and body. Upon noticing his unconsciousness, she immediately turned and began galloping through the forest, sensing something was wrong.

She reached the palace grounds, neighing loudly and causing a huge scene, causing the guards to come over, questioning her disheveled state and their beloved prince's absence.

It didn't take long for them to understand and rush into the forest, following Vesper alone to lead them to their precious prince who seemed to be in danger. They found him collapsed on the ground, pupils dilated, skin pale and heart rate growing by the second; his breath was short, as if he could barely breathe.

His skin was cold, clammy, and sweaty, especially on his forehead. Even in such a state, he seemed to be fighting his own body, trying to regain consciousness and control over himself. The color had drained from the guards' faces as they took in the scene of the prince there,

pooled

in

golden

sunny

blood

This can't possibly be anything but horrible.

CHAPTER TWO

Dacian

Light seeps its way into my vision as I slowly fluttered my eyes open, recognizing the familiar ceiling and surroundings of our physician's room. I must've blacked out again, and badly, considering the massive amount of pain that hit my left ribs when I sat up. I looked down, inspecting the bandages tied around my torso. Only then did my memories start flooding back to me, making me sigh in irritation as I looked up, meeting the eyes of Dr. Richard Bate, who wore a stern and concerned expression as he spoke, "Your Highness, you passed out, do you remember what happened?"

I waited a few seconds to collect my words before responding, "I remember being stricken by an arrow and bleeding out. I must have lost consciousness after that. Who found me, and how?" I replied, fingers moving up to run through my hair, combing it down but only messing it up more as I reached out, holding onto the edge of the bed to balance myself as I sat up more carefully this time.

I should probably eat something to get some nutrients into my body; my body felt like it had gone through hours of training even though I hadn't done anything productive. I looked up at him, waiting for an answer that he was delaying. He tilted up the middle of his round glasses, looking at his clip board, at me, then at the clip board again. I lazily drew patterns across my knee and looked around the room while waiting for him to speak, growing a bit agitated by the minute. The Kingdom had equipped him with the best tools as well as medicine he could need to be the Royal physician. We are mostly fine, except for me.

Being anemic means, I get to see the dull room I'm situated in right now a lot more often than I'd like. It most certainly does not help that for whatever reason, I've begun collapsing out of the blue, and way more than usual lately. It seems that no matter what I do, it's to no avail. I've had so many different varieties of cereal and fruits and meats and nuts over the recent years I may as well be a Royal balls buffet. It's begun affecting my performance in duties as well. I've become weaker, more succumbed to fatigue in ways I never used to be. Some days I can't even go through half of my daily fencing training or take Vesper out for a ride without getting dizzy. Not to mention my combat training, my skin stains itself with shades of blue and purple you'd only ever see in the sky, especially during the sunset where the sun and sky combine just right, forming views people fight to paint. I turned towards the desk, and my thoughts were interrupted by Dr. Richard, who seemed to have an answer for me now.

“Did you happen to see your blood a few moments before collapsing?” He spoke with interest and curiosity, lacing his tone. I grabbed the bottle of juice one of the servants had brought and drank around a quarter of it before replying, “Yes, but I'm not sure if my recollections are correct.” I rubbed my temples in frustration, I started to triple check to see if my mind is correct, maybe I was starting to see things. Because instead of the usual maroon fluid that would flow outside of one's body, it was—.

“Liquid gold. It appeared to be golden and... glowing. As if my blood was a mirror and reflected sun rays, but there was no way in for sunlight, not even a bit so how? —” I spoke without thought, until it hit me stronger than the gash on my side. My body unwillingly started to tense up and the wound on my side felt like it was opening. My hands were wrapped around my throat as a few coughs exerted its way out of my mouth.

There was no way this was happening, right? Not this early. My eyes followed the physician's hurried movements, trying his best to soothe my back and give me a sip of water. Strange anxious whispers came out of his mouth. My arm extended out towards the physician's collar, my hand weakly gripping his dirty white collar, seeing my knuckles become brighter than his shirt. The doctor had visible sweat drops forming on his forehead, grasping his clipboard and his heavy pen fell out from his fingers in surprise.

I slowly felt my hand grow weak, shivering with the slightest usage of energy. I let go of the man's collar with a push, wiping off the filth from his collar with a towel just opposite my care bed. My breathing grew heavy, transforming my speedy breaths into deep slow breaths as an attempt to calm my nervous system down, as an attempt. I need to act professionally furthermore smart as a part of the Royal family.

I offer a small apology under my lips, hoping he'd excuse my fierce behavior, rubbing my nape to show anxiousness. He fumbled with his hands, not bothering to fix his collar as to not make me snap, carefully picking up his pen before it fell right back to the clean polished ground. The pen gradually rolls and hits the bottom of my personalized care bed. He cleared his throat in awkwardness and appeared to have a stiff back, showing no comfort whatsoever. He didn't respond to my apology.

Good, he brushed it off.

"... As you may have realized by now, your blood has turned into gold, although it seems to act perfectly fine in your body as replacement to blood, it will not suffice in the long run." His pupils look down to his conclusion that was written on his paper, speaking in a concluding tone.

He stops for a short while before continuing. “It will take control of you far quicker than you know it, I’m sure you are fully aware of it. This gold has agonizing consequences for the body; the toxins found inside of the strange fluid are stronger than all of our antioxidants combined.” I look down on the lightweight blanket covering my body from my feet up to my waist, only granting Dr. Richard Bate my sense of hearing. “I fear we have no cure, your Majesty. The research done on this case is too little as we both know, only a few of the Royal family members have been cursed— Apologies...” exclaimed the tall brunette, accidentally letting a snide comment falter from his teeth, covering it up with a few coughs. “As I said, only a few of the Royal family members have been diagnosed with this strange illness. We aren’t aware of what type of symptoms you’ll be receiving either, but as I noted, you’ll possibly have a frailer body, seeing how your immune system has grown weak. To add to that, you’ve been coming to the care room far more frequently than you have on the other days. The nurses have continuously put ointment on the many bruises etched on your body.” The doctor put his thumb and forefinger on his chin, rubbing the short stubble decorating his face. I heard my heart pound out of control, reaching my ears as the noise expanded throughout my body, similarly like waves.

“It is best if you try to eat more nutritious food, your Majesty. It will be better for your health and decrease your symptoms. We’re left without a cure; we sincerely apologize. May the Guise protect you, for his blessings to cure the incurable.” The doctor seemed to have finished his speech, he wiped his sweaty palms with the help of his shirt cuffs and fixed the position of his glasses, resting easy on his humped nose. I could hear him exhaling shakily, nodding followed by a slight bow. He made quiet steps and excused himself outside the room. My gaze remained on the blanket,

colored like snow. I stared at it so much that I started seeing different hues of colors and blinked immediately. The bright color of the blanket hurt my eyes after I blinked.

My mind retracted to the simple words of “May the Guise protect you.” The guise, also known as The Guardian of the Guise. A Deity that has guided our family for as long as we can recollect. “His blessings cure the incurable...” I murmured, barely moving my lips and pulling them apart.

I thought for a bit, memories of this morning played in my head very clearly, as if it had just happened. I looked out of the window, which was open to its fullest. Witnessing radiant sunshine enters the room just slightly; a beautiful and warm mix of vibrant marmalade and honey. The breeze from earlier that morning hit me again, except it was way past noon, and alternately, instead of spending time with Vesper and enjoying nature, I was stuck in the care room, too weak to move a muscle. Just like that.

I started patting the bandage on my wound with precise caution, I could never let this happen to me, really? Me? Incurable? That can’t be right. I beat the impossible itself. I turn luck to fit my own radar and now I’m expected to wait and hope a God who’s burdened me and my family with regulations, to have mercy and save my life for me? My ancestors might have succumbed to this, but I’m not as pathetic and weak-willed as they are. The thought alone makes me feel each microscopic fragment of cilia on my lungs. A feeling of disgust is so pure, so strong I’m afraid I might bring down an entire nation just to relieve it. It’s an utter and total detestation. The deal is stupendous, idiotic, and I’m sure to my core that there are pieces in the puzzle missing. Why would a God, a deity, a mighty powerful creature agrees to help our family out? Why would

the only catch be us reproducing, spreading the Royal blood and not allowing our land to get conquered? It makes no sense. Especially if we don't follow it, we're cursed with our own blood being toxic to us by turning into a gold, sunny fluid of some sort and dying. I fail and refuse to believe I'm the only one who's questioned it, nor do I understand why no one has done anything until now. My past relatives couldn't have been that vacuous. Clearly someone needs to put an end to this "deal", and it seems it must be me.

As sick as I am of this world and its innards I have absolutely no intentions of dying and taking the easy way out like the meek fools who have in the past. I am completely alone in this, and I especially won't go down until my miserable, cowardly older brother learns his place once and for all. Our people already despise and loathe him. The only reason is that he's king and I am not because I didn't want the role. It's a dull position. I had no interest then when it was offered after father died and I don't have any now. I take a lot of pleasure in breaking Calian down. Bit by bit, carefully deconstructing and taking away small scraps and shreds of his soul. Just knowing the fact is enough to keep me moving and I sure as hell won't be stopping until there's nothing but the essence of my wrath left of him. I need to talk to the Guise. I know he's out there, and he will see me and help me. It's not a matter of "if" anymore and never was. If he proves useless, I might just have to roll the dice again and make him hope deep in his powerful soul it lands on what I want.

Maybe things won't be so dull here.

CHAPTER THREE

One peaceful, eventless day. That's all I ask for, and yet it seems to be too big of a wish; everything feels like it's out of touch, and that I'm running out of time. Unknown sensations start to swallow my heart whole, like ink splattered on white paper, forever stained in uncertainty and most evidently, guilt. My gaze lowers as the tips of my fingers grazed lightly on my textured neck, trying my best to not reminisce about the deadly past, and the awful events that occurred in it.

I clasp onto the hilt of my small blade once again, slowly letting out a breath I had no idea I was holding, resuming playing with my blade as my eyes scan through only one of the papers of the major paperwork I must get done.

By tomorrow morning.

I furiously stabbed my blade into the paper, accidentally striking the sharp steel object through my wooden desk. A dreadful sigh came out of my mouth, another problem on the pile of the other hundred problems I have, a great way to start my morning. I stood up from my seat, sick of the hours of planning and the restless nights I had to spend in this room. The hands that were once observing my neck were now on the handle of a door, pushing it down with quick force to open it. I sprinted out of the door in anger, feeling nauseous with the amount of work bestowed upon my shoulders.

Immediately after I closed the door, I could hear gentle footsteps from the long hallway; my ears fluttered at the soft thumps of shoes on the carpet. It seemed like someone was coming towards my way. I quickly adjusted my clothing to look proper and natural, trying my best to walk

normally in the hall as if I didn't almost just break my office door. I stumbled across a familiar presence opposite the path I was walking, attempting to be sly and get away from any sort of interaction, especially with the attire and expression I had currently. Unfortunately for me, the familiar figure turned around swiftly, shortly after recognizing me and calling out to me. With stiff posture, my body forcefully turns around to the call.

"Renna? Am I right?" yelled the Man from across the passageway, the two words echoed strongly. My eyebrows furrowed, making an effort to recognize the individual and how he knew my name. Which was strange, almost nobody called me by my own name. My legs made a step or two towards the individual, standing tall and questioned. "That would be me," I showed my confidence in my words, not to mention anything about where he came from, and his familiarity.

"Do you happen to need something?" Continuing my unfinished sentence after a pause. The figure comes forth, leaving a meter of space between the both of us. An angry expression terribly spilled on his face. His index finger suddenly makes its way to the middle of my chest, shoving it with emotion, shaking in anger.

"You say that little prince of yours to quit being so haughty, arrogant and a snobbish rat, understand me? Nobody, and I mean nobody," furthermore digging his finger into my chest repeatedly, yelling from his throat.

"-wants an acquaintance with a stuck-up brat. He needs to get his act together and stop fooling around!" Gripping his teeth, the man himself looked like he was about to explode and turn into the cardinal sin of Wrath.

I wore a stern look on my face, confused about why I had any play in this, opening my mouth to respond back to the madman's words before he held onto his coat and walked off, his hands in fists. I cleared my throat loud enough for him to stop; my eyes hollow as I spoke. "You do realize who you're speaking to, correct? This has absolutely nothing to do with me and if you have any issues, use your words correctly and address me in a way that's not degrading." I gestured for him to come back, and I watched his eyes widen with pleasure. The veins in his arms accentuated with furiousness as he stalked back towards me.

"Do you know who you're speaking to like that? Oh, almighty! You and that wretched prince is the same." He spat the words out with such a venom. You'd wonder if he was carrying a snake. I looked him up and down, trying to recognize him.

Oh.

"You're the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ember Ness, aren't you? You're speaking to the princess and general of Velmorla. Speaking to my waste of oxygen from a brother was a mistake, which I'm sure you've realized by now."

I practically sighed the words out, but my response was stringent enough to have him pause. I observed that he collected himself, cleared his throat, and adjusted his coat.

"Well, your brother didn't make us feel very welcome." He stated as he looked down at the floor, then at the Lancet window on our right as it carefully and diligently worked in the night.

"I assume you're here to form some sort of alliance?" He nodded and I

gestured to one of the living areas, “I’ll join you in a few moments. I have something to do, so if you may, I’ll excuse myself.”

Before I could walk away, I heard him scoff under his breath. “A woman? Is this some sort of joke? Take me to the king. I don’t want to speak to a little girl playing around.” He snorted, his eyes lacking respect as many usually did initially.

“You may call me the commanding general and princess of Velmoria. Do you want this alliance, or not?” This seemed to stir up thoughts in his head as he calmed down. The man sighed in reluctant agreement, walking over to the young woman and shaking her hand before moving with quick strides to the living area. His pride was heavy, but his duties for his kingdom were heavier and reputation didn’t lie.

In the underground world where Velmoria lay, unbeknownst to most of the world but those powerful enough to hear of it, rumors of Renna Velmoria had spread far and wide. The princess who’d taken up the role as commanding general. Who ran into the military and army? Who people were too intimidated by not to respect, despite being a woman. Her results didn’t lie, and most of the time that was enough of a mouth zip for the people who have anything but compliments to give.

After dealing with the man, Renna’s feet stormed through the palace, marching towards the North-East path of the palace where her father’s office remained. Her hands glided through her straight, unmaintained hair that she had no time to properly do this morning, eyes closing for a moment while her feet forcefully walked by itself. Oil paintings inhabit the plain beige walls, paintings that bore the life out of her, faces and scenes that she’s seen much too often, and stories behind them that are

talked about less. She rubbed the fingerprints of her thumb with her pointer finger as she finally reached the end of the endless, looping hallway. Her mind replaying the words the familiar man had spoken before, steadying herself with a slight step back, she'd reached her destination and had almost bumped straight into the tall wooden doors. Whoever passed by would've thought she was being tormented as she sounded and looked exhausted, and in truth she was. She took her hair out of the knotty, messy braid, making a mental note to redo it later as she shook it out before taking a moment to compose herself.

Just as she was about to knock on the king, her father's door, she instinctively stopped herself and heard voices behind the wooden door. One of the things that Renna was blessed for was good hearing; she could hear a pin drop and know exactly where it was located. This was a great advantage for her in many situations, especially as a General.

She quietly shifted to the wall beside the door, supporting her back with it and eavesdropped on the ongoing conversation. Keeping an eye on passerby and an ear to the wall. Her ears could only pick up on a few words, but she knew exactly who and who were conversing, her father and his right-hand, talking about another—

“Kingdom?” Renna uttered, barely a whisper to confirm what she was hearing. “A God... with what capabilities?” Her hair got in the way of her eyes, hurriedly brushing her hair back to keep track of anyone daring to come forward.

“.. A God residing within the Elysian Kingdom, your-” The King's right-hand said, apparently informing the King of this ‘God’. Renna cursed beneath her lips — she could barely hear! Ultimately figuring that the

man was moving around whilst talking, annoyance building up within her. That was until she heard something that would make her heartbeat unhealthily faster with adrenaline.

“This is the same being who brought back... —a miracle worker...! This would be the perfect opportunity to! —”

To what.

To what?

Her hand gripped the wall, scratching off a bit of wallpaper on instinct, annoyance replaced with shock all over her body like fireworks blowing up many emotions at once — the man continued his speech, driving Renna to listen more. Something finally stirred in her again, as if she had just regained consciousness.

She knocked, didn't wait for an answer and stepped inside, barely glancing at the man sitting opposite her father.

“Get out. I want to speak to my father.” My words were hollow and undebatable as I spoke.

“Princess, we're discussing an important topic-”

“I don't care. Get out, I need to speak to my father about a matter that requires his attention.” I glanced at the man sitting in the luxurious chair behind the desk, the man I call father, and the king. He ran a hand down his face, gesturing to the door. “Go ahead, Cedric. I'm sure she won't be long.” At my father's word, Cedric nodded, getting up and excusing himself before closing the door after himself.

“What is it? You can’t interrupt my meetings like this Renna.” My father’s voice was frustrated, like he was already sick of me even though I had just come in. “I came to tell you about Silas’s most recent stunt. As much power as we hold, you and I both know we need alliances, father. Either discipline him properly or don’t send him as a representative for us when meeting a possible ally.” My voice was sharp and straight as I watched his brows twitch and furrow in annoyance. “What did he do this time? I told him to behave.” I walked closer and placed both of my palms flat down on the wooden desk “Well he’s not very good at listening, is he? Discipline him or I will. This puts us in a bad position in the long run, and I will clearly not have it.” Before he could reply, I walked out, letting the door shut behind me.

My room. I need to get to my room and figure out what exactly my father and Cedric were talking about. I basically stormed inside, the shutting of the door so extreme it rattled the furniture in my room. I ran a hand down through my hair to calm myself as I sat on my bed, unbuttoning my uniform. A God. That’s what they said, isn’t it? I almost can’t believe it. Could I have misunderstood? I doubt. I didn’t hear much but it’s in the name, isn’t it? A God is out there. A god is out there, and I need to find him. But I need details first.

And I know just where to get it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Renna

Birds chirping, alerting one another and the sounds of their wings flapping in the freezing cold air, each of which flies in coordinated groups — otherwise known as murmuration. The sun rises in the east, allowing its rays of light to reach crops and animals, the source of life for humans. Though no such thing ever occurred in the Velmorian Kingdom. No light, no nature, blessed with nothing of what the Earth had provided. It was an underground powerful Kingdom, with many connections and sciences, immense knowledge and competence. Because of the Kingdom's value and preferences, the Velmorian heritages chose to keep the Kingdom a secret; only a few specialized individuals from each Kingdom could further keep contact with them. This was mainly a concern of assassination attempts throughout the years of developing the Kingdom and was chosen to be kept this way for safety purposes.

Renna had not seen the light of day, quite literally never, which as an outcome caused negative effects in her daily life as any person would, regardless of status and wealth. The circadian rhythm was messed up, and the only components provided that weren't food resources were partially artificial. The squeaking of a sink knob was heard, fresh water pouring out from the sink tap, two hands cupping the water, beautifully pouring out of the small gaps between the fingers and eventually overflowing. Splashes of water were also heard, face covered in the liquid as an attempt to strip off the oils from the skin. Thoughts came crawling in the back of Renna's mind; her brain immersed deeply in these hypotheses, taking over her as a whole. She wanted to break a cycle.

A sick cycle.

Wake up. Be hygienic. Looks proper. Feed. Mockery. Work hard. Pushed aside. Mockery. Misogyny. Acceptance. Sleep.

A never-ending cycle, day by day, week by week, nothing ever changes. As if she were stuck in a loop, every other day felt the exact same. Nothing felt real anymore, and she wanted nothing more than to feel real. As much as she was confident, Renna was at the end of her rope, gripping the last few strands of yarn without complaint, at least complaints that nobody would hear but herself. There was only a handful of moments left until her hands felt weak, eventually letting go of the painful fibers that left an imprint on her hands. But if she had to go down, so did the whole Kingdom, and she was going to find a way to bring them down and rise herself up furthermore. A deadly competition with a deadly number of risks, but she had nothing to lose, Renna was a dead woman either way.

Bristles of a brush finally went through the young lady's hair after being tangled for weeks, it was not taken care of like it used to be before, nothing was like how it was previously, and it spawned guilt in the core of Renna's heart every single time she deeply thought about it. Her arms grew sore after what seemed like ages of untangling her hair, flipping it back and drying it with a towel she had snatched nearby.

She took a glimpse of her uniform, gently and neatly buttoning the thick buttons on her perfectly fitted short coat, an outfit that was worn daily. She brushed the slight dust from her padded epaulette. Furthermore, fixing the white, thin sash wrapped tightly around the base of her body.

It was funny,

Really.

Dressing as a General, having the qualities of a Commanding General — actually, being way more qualified to be a Commanding General, and still not being taken seriously. She had worked hard to be a General, way harder than her brother to prove that she could play a role without her necessarily having to be a Princess. There was nothing wrong with that, but that was not her desire in the slightest. She wanted to lead, to rule and to be a great example of a Woman. Despite all of this, she continuously gets dragged down and turned into a nobody, a lady that should be taken care of and dependent, not independent. She's seen as an individual to only carry babies in her womb, form alliances through marriage and be a mother, never as an individual with talent and astonishing skills.

She had entered the hallway without realizing, her thoughts got the best of her, it nearly felt like her body had taken control of her automatically, maybe it was because of how everything felt so repetitive. She gripped her head in an attempt to get these fleeting thoughts out of her mind, trying to regain consciousness over herself, and finally focus on the tasks that were facing her for the day. Her legs walked further from the spot she had stopped for a moment or two.

It was early morning, so early that the maids and butlers had yet to wake up. Her insomnia was getting worse by the day, it felt severely worse that she couldn't sense her tiredness. Feeling more like a senseless puppet rather than an actual human being. Renna did not know what had motivated her to go in front of her Father's bedroom door, fully knowing that he was deep asleep. She opened the door without thinking twice, not bothering herself by knocking on his door three times to allow herself in. She also didn't bother with being quiet with her footsteps, the heels

on her boots made big claps against the clean ground, pushing her back against the bedroom door and closing it, locking the door without turning around.

There was no source of light in the room except for one small oil-based candle placed on a sort of wooden bed bench. She reached out to her side with the slight eyesight she had in the dark, thanks to the candle. It was a bigger candle with a case surrounding it, holding the heavy metal case from a loop created on top of it, eventually lighting up the candle with the help of the other candle, putting it back to its place after it caused a spark.

She made precise steps towards her slumbering kin, lifting the lantern to see his face. Eyes flicking to her side, a personally designed shotgun her Father had put as display on one of the many shelves, a gift from another Kingdom for her Father. Renna grabbed the shotgun, her back facing the dozed off male. Her head turned before her body did, inspecting him. She gripped the shotgun, preparing for any and all outcomes when she woke him with a clear voice, saying -

“Father, wake up.”

No responses, only the shifting of the mattress was heard.

“Father.” Renna urged him angrily, not having any time to spare. She slapped his cheek hard enough to wake him up with the head of the shotgun. Grabbing a fistful of his hair, she looked carefully at his eyes and closed his mouth immediately with the cuff of her uniform when his eyes were lifted. The man was in a state of shock, a shotgun pointed at his neck, with restraints in his mouth additionally it was all his daughter’s doing.

He muffled and tried to scream, stopped by what's around his mouth, gripping his hands on his daughter's shoulder, attempting to use self-defense but to no avail. She had more advantages than he did; he couldn't call any guards either due to his mouth being blocked.

“Don't make this harder for any of us, I only want answers from you. I'll let you live if you comply.” Renna stated her purpose, being straightforward with her boundaries. She nudged the head of the shotgun deeper into his neck when her father continued to muffle and disobey her; she wouldn't accept such stubbornness. She pulled the safety trigger from the shotgun in hopes to terrify the man lying in front of her, gripping the gun carefully than before. Thankfully, he calmed himself down to survive, gripping Renna's wrist cuffs, signaling that he would talk.

“Good.” She said, knocking him out with the shot gun before carefully dragging him out to the area behind the palace. She waited a bit for him to wake up and when he did, he was completely tied up, different forms of restraint tugging at every one of his limbs.

“Tell me what you know about this deity from the Elysian Kingdom.”

“What are you talking about? You threatened your father in his sleep for this? Untie me at once!”

He held such an angry look in his eyes he hadn't shown for years. Not since the time I told him I wanted to be general. I'll never forget that day; it was humiliating. No one, barely anyone, believed in me, and it took two years of torture and training, despite being overqualified already. For my father, to give me a chance, a chance.

I sighed, tightening the chains I'd tied him in. I'm glad I didn't even

consider a rope for this. As horrible as he is, he still knows how to handle and take care of himself. I grabbed him by the hair growing at the back of his head, tilting his head up to look at each other... correction, for me to look at him. His eyes were covered so he wouldn't figure out a way, some way to disadvantage me. I looked at the hair clutched between my fingers, the hair on his scalp so platinum it's milky white.

"You know what I mean, father, just tell me, will you? Don't make this any harder than it must be and we'll be done here." I responded after a bit, one hand keeping his head stable.

"Foolish girl, you couldn't have just asked me yourself? You don't need to go to such measures!" He gritted his teeth, body tightening and tense. "Do you think I'm stupid, father? You wouldn't have told me. I know you well, and I'm sure you know I have no interest in wasting my time."

"You always have been way too stubborn for your own good. Fine, I'll tell you, but this information goes nowhere. Absolutely nowhere and no one. You hear me?"

"Got it. Just start. I'm waiting."

CHAPTER FIVE

Renna

I sat on the ice-cold pavement, waiting for him to begin speaking, which after a few seconds he did. “Have you heard of a woman named Eurydice? She was a noblewoman in Greece around ten centuries ago.”

I narrowed my eyes before responding, “The miracle woman who almost came back from the dead? Isn’t she an urban legend or something of the sort?”

“Something like that, but I won’t bore you with the details.” Father says, “The Elysian kingdom’s royal members are directly related to her.”

I pause, consider his words and raise an eyebrow.

“What does this have to do with the Deity you were talking about? How is the Elysian kingdom related to him?”

“Well, a man named Orpheus from back then— around 500 BC, fell in love with her when traveling. Eurydice was always known as gentle and kind by the people around her. When she herself barely had food to eat, she’d still give what little she had to children and the unfortunate, prioritizing others over herself. It didn’t take Long for Eurydice and Orpheus to fall in love. They met when he saw her one day, peeling apples while telling stories for two small orphan children who had been hungry for days and were thinner than a tree branch. He was so amazed— so awe struck by her thoughtful, philanthropic heart that he fell in love at first sight. He extended his business trip, bound to winning her heart over, and Eurydice, moved by his ambition, fell in love with him as well

shortly after. Unfortunately, her sweet and beautiful personality made her an easy target, easy prey. One night while she was watering her garden, she was unexpectedly killed by a drunk man in the wrong place. The Orpheus was heartbroken. He was desperate and despaired, willing to go to any lengths to bring her back. He searched high and low. Narrow and broad. He visited a lot of wizards and witches and finally discovered the underworld. Although warned against it, he still went, determined to bring Eurydice back.

There, he met ‘The Guardian of the Guise.’ Who agreed to help him? Long story short he made a vow— a deal of some sort with this... God. This deity. The king got Eurydice back and in return, the Guise asked the King to continue ‘spreading the Royal blood’ and not allow his kingdom and people to get colonized or mixed. He agreed immediately; he didn’t think it would bring any harm. He had a condition though, that he couldn’t look at Eurydice’s face until after they exited the Underworld. He agreed at the moment, but as soon as he saw her figure even though it was in the dark and shadows covered her, he rushed up to her, unable to control himself. He was shocked by what he saw. She had been destroyed into ash from top to bottom, a scream so loud, so horrifying escaping her throat the other souls in the world began rattling. Orpheus, the King, of course, was devastated. He had to watch Eurydice die not once but twice. Nonetheless, he still had to follow up with his end to the deal. Generations went on, and the vow and conditions were only broken by a few people. Of course, people within the Royal family Of Elysia know of this deal. The Guise is loved dearly in their family for helping them at a rough time and keeping their lineage ongoing.”

I took a moment to process the information he’d just dumped on me when all I asked about was the Guise, fingertips softly grazing my chin.

“I see. And this... this Guise, can he do anything at all?”

“As far as I know, that is the case. We’re planning on trying to contact him. He could be of good use to us and our kingdom.” He stated while fidgeting with his chains.

I hummed lowly in response, slipping my gloves off and digging into the rich, roughness of the ground with my blade. I stopped after I found what I was looking for, a sheer blade I had handcrafted. One that didn’t exist, at least not in our realm. I specifically designed it to look like it’s from the outside.

“What’s that noise? I hear metal. Why are you stabbing the ground with your blade?” Father’s voice was curious and confused but quickly became impatient at my lack of answer. “Renna? Renna. Answer my question. Hello? Renna. Ren—”

I’d slashed the blade down his throat, slitting it. I let it sit for a moment then dug it deeper. If I could, I would dismantle him completely for being a horrible father. A horrible man as useful as a tree bark. I pulled away with annoyance as the blood trickled onto my fingers. I left the blade in his throat and grabbed the cloth from the inside of his nightwear. Father always has—or I should say, had cloths and handkerchiefs on him at all times. He was a neat freak after all. I cleaned my hands, dropped the cloth on his lap, and walked away to return to my chambers. I should get a full night of sleep, I have a big day tomorrow, after all.

The next morning, Renna was woken by the sounds of rough, catastrophic knocking on her door. She grumbled out a “come in.” as she leaned more into her pillow. The Lieutenant General stormed inside, panic racing across his face as he yelled and shrieked.

“Wake up! He’s dead! He was murdered last night in cold blood! Princess, do you not hear me? He’s de—” Renna interrupted his nervous rant with a tired but asserting tone, “First, what did I say about calling me princess? How insolent are you. I’ll see to it you pay the consequences for that. Second, stop your rambling. Who’s dead? Speak properly, I don’t understand the thing you’re saying!”

The man, already startled enough gulped and nodded, straightening himself. “Yes, my apologies Commander General. Well, I panicked because your father, the King, is dead! He was found dead this morning!” Renna shot up immediately, surprisingly crossing her features as she spoke. “What do you mean by dead? How did he die?! Who found him? Tell me now!”

The young man was slightly shaking as he attempted to speak calmly and rationally. “He was found behind the palace, tied and chained to a chair whilst being blindfolded, a blade stabbed through his throat. The servants found him just a few minutes ago whilst going out to fetch some items in the storeroom!”

She was already getting up, moving to put her uniform on as quickly as she could. “And he’s definitely dead? What did the medics say?”

He turned away, his back to her. “Yes, Commander General. He’s definitely deceased. We have to act quickly, the news will reach the people soon, and we need to know what to do. We also don’t know who his late highness’ murderer is.”

She grabbed her blade, walking to the door and gesturing with her head for him to follow her lead. “We’ll address the other concerns later. First, we need to discover my father’s killer at once so justice can be served.

Do you have a blade?"

"Yes, ma'am." He says, "But the blade... has no initials on it. And its metal is extracted from another realm."

Renna pauses in her footsteps, turns to him, and raises an eyebrow. "Another realm? Then they're most likely out. That narrows it down." She began walking again towards her brother's chambers.

"Yes, Commander General, but how do we know who? What will we do? What actions must we need to take now?"

Renna didn't wait to knock on her brother's door, walking in and speaking loud enough to wake him from his clearly peaceful slumber. "Wake up you dullard." When the young prince remained unmoving, she sighed, taking out her blade and throwing it directly two inches from his head. Her lieutenant paused, once again reminded me of how talented she was, and her brother gasped awake from shock, fear and panic all at once. "For Christ's Sake — I was sleeping! The sun hasn't even risen!" His voice showed irritation and was shaky, heart rate plummeting at the sight of his sister's narrow eyes and her Lieutenant beside her who looked equally scared.

"Father has been pronounced deceased. Get up. We have duties to do, and we need to do them right at this moment. Get ready for the day, I'll meet you at my chancery. Do you understand?" She tilted her head, voice stern and as sharp as a paper cut.

"W-wait what? Father's dead? What happened? How did he—" He was cut off by Renna's sigh, her fingers grazing her chin softly, an action that had developed into a habit. "He was murdered. Again... I will be

waiting for you in my chancery to discuss everything. We need to take careful measures from now onward. Do you understand?” Her voice was impatient and somehow sterner this time, completely dismissing her brother’s shocked, sleepy, grief filled face. Before he could reply, she turned on her heel and walked on out, her Lieutenant following behind her and nodding at the prince before shutting the door behind him.

A topic that is efficient and unhurried. “We will have to announce the King’s death to the public this afternoon. I need to talk to my brother first before I make any rapid decisions. Tell everyone to calm down and to prepare Father’s body for burial, we must hold an elaborate ceremony regarding his death. I remember him requesting to be buried next to my mother. Make sure to tell the Protector of King’s hand — Cedric not to act on his own and to report to me for any inquiries.” She stopped in front of her chancery, glancing at her Lieutenant, Zixuan Zhang, to make sure he was listening to which he nodded, saluting before leaving. Zixuan had been with Renna for a while. She hand-chose him only a year after being Commanding General herself, after the white war in which a lot of people were unwilling and unhopeful. He was young, but a fast learner who knew his place and never made remarks about Renna’s position with her or behind her back. Instead, he carried quiet respect for her, even looking up to her.

Renna stepped inside her office where she immediately sat in her chair and began braiding her hair. It was in the way and annoying since she didn’t have time this morning due to being in such a huge rush.

After about five minutes, her younger brother Silas walked in, stepping towards her desk before she held her hand up, stopping him. “You didn’t knock.” He taunted, placing his palms flat on the desk. “Father just died

and you're worried about me knocking? Don't enrage me. It is clearly not the time for this, Renna."

She tucked a loose bang behind her ear, tossing him some papers to read over. "He was murdered, Silas. He's dead. Actually dead. Has your brain processed that? Do you realize what this means for us? For you?" She spoke calmly while reading through a document herself. Silas's face shifted as he looked down. He was childish and rude and incompetent, but he did share a relationship with his father.

"We need to find his killer." He says, "Will you find his killer? You can do it, can't you?"

She paused, looking up at him as she took hold of her glass and took a sip of the gentle and crystal-clear liquid, "Yes, I'm already working on it and investigating. I will find his killer, Silas. Don't fret." His demeanor seemed to calm a little. "And... you will be taking over the throne?" His voice was quiet, almost hesitant. She looked back down at her documents, placing her glass down with a soft clink. "Actually, this is what I hoped to discuss with you. You will take over as king." His eyes widened. "Hold your horses, Renna. You're the older one here, shouldn't you become Queen? I don't think that's—" She completely ignored his words, continuing her speaking. "Of course, you'll receive proper training, and I'll see to it that you're in good hands. The people of course will be delighted, I'm sure they'll be very happy you're taking over—" He stood up abruptly, his hair messing up a little due to the sudden action. Renna narrowed her eyes, "Oh what is it now, Silas?" She looked up at him, setting the documents down, very much bothered by his dramatic expression. "Can you listen to me?! I'm not prepared for this! I know I've always planned to take over, but it's just! — I never

thought it would actually occur! You are better fit. We both know that. You're an amazing leader and people respect you. You actually know what's going on around here while I'm... I'm clueless. I can't take over, and what in God's name do you mean by 'I'll see to it that you're in good hands'? If that were to happen, wouldn't you help me yourself?" He finished speaking and waited for her reply.

Renna cleared her throat, intertwining her fingers. "The people and soldiers respect me out of fear. It's fake. They would be much happier with you as a leader. And I will see to it that you're taught well and will manage the kingdom well, because I'm leaving. I can't foresee your progress myself."

She watched as his eyes widened more, if that was even possible. "What do you mean by leaving? Where are you going?" Anger and panic were growing in his voice, demanding answers.

Renna got up at that, walking to the shelf near her and grabbing a thick, hefty book before tossing it at him. "I'm leaving to go to the other realm to find father's murderer. This book. It's everything I've learned about the kingdom. About duties, responsibilities, alliances, how to form them and every kingdom's personality and how to deal with them. How to handle situations. I've learned from father step by step and I'm sure with this and the extra help I'll arrange for you that you'll do just fine as a Monarch. Will you finally stop being a little boy and make sure you don't fail your responsibilities for once in your life, Silas? Being king isn't as easy as a prince with barely any duties, you know. Neither I nor father will be able to come to your rescue this time around if you make any mistakes."

Silas stopped in motion, looking down at the huge book placed in front of him before glancing at his sister then back down at the book. He spoke with hesitancy, requiring reassurance, "...You really think I can do it? Be a grand King like father was?" She turned to face him at that, a small snicker escaping her lips.

"You're incompetent, you're rude, you're not as educated as you should be, you don't know how to pay proper respect to people or how to talk to our alliances, you never take your duties seriously, you don't know the first thing about being a leader, you don't know how to carry a title not just in name but in actions." Her voice echoed in his mind, an expression immediately falling. "Is that what you want to hear, dear brother? The harsh truth?"

"So then why me? Just take it over yourself if you don't trust me." Renna examined her hair in the mirror, adjusting it.

"As I said previously, I am leaving to find my father's murderer. I expect it to be a long journey. I don't trust you to be the King our father was, but I expect you to learn and try." Renna says, "I need to know if I can rely on you, Silas. Will you or will you not adapt?"

"Yes. I will. I'll...I'll follow all the instructions. For father. I'll make my father proud." Silas replies, voice confident now. "You can rely on me, I swear about it. I won't fool around anymore."

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I watch the crowd of civilian's whisper and mutter what they assume they've been summoned for while some gathered their many papers and ink in one corner eagerly waiting to get the newest Buzz feed that will

help put more bread in their family's mouths.

I clear my throat before speaking loud enough for just about everyone to hear. "The king is dead." silence. Drop. Dead. Silence. It lasted about 3 seconds before the crowd erupted into screams and yells while others questioned and demanded answers.

I sigh and extract my matchlock arquebus, clicking the trigger so I could shoot freely if I please. I point it at the crowd and watch as they go silent, finally.

"Now, does anyone want to let me talk or are we losing more than one life today?" I look around, waiting for more unnecessary commentary then hold the gun down. "Very well, now onto more important matters. I'm sure you're all wondering who will take over the throne, well—"

I'm interrupted by Lieutenant General, Zixuan Zhang, whispering into my ear. "Ma'am, don't you think it would be better to start with how your father died?" I sigh, realizing he's right. My sleep deprivation seems to have affected my actions and decisions.

I look back at the awaiting crowd and speak again, "My apologies, I'm sure you're all wondering how the king's life ceased. He was murdered in cold blood." I watch as a collective gasp runs through the crowd and before more yelling can start that my current headache can't handle, I hold up my hand to remind them I still have a gun in my hands.

"I will be leaving to go to the other realm to find fathers killer to avenge him. As for the throne, I've decided Prince Silas should be the one to take over as king. His coronation is tomorrow. I expect you all to attend and be present and am very sure the majority of you are delighted by this

decision.”

I don't wait for a response and simply nod at the audience before walking away, lightly pushing my brother to give his speech.

“Your grace,” Zhang starts as we walk inside. “I think it will be a waste to go after your father's murderer. Putting The Prince in leadership position is extremely... Risky, your highness.”

“Fear not Zhang, for if he's truly related to me, then it won't take long for him to adapt no matter how incompetent he is. I will make sure that he is in good hands.

I pause in front of my bedroom, tilting the handle. “I want you to take over as Commander General whilst I'm gone, Zhang. Not just that, but my role as princess as well. I put the trust of Velmoria in your hands. Protect it and make sure my brother does not disappoint me.”

The shock registers on his face and I watch his jaw clench and unclench, trying not to show too much emotion than necessary. “Are you sure about this? Do you trust me to such measures? Shouldn't Master Cedric handle that and me only the role of Commander General?”

I raise an eyebrow as we step inside my office. I had to sit at my desk, tossing the other papers aside to make space for myself as I responded. “I don't trust Cedric as much as I do you. He was my father's right hand and you're mine, are you not? I trust no one else more than you, and I expect you to not let me down.”

Zhang gulped before nodding, “Yes, ma'am. If that's what you wish, then that's what I will do.” He paused, “I won't falter your expectations

of me.” He said and was excited, his words lingered.

Well, I best begin packing then.

## CHAPTER SIX

*Dacian*

“I want to meet the Guise.”

I vocally stated, my words echoing throughout the room because of the large, slightly unevenly decorated space. Silence filled the room like water, flooding my ears so much that I could hear a hissing sound. I shake my head to get rid of the annoying static deafening me. The individual before me, my older brother, responded with nothing but steady breaths. I couldn't perceive any body language, or have a glimpse of his eyes, the two notable things to detect answers from a person. His eyes were looking down on the cold ceramic floor; half of his face covered by his headpiece, visibly covered in jewels. Calian's body remained stiff; he very much knew that I could sense something from him. Calian didn't want his body to reveal anything before his mouth did; you wouldn't be able to tell unless he speaks.

I watched as he rested his fist against his cheek, his lips parting enough for me to see his front teeth as he was seated on his velvet throne. His seat was presented on an elevated block, a staircase leading up to it. I hated the fact that I had to look up at him to see his cocky presence. It disturbed my body and uncomfortable was an understatement. My ears perked as I heard his jewelry sway; his head raised up so he could look at me with seriousness.

“Are you in the right mind?” He finally responded after a hellish minute or two; his gaze averted to his right. “You really think it's an easy adventure to meet The Guise?” He inquired simply, clearly having no expectations that I would meet the God. Maybe I just had to prove him

wrong, like I always believed myself to do. I didn't answer immediately, pausing to think of a good answer for him to allow me to go.

“Well, the Guise is a Deity that our royal lineage has had contact with for several centuries, we are the main connection — if not the only human connection this God has, and it's with us. I'm very confident that the Almighty Guardian of Guise would have no regrets in meeting me.” I explained with good reasoning to the man above me, didn't I? It can't be that difficult to get it through his skull. My kin may be higher than me in position, but never in self-esteem. My arms were placed by my sides, I didn't look up at him, looking at the staircase in front of me. Remaining patient for an answer, thinking and strategizing.

“... And how would the Guise find you any useful? A mere human, a human with golden blood in fact, a curse, bestowed upon you for not obeying him.” My elder brother questioned once again, using different scenarios and ‘What ifs’ to push me away from the idea of encountering the God.

“Whatever objective you have stored in mind that requires the Guise, get it out of your head. Who knows, he'll probably curse you for even thinking of such blasphemy.” Calian chuckled, clearly making a joke out of my idea. Which of course angered me to the core. Who did he think he was to say this about me? To my face? His having the role of King doesn't justify it, neither does family. Blood means nothing to me; it never meant anything from the dawn of my existence. I suppress my anger to stay calm, so what if he thinks it's impossible and blasphemy? Such excuses! “I try not to show bitterness on my face, hoping I mask my overwhelming feelings well.

“I have no cure, brother.”

I stayed silent for a bit before continuing. “This golden blood is slowly beginning to curse me, I’m severely anemic and I choose not to spread the Royal blood as a choice of my own. If I could get to talk with the Guise, I would have the opportunity to get blessed by him. He has helped our family for centuries; I could be renowned as an exception — a chance to change history.” Stepping closer with each and every sentence I spat out, never did my eyes look high above me. I sound as convincing as possible, swaying my hands as I spoke intelligently.

“It is also a very good chance to ruin our reputation, haven’t you thought of that, little brother?” My gaze decisively averted to my older brother when he bravely uttered the words ‘little brother’, coming out of his lips with a sarcastic taste. I caught his eyes boring into mine once I looked up, he was still left in the same position when I first looked at him, with the only change being his eyes. His emerald eyes. Eventually, I realized the ambience he was giving off.

You’re a Nuisance.

Calian was showing that I was a disturbance, and that I had to get rid of myself out of his room. His irritating stare alone unveiled it easily for me. With one deep breath in, I offered him an even more irritating glance and turned around in anger, curling my hands inwards towards my palm. The room felt tense as I walked out; it felt like competition of whose pride was bigger than whose. It is competition, but I was always the vanquisher; the King was too blind to see that. I could hear a scoff behind me, I gripped the metallic handle of the huge door before me, waiting for just a moment to spin my head halfway to look at the figure once more.

I bitterly walked out and let out an unsteady breath. How could he doubt me? Such gibberish, there was no way I would ever let him get in my way of talking to the Guise.

“Curse him! Curse the damned Guise as well! Getting me stuck in a terrible position...” I lashed out, not controlling my wrath for any longer. I felt the knots of fury unwind with fuel and fire, converting my temper into ambition, the need to prove my brother wrong. I wasn’t just anybody to be brought down. I, Dacian, swear on the gold that runs within me and the gold crown that sits on my head, to become greater than the greatest itself, and to remove any halfwit that even has the thought of thinking oppositely of me. I punched the wall nearest to me to somehow release what I was feeling, but it did little to calm me.

I pushed the burning thoughts further before it got the best of me. I must prevail — composed and serious; I can’t afford to crack the shell of who I’m supposed to be, not right now at least.

My brother is not the Sovereign he thinks he is; the other breathing flesh may consider him as their Monarch over the nation, but not me. I’ve never considered that slobbering man any higher above me, not anyone in fact, so how does he have the audacity to be so commanding? so assertive over every little action I conduct? He perceives me as a Rook in his battle of wits, nothing more than a puppet to get his hands on and control however he desires to. He underestimates me because he hasn’t seen me; I have not once shown it. But maybe — Scratch that! Certainly, it’s time for me to show him who I truly am, the real Dacian Elysia.

I have planned my actions already, however perfectly performing it was the problem. I, as a prince, a Ser, and a Regent of my elder brother, am

more than capable of carrying out the plan. I have no doubts of myself and performance — albeit the footmen and head maids scampering around the Kingdom like they lost their heads, with the addition of Knights keeping guard of activities. I could not possibly do it during midday in broad daylight, what kind of ignorant person would do that? I'm forced to carry out my plan after night, when the skies are colored like a pitch dark black. Security will be even stricter, I will just have to deal with it, better to clash swords rather than get caught, right? I must be going crazy, I am right.

I let out a chuckle and smile broadly; I will handle it one way or another. Nobody has restraints on me, not even family can stop me.

~

A cup of dark liquid swirled around and against the sparkling silver, no tarnishes in sight. The sustenance was few, rich in color and flavor; it was used to lessen fatigue and bring great vigor. The aromatic liquid was known as *nigrum capulus*, transported specifically from West Asia to the sacred soil of Elysia. Dacian took a small sip of the smooth solution; the sharp bitterness made its way to his taste buds — a taste so strong it awakened his body once more. It was way past night and in a couple of hours the dawn would rise again. Dacian had to act quick but stealthily, ought not to get caught lingering in the halls during the darkest times of the night. Dacian put his tall silver cup down on his nightstand beside his bed, having enough sitting down on his mattress. He stood up as a slight wave of dizziness hit him, a common symptom of anemia. He blinked once — twice, to wash away the flickering and lightheadedness. He was planning on gathering supplies and running away; it was the only available solution unless he committed treason which could be executed in many

ways. But nevertheless, I didn't have enough care and responsibility to commit treason. He decided to take on the better path of sneakily running away, hence why did he wait until midnight to conduct his plan? Dacian had been waiting since his interaction with his brother to do this. The thought of leaving the Kingdom, having free will and the pitying face of the King was enough for him to communicate with Guardian of the Guise. Dacian showed diligence in his steps, conscious of his actions and attempted to contain his breathing, as quietly as was achievable. There was surprisingly no one out in the dark; at least not anyone Dacian had caught up with his eyes. There was no way that Calian had figured out his proposition in fleeing, not so quickly. The king was intelligent, but he was not a mind reader nor a fortune teller, so he couldn't possibly figure it out just yet. Dacian meticulously made his way to one of the rooms not far from his bedroom; it was a supply room filled with various types of weapons. He grabbed two to three weapons he had expertise with — it would sure come in handy when he needed them. He would be gone for a while, of course, not just for a night. Dacian also got a lot of patches; he would not be able to visit his doctor for checkups or maims anymore. With that, he gathered the required supplements, furthermore cloths for emergency cases. Without wasting more of his valuable time, the tan male headed outside the room when his ears shivered at the sound waves of one talking, alongside with it were heavy footsteps. Dacian hurriedly went back inside the storage room; his intention of not getting caught was extremely serious — he taunted at the thought of fighting another individual which could very much so alert another individual. Worst case scenario, many souls.

Dacian did not have enough time to spare for such scenarios and avoided it to the best of his abilities. It would cause present and future

problems that he could definitely, and much certainly could not afford. He had to be on his feet and strive with his calculations. He had left a small space to inspect the person that was guarding the hallways; no one was in sight until a small light came closer and closer. With a candle at hand, he saw the following individual — correction. Two individuals, judging by the presence of the duo, were having a lively discussion. Dacian had recognized the two from their uniforms as Royal guards of the Kingdom; one was speaking whilst one was listening. No wonder Dacian had suspected it was only one individual residing within the halls. As expected, they were gossiping concerning a family member of the Kingdom to keep themselves entertained and well... awake. It was about his mother. Dacian's Mother. He let himself hear what the two had to say about her while strolling oh so painfully slow down the carpeted path.

“...Her late grace Elena Caelor was the second wife of the previous King, she was the light, soul, the embodiment of hope in the family... O' Course! Her own name represented her perfectly. A few months before her death, she looked dead from the inside out although being completely alive and well-fed.” The Guard with the candle was talking about his deceased Mother with respect, his beard long and his fingers protected with a thick glove, explained to the other — seemingly a newer Royal guard that hadn't known about the events that had unfolded throughout the previous years or so.

“As if her spark had been lost in a flood or a powerful force, the Sun was no longer known as Dawn. It felt cold for a while, I... I experienced it. It was painfully awful to see. A mere Guard had no business even being in the presence of a Royal member, so as to talk with her? Cheer her up? My! I would have been fine meat displayed for cruel animals to feast on! It was no different than a treason.” The Guard continued once more,

talking emotionally and trying his best to lower his voice, even the other Guard had warned him so by patting his shoulder. Dacian was curious; it had seemed the particular Guard had fallen for his late Mother. His late Father, who was King before Calian, had not spoken about his late Mother like that. It was clearly an arranged affair to keep two Kingdoms steady and well-balanced; Elena Caelor was only seen as a gem — an exchange between the two Kingdoms. This was common among Kingdoms, to offer their maidens to the princes and Kings as prizes and nothing more. Merely an object to create connection between Kingdoms, no romantic feelings were involved. His Mother was unfortunately treated the same, not that Dacian cared or remembered, it didn't affect him much, neither did her death.

“She was found in a pool of her own blood. A pool of opaque and thick blood underneath her pale exanimate body, meticulously stabbed everywhere around her chest.” The guards finally went past the door Dacian was hiding behind, in which he was keeping both his eyes on the patrolmen. “The vicious murderer has not been found and everything related to the poor lady’s case was forgotten and turned to dust. However,...” Dacian sighed in relief when the men’s voices had faded away down the lengthy hall, no more footsteps were heard, and it was clear to go. The wooden door’s joints made a deafening creak sound as he opened the door fully open slowly.

Ultimately, Dacian approached his room after gathering the necessary supplies. ‘This will be all I need, for however long I must be gone.’ He thought as he opened the door to his bedroom slowly and went in. Ensuring no one had seen him exit or enter his room. His breath exhales reassuringly, a heavy weight off his shoulders as he put the items in a drawer. Stuffing it with his other clothes so it would look invisible. Even

with the solution he drank earlier, Dacian was worn out. After all, staying up all night after heavy duty was not ideal for the body and soul.

“It’ll be sunrise soon; a nap wouldn’t hurt a soul.” Dacian uttered out with a slightly hoarse voice, swaying his head from side to side to get a relieving crack from his neck. He sat comfortably on a settle sofa, putting his arms on the fabric and letting his neck go back. Sleep took over him faster than any emotion, slumber evident from his body.



It was way after sunrise; thunder strikes faltered and stroked heavy once again. Rain had exceedingly poured onto the ground, gracing the greenery of humanity. Dacian woke up to the sound of rain; it felt refreshing to not wake up to the butler’s scolding voice but to the beautiful sound of nature. His body did not feel great in the slightest. His body felt drained; he was running possibly 3 hours of sleep, or less. He really regretted taking a nap, maybe then his body would’ve felt more functionable and less lazy.

He started to stretch and did not worry about changing his clothes, not that anyone had seen him last night either way. Dacian walked out of the door, the same exact door that he exited about 4 hours ago. It was a particularly quiet day, quiet in a sense; no one was talking in the halls nor was anybody in sight. Rainfall had replaced every chatter that would occur in the mornings. Just as Dacian was about to go upstairs to enjoy more of the rain, a short figure had run towards Dacian. He hesitated for a second to climb the stairs to recognize who was running so quickly. A veil had covered most of her hair; starry purple pupils looked up to him. Astraea.

Astraea Elysia was the daughter of Calian Elysia and Hestia Kerameus, their only precious daughter and Dacian's only niece. He hated to admit it, but the man had a slight soft spot for the young girl. She was an innocent young maiden, treasuring the slightest of things she was given. A pure warm-hearted angel born in a cage, she was too naive to understand the cruelty of the world. 'Easy to control.' This was how Dacian described her simply. She was gently panting from running so fast and stood before her uncle, gripping her soft and voluminous skirt that was too long for her. Dacian patiently waited for her to catch her breath, appearing blasé.

"Ser Dacian! Please, would you wait a moment? I urgently need to have a chat with you." She caught her breath and finally said what she wanted to say to Dacian, emerald jewelry sparkling brightly despite no sunlight, going very well with her purple eyes.

Dacian sighed, having to always get interrupted in the mornings, not once did he have a morning to himself. Relentlessly, he nodded at his niece firmly and opened his arm up to stairs, signaling Astraea to go on first. A small 'Thank you', barely above a whisper came out of her lips and grabbed a handful of her fluffy skirt. Astraea climbed upwards the stairs while Dacian followed after her, letting her have casual moments of struggle while going up. The balcony was revealed, although it was dry; a roof protected the balcony — cool winds came here and there, and Dacian offered Astraea a seat on one of the chairs. She sat down, nervousness evident on her face, it technically flowed in her blood in this specific moment. Dacian sat down in the seat in front of her, his gaze fixed in the rain and cool weather rather than the lady in front of him.

She took a small breath. "My father has arranged a marriage for me, Ser Dacian." Her voice was shaky, as if her throat had closed on her — so

close to sobbing, but she resisted. “I-I don’t want this; I am too young to be married off to a strang— a stranger! — “ Astraea could not hold on and broke instantly after the second sentence, hiccupping with her words, bags were underneath her large eyes. Bags like these couldn’t form in just a day, definitely overnight, maybe two nights or so. Dacian looked at her; he did not have sympathy in times like this; Astraea had to be an exception in this case. He held a small amount of sympathy for his niece, but not totally sympathetic. He slouched his back to come slightly closer to her; she looked incredibly tired, no teenager had to feel this way by force. He grabbed her soft hand, the distance between them was close enough to allow him to do that, holding her hand as a sign to show he’s here.

Astraea’s eyes expressed shock, not expecting her uncle to comfort her, even subtly. “Ser Dacian...—”, “Quit calling me that, Astraea.” Dacian didn’t hesitate to interrupt Astraea’s speech immediately. “We’re family, you can call me uncle, preferably by my name — I do not want to hear Ser coming out of your mouth again.” He explained it reassuringly yet also harsh to get his point across. Astraea nodded quickly at his words, another tear down her rosy cheeks. “I’ve got you covered, Astraea. I can help you out if that is what you’re requesting.” He looked at her to see her facial expressions, miserable was all there was to it. Silently waiting for a nod or a word if it could even get past her throat.

“I really need your help uncle.” She gulped down after she said that. Thick eyelashes wet with overflowing tears, nose red like a rabbit from crying.

“I can help you get out of this situation. You’ll just need to follow me and do whatever I say, simple enough?” He looked at her in a dull

manner, no signs of worry shown in his face nor his heart. There was no reason as to why he was helping her out; he could simply reject her pleads and go on with his day. After all, he already had enough plans for the future. Perhaps she could be of some use on the way to meeting Guardian of the Guise, a fair exchange for getting her out of an arranged ordeal. He did not intend to use her for any purpose, at least not yet, and if he wanted to, he would. It was his world in any case; he had free will to use everyone like a pawn.

They remained there in the rainy, cold breeze. Comfortable silence between the two.

Things were going smoothly.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Dacian*

I wake up more well rested than I expected and a quick glance at the clock alerts me I've been asleep twelve hours. That explains it. My limbs feel as though I'm swimming under water, and it takes great compel to get up and begin my day. I quickly dressed myself and washed up before exiting my chambers, intending to seek out Astraea. I knocked on her door and did nothing. She must be in the garden. A frustrated sigh escapes my lips, great, I have to look for her in the maze since she's always couped up there. Astraea's most likely always there because she wants to be just as unpredictable as the maze, since almost every pillar in her life is controlled and might continue to be. I really do need to figure out a solution for her situation. It's frustrating and my hair that keeps threatening to fall into my eyes right now is even more frustrating. Someone remind me of why I keep it long? No matter. I take the spare hair tie I always have on me off my wrist and tie my hair back and up. A few pieces of my bangs escape the hold, but it doesn't matter. There's nothing else I can do.

I stride to the gates to go out and see a man in fine clothing standing with his hands behind his back. An English man, it seems, but what is he doing here? That's a silly question. They've been trying to purchase ours and others for nearly two decades. There's probably a representative of theirs in my brother's office and part of the reason why no one has woken me is probably so I wouldn't interrupt their meeting.

I smile and nod at the servants alongside the guards before turning and walking to the throne room where I know I'll find the person I'm now

looking for. I reach there and decide not to go in, engaging in conversation with the guards so as to not raise suspicion either. This way I can both eavesdrop on whatever conversation is happening inside and not look weird or alerting doing it.

“Truly, King Calian, it’s a great deal and I understand not why the likes of you refuse to understand and go forward. This will be beneficial for both parties.” I hear a prideful, arrogant tone of a man I don’t recognize inside. I should probably go inside now to stop my idiotic brother from making any decisions that won’t do us or the Kingdom any good.

The guards open the enormous gates and I step inside, a charming smile gracing my face.

“Brother, you should’ve told me we had guests. How rude of me to not accompany you!” The words escaped my lips with a soft chuckle as I sat down beside my brother.

“Oh, well you seemed so exhausted I thought I should let you sleep in, Dacian.” Calian nervously cleared his throat with a small laugh before gesturing to the man sitting across us both.

Calian introduced the man but I was tuning him out by then. I sat up to shake the hassle’s hand then sat back down.

“Mr. Jackson! You guys are quite persistent, aren’t you? No matter how many times we refuse, you just keep wasting your time! It’s a shame, truly.” I say while my fingers tapped against my thigh rhythmically.

“Actually it’s—”

“Anyway, I feel like we should be done here. We won’t be giving our

land up. Not to sound like a broken radio, but our land and Kingdom have been passed down for generations and generations. We have honor and unfortunately for you, we aren't interested in giving it up."

A servant came in unnoticeably to set down a tea pot and cups to pour the tea into.

"It's not your land, Prince Dacian. It's ours." Jackson's eyebrows furrowed in a look of impatience from how many times he's had this conversation.

"Did you purchase it? No, not from us. Neither did you trade for it, Sire. Therefore, it's still our land."

"We've proposed a new offer; you should rethink this." An almost anxious smile came onto his lips, like he was perhaps testing the waters and hoping I'd change my mind. Nevertheless, I suppose I'll humor him.

"We will think and get back to you." My voice carried a sharpness that carried no argument and was final. The man's expression sunk, but he only grumbled a little and nodded, getting up to leave. I gestured to one of the guards to escort him out. Both do not seem rude and make sure he doesn't go anywhere but out. Mostly to make sure he just leaves immediately.

"Dacian, you shouldn't interrupt my meetings like that. How many times should I tell you? I'm sure it's not hard for you to understand." Within five seconds his respectful demeanor was gone, what a shame, It's too bad. He's a little less irritated when he is sickeningly nice. A little.

I chuckled lightly, crossing my arms as I leaned back against the chair

and took a sip of my tea. “Don’t be ridiculous. We can’t give up our land. You realize that, right? Besides the fact that our surrounding Kingdoms aren’t, and it would be a loss for us, there’s also the matter of our families—” I was momentarily cut off and interrupted by my brother’s looming voice as he barked out a laugh.

“And why not? Come on Dacian, we owe nothing to our ancestors! To hell with honor. We need to do what’s best for us.” He raised his voice, as if he fully believed what he said had no wrong in it.

Usually, I’d agree with him, we must fend for ourselves. Not right now, though. Does he really not remember? Is he an idiot?

“Calian, how has it not occurred to you that you will be breaking a sector of the deal with the Guise? We mustn’t let our Kingdom be taken.” I replied back, a hint of judgment lacing my tone.

“I didn’t expect you of all people to be stupid, Dacian. That is irrelevant to me as I’ve already conceived an heir. I’ve spread our family’s royal blood, so the other half of the deal does not apply to me.” He remarked the words as if he was clarifying chess instructions to a child. That’s how he sees me even though I practically run the kingdom. A child.

“That’s not how it works, Calian. If you allow this deal, it won’t only be me who’s cursed, big brother.”

He barked out a laugh once again, as if I’m the mistaken one and not him.

“As much as I’d love to sit and debate, I’d rather not waste my time on you, little brother. Very well, you are quite smart, so I won’t proceed

with the trade partially because barely anyone else is complying with it as well. In that part, at least you are correct. It may be a loss for us. You win, for now.”



I recall back to three or four years ago a war happened between a faction in a Nation among the continent and the Settlers. It lasted about a year and ended with a treaty being signed, which was fortunate for the people. Some said the treaty was formed within fleeting moments where the Settler’s leaders would take the Kings of the Kingdoms, they were in war with and get them drunk. They wouldn’t be in a pleasing or appropriate state of mind and just go along with whatever the English men said.

Thus, a treaty or more were signed. The losing side had to forfeit millions of acres of land to the Settlers following their defeat. I convinced Calian to still not give in to the threats and offers, and it worked for a while. That must be why they’re doing this now, isn’t it? They’re angry, it seems. Ran out of patience. So, they decided to attack us. Things have been rough for the following few months now; we’ve had little to no access to farms, land or the ocean. They’ve forced us into some swamp land and made everyone rearrange their life, including me. I never imagined it to be this bad. I tried to fight, but I did. I wanted to, but I was forced to stay back because of my condition. It was humiliating— being capable of so much and nothing at the same time.

I’ve been preparing for this moment for so long. I helped with strategy and technique and just about everything else I could manage. That involved intellect to at least recollect what I could of my pride. It was

shameful. I'm known for my skills as a warrior and as a strategist.

While during this war we are in advantage because of my leading and planning— this time around I couldn't join in on the fun, unfortunately, thanks to my curse. Everyone insisted I stay back no matter how hard I argued. Calian only agreed because if I bled the people would find out my blood is gold and they're already unmotivated and depressed enough as is, finding out me, their beloved prince is close to dying and under the gaze of a curse would surely cause a massive disturbance. I exhaled a long breath as I let my hair down from the tight hold it has been in all day and lay down, finally, a moment to rest.

Meanwhile, the King was in the process of signing the very treaty Dacian had been resisting. Unfortunately for the younger brother, Calian had no sense of pride and his only concern was saving himself and maintaining his own comfortable lifestyle. In a fleeting moment of weakness he'd given in when the enemies once again offered a treaty and to buy their land. Calian had negotiated that he would exchange everything if he himself was taken care of.

“And my safety is ensured? I will be leaving tomorrow?” Calian's voice was hesitant, maybe even a little desperate for reassurance. The brunette English man only nodded with a smirk that could only be classified as mischievous and cunning.

“Yes, you will be living within an estate a high-ranking Noble has offered as we said. You will be living as you wish while we take care of your... assets, here.” The man responded eagerly, stroking the fur of his pet feline.

“All is well then... I'll head to my room after this then, I must rest up

before my big day tomorrow, aren't I right?"

"Yes, let's get a move on then huh?" The man said with a chuckle.

He slid the paper, the contract, to the King and pointed at where to sign. Calian grabbed the quill beside him and dipped it in some ink before signing his signature.

Done. It was all gone, everything that had been built by a single signature, barely two seconds.

The Elysian Kingdom officially belonged to The Settlers, and King Calian would be going to Great Britain tomorrow morning at dawn.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Dacian*

“Ser Dacian! Ser Dacian!” A panicked voice called out to him while Dacian was cleaning his silver sword with a soiled cloth. A Prince’s duties were on top of the list, training was only a fraction of a Royal Prince’s Day and considered a must so as not to become weak. His fingers contracted on the blade and stopped moving when he heard his name being called so urgently.

His head shifted upwards; burgundy eyes looked ahead. He could recognize the person from a distance; his brother’s right hand had run to him. With a sigh and an accidental clank of his armor, Dacian stood up from his bench with his sword at his side. The man was now in front of Dacian, Sebastián Navarre.

Sebastián Navarre was no stranger, not in the Elysian Family. For centuries now, the Elysian family has been acquainted with the Navarre family. For each new King in the Elysian family, there would be a right hand provided by the Navarre family; it has become a tradition between the two. One is a Kingdom, a Ruler. The other is a Clan full of Knights—a protector. Sebastián happened to be the selected right hand for Calian; Dacian didn’t see it in Sebastián, but it didn’t matter. Not like he was Ki—

“King Calian has fled! Oh Guise, forgive our sins!” Sebastián cried out. He started tripping over his words and could not word anything out of his tongue. Panic and repentance filled him wholly. Dacian could see it overflowing from within the man. Dacian had suspected such a scenario would occur, after all he and Calian were brothers by blood, only by

half. But what he did not expect to hear was that he did not take anyone with him. Calian himself—that was it, he left his wife, daughter, his right hand, and his role as King.

“He sold us. The kingdom and the land as a whole, Sebastián.” Dacian made his way to Sebastián’s right with slow steps as he talked. Sebastián’s body stiffened when Dacian made contact with him, shoulder brushing against shoulder, Dacian being at least half a foot taller than the other individual. “You are in his place, Prince.” Sebastián stated. “And you are his right hand.” Dacian argued. Building a tension between them. “You ought to rebuild the Kingdom and resist the foreign forces immediately Ser Dacian, Calian had assigned you as Regent the moment he became King.” Sebastián argued back passionately, a hint of loyalty still was lying in his heart for the traitor. “We need someone in his place for the time being. The Kingdom will fall apart without its King. We cannot let these foreigners take our soil, Ser!” He said with an accent accidentally flowing out of his lips; desperation was very apparent through his voice.

Dacian said nothing; his head was straightforward and lacked a response. No response was a response, a quiet agreement. Although that was not the case for Dacian. He was never the caring type. What great had Calian done for his half-brother? Even so, Dacian had no intention of cleaning up the mess his kin made, for his own selfishness and greed. Dacian walked forward leisurely, putting his sword in the scabbard wrapped around his lower waist. If he was made King, then he sure would play along with the role for the time being. He could use this opportunity to his advantage for his escape, pull a few strings from here and there to distract the members in the Kingdom. Then leave the Kingdom just like his brother did.

Feather-like particles suddenly came out of the sky, Dacian had just

realized how cold the weather had gotten, and that winter was slowly showing its signs. The particles crushed underneath his metallic boots; snowflakes decorated his armor like dandelions. Dacian predicted the snow would cover the ground in no time; it would be impossible to flee in such dangerous conditions. He decided to act quickly instead of postponing his escape, his steps transforming into slightly faster ones to execute his future moves.

Dacian entered the Kingdom through the main entrance and was greeted by the warm and humid air in the building. Sebastián was running after him like a Mutt, it was clear by how out of breath Sebastián was that he did not train enough, yet another reason why Dacian thought he was not a good choice. He thought of Sebastián as a Mutt for a reason. He listened, took action and obeyed with little to no pressure. He was even following Dacian around like he had owned by him.

“How disgusting.” Dacian muttered under his lips; he hated the feeling of being around someone so controllable. Either way, he pushed aside his revulsion and unpleasantness; he needed to think like a King.

“Sebastián.” He turned his head to his left shoulder, this would be his first official command as a temporary King, working in his brother’s stead. “I need you to gather our forces in several groups, five to six would be enough.” He turned his head forward once again, taking careful steps with thought and consideration. “Calian abandoning the Kingdom means our situation is no good, foreign forces are possibly on the way to take our land. They are armed with advanced weapons we have not yet seen before.” He continued, talking from a strategic perspective. Sebastián was now following after his movements and nodding with every word that Dacian had commanded.

“The forces are incoming from the south; I’ll leave it to you to plan this in orderly manner. I have business I need to take care of currently. Inform the others that I’ll be on the battlefield shortly after our forces start their attacks.” Dacian stated in an urbane tone, giving confident commands and was even willing to participate alongside the others. But that is only a trap dense heads would fall for. He would rather be burnt at the stake than fight for something that was never his. He did not have to prove to simpletons that he owned this soil, and to fight alongside them? What was this, a ‘Teamwork makes the dream work.’ kind of Nation? A joke not even a Jester could think of. Dacian did not know whether to laugh or shout in frustration, it was hard being clever — but it did not mean he had to share it.

Dacian waved his right hand twice blithely, a sign for Sebastián to get going and start taking serious action. When Dacian still heard Sebastián’s annoying clinking footsteps, he grew exasperated and stopped moving to fully turn around.

“Quit disturbing me, work won’t do itself.” Dacian said between his teeth and clenched jaw, his eyes glaring into Sebastián’s. A hard gulp came from Sebastián’s throat as he hurriedly nodded and turned outside to inform the others of his planned order.

With this, Dacian continued his original path. The necessary items for the adventure were already packed and ready for travel. However, he kept Astraea in mind and decided to inform her. She probably knew the news already; Dacian hoped that she hadn’t worried so much that it could possibly affect their journey, she was a worrisome person — an over thinker. He struggled as it is currently, he did not need someone doubting every single action they’d commit.

“If worse comes to worst, I’ll have to leave her on my way, the only problem would be where I would place her...” He tried not to plan too far ahead and shook his head to somehow knock off the negative thoughts like dust. He will be perfect. Everyone will clap for him, respect his name and status out of fear and inspiration, nothing will be uttered from their lips but praises. He smiled at the thought of his future, something his hands could very well reach. Everything is possible if he puts his hands on it; he thought of himself more proudly than ever if that was even possible.

Dacian had reached his destination already, he stood pridefully before the door and knocked twice, he couldn’t storm into a lady’s room like a madman. With a bit of shuffling and footsteps, he could finally hear and see Astraea open her bedroom door, upset was painted on her face. Yet, she looked relaxed as well; she wasn’t under her father’s control anymore. A terrible feeling of relief and sadness still flooded her, though. Calian was her father and only father after all, disregarding her as if she were nothing. Dacian knew it all too well, he was glad he didn’t end up as a bug to get stepped on and left alone. If he were in her place, he’d be filled with ultimate fury and conduct many schemes to his satisfactory goal. He had always been that way, and he did not give an effort to care about what others thought about his spoiled behavior. To hell with their opinions.

Astraea shifted to the side to allow him to enter. Maroon eyes inspected the room swiftly, clean, yet messy. Her room looked like a dream, like a Greek God’s room. Light curtains decorated her room, books laid out on the ground, some open and some just thrown without a care for them. He didn’t spend too much time looking around the room and got to his main point almost immediately.

“Your father betrayed us. Judging by the state of your room and yourself, you’re already aware of that fact.” He informed her before carrying on with more. “We’ll have to leave in an hour or two, it’s best if you pack what you need.” With hands behind his back, he spoke. In truth, he did not know when the foreigners would arrive, it was unclear as of now. It was better to act ahead rather than behind; he couldn’t afford any mistakes right now at this perfect chance to finally meet the Guise. He would have to prepare sincere and proper words for their meeting. Astraea walked ahead of him and towards the balcony in the freezing cold. She had a comfortable fur boa wrapped around her arms and back; nose and ears colored a soft pink tint. A large sigh parted from her lips, forming a condensation cloud from the cold weather. Dacian stayed between her room and balcony, leaning against one of the pillars just before the balcony. He knew she had something to say. Something to pour out of her scarred heart, another deep dash etched on the pumping organ keeping her alive. She was generally not the quiet type. Shy? Yes, but not fragile. Astraea was a lively girl, it did not matter how many god-awful things had happened to her, she always kept her spirit alive and pumping. Remaining hopeful was the only reason why she was still alive.

“Do you think we’ll get colonized, Dacian?”

A question Dacian couldn’t answer, he was stuck-up, but not a liar, at least not a liar in situations like these. He didn’t want to give his niece false hope.

“I don’t know, but we’ll be out of here before we are. The only thing I can guarantee is our escape, not the Kingdom’s future.”

He stated truthfully, royal blood was never a blessing for a man like

him. He was now cursed with blood like gold, opposing his skin and bones. Dacian never asked for useless blood that never provided him with any benefit, so why should he have to care about the people who reside here? This castle and soil that was built out of nothing but shame and lies, nothing but to mask weakness and vulnerability. A crown sitting on Calian's head and a title could not save him from his fears of being colonized, this is why he chose himself over the safety of others. There was no 'One for all, all for one.'

"It's best if I get going, please be ready in a short amount of time. I'll see what the others are doing before we flee." Dacian noted, he had to check up on Sebastián, seeing what he had prepared before the settlers came.

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The blazing Sun, the only source of heat for anyone outside, had almost disappeared while the Moon had slowly started to show its beauty and light from the top of the sky. Snow had piled up starting from early morning; the top of the piles became slightly crisp and crunched when you came in contact with them. Elysian forces were ready; a few soldiers were on the watch for any incoming attacks or any news in general up on the watchtower. There had been surprisingly no news since the very beginning of today. Signed treaty papers were the only proof that the settlers could arrive at any given time. Everyone had to be thinking on their feet at any glimpse of man.

Dacian's outfit had changed into a more suitable outfit for the weather. A heavy, dark coat draped on his shoulders. His clothes were strictly monochromatic; white fur surrounded his neck, and he had silver accessories like the buttons on his vest and coat.

He was sitting in boredom, reading scrolls of his brother's intentions and musings, in actuality—he had planned this from the get-go, Calian had been eyeing the intruders knowing that they were knowledgeable furthermore had good offers, his half-sibling would not accept merely anything, of course. Dacian was in the middle of reading half of his brother's letters when he was interrupted, rudely by Sebastián, that foreign people had started to appear from a distance. Something moved in Dacian's soul, a chess piece going forward in its game. "Finally, something entertaining." He deliberately spoke as he stood up and threw the scrolls carelessly, boredom would eat him whole if he didn't do something this instant.

He instructed Sebastián he would enter the soon to be battlefields in a minute and told him to go ahead along with them, a lie so swift and sweet it didn't even feel like one. He rushed to Astraea's room to collect her items, knocking twice just like a few hours ago, but impatiently. Astraea opened the door wide again; a soft fur hat planted on her short hair. Gloves and coat were already on her, she was impatiently waiting to leave as well. Dacian nodded — Astraea understood. They were leaving right now. She held her prized possessions to her chest, looking back at the room she grew up in, a decision she made too late to regret now. Astraea had to move on and be a strong lady; she was all grown now. Dacian still saw her as a child, especially with that hat and pout on her face. He smiled internally, remembering her as a child and spending their precious time together, memories unforgettable.

Astraea and Dacian reached the Kingdom's horse stables in no time, both of their breaths fading into the brumal sunset. Vesper was clean and ready to go, the stable master was nowhere to be seen, things had been going too smoothly that Dacian had started to grow suspicious. Nonetheless, Dacian sat on his horse steadily, so did Astraea with hers.

Dacian ran his fingers through Vesper's long, luscious hair as she strutted, Astraea's horse followed shortly after. He was in front of Astraea, in scenarios where the forces had come to their secret path, he would fight back. Between the two, Dacian was the stronger one. He trained until his body ran out, it was only justifiable if he went in front, acting as a shield. He also knew his way around the outside world, Astraea did not. Her parents insisted she stay inside, with no knowledge of the outside world and its cruel nature, she required assistance. Just like how Dacian was the more ill individual between the two. He needed someone to take care of his wounds and gashes, especially with his anemia, and Astraea provided just that. She was smarter in terms of taking care of others, constantly collecting herbs and experimenting with them. It's a shame she can't share her intelligence with the world, just for being born a girl.

Vesper had paused abruptly in her tracks, Dacian took note of this and put his hand on his sword, handling his atmosphere with sincere caution. It seemed that Vesper had sensed someone. No. A group. Dacian's horse let out a sharp huff and dug her hoof into the snow. He got off his horse with elegance, taking his blade out as it rubbed against its case with a soft hiss, a spark emerging from it. Vesper was correct, forces had come up with their horses and fancy weapons. It meant nothing to Dacian, all of them combined did not come an inch close to Dacian in strength. And in all of the other topics.

They spoke a language unknown to Dacian's ears, they spoke loudly. So. Damn. Loud. Their aggressive voices rang in his ears, they looked like they were arguing about him being a nuisance and in the way. When it was quite the opposite, they were in Dacian's way, and he had no other choice but to color the snow red.

“A hundred troops...” Dacian only conjectured, a rough estimate of the soldiers in front of him, ultimately putting their nagging to a finish with a slash and focusing on Dacian instead. He swung his sword with calculation; adrenaline rushed into his blood cells like he was born anew. He did not focus on the golden blood dripping and stabbed his sharp yet slender blade into any standing man he saw.

Splash.

Splatter.

Splash. Splatter.

Over and over again. The cries for help didn't reach his ears, he silenced the gagged sounds coming from their ragged throats. Dacian did not feel like himself in that moment, perhaps a beast. A monster created to devour and spill. He knocked over the remaining soldiers with a few punches to their stomachs and faces made only to be punched by Dacian. He caught his breath only after he stopped slaughtering the men. The extermination was a mess. So much for not participating in any fights, now he had to deal with all these corpses.

Blood seeped its way into the pure white snow. The snow was the canvas; Dacian was the painter. Of course, a bit of credit went for the soldiers for their act of generosity, offering mesmerizing paint. Dacian felt his body go numb, fingers tugged his bleeding side, or maybe his side wasn't even bleeding. He didn't know. He couldn't care to muster up his thoughts into one.

He tripped over his step, a small laugh gasped out of his lips before collapsing just like every other soldier surrounding him. Except they

were defeated, he was not.

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A painful headache surged into his skull, gripping the sides of his forehead with his thumb and pointer finger. A natural grunt came out of his mouth, trying to see if any limbs produced movement. With that, he stood up and regretted it instantly. A huge wave flowed from his stomach; the pain burned within him like fire. His hand wrapped around his upper stomach, restricting the ache in his voice by grinding his teeth together. He turned his focus to his surroundings, Astraea sat in front of him, greeting him with a relieved smile and happy tears.

“You’re alive, Oh goodness!”

She put her warm palms on Dacian’s shoulder, checking his temperature with the back of her hand. Luckily, he hadn’t caught a cold. There was a small bonfire before them, keeping them warm and comfortable for the time being. His wounds were patched up, all thanks to Astraea. She took care of him when he became unconscious, everything happened so fast in Dacian’s mind it felt like a gust of wind.

“Thank you for taking care of me.” Dacian told Astraea in a genuine tone, it was good that she decided to come along. He would’ve gotten frostbite in mere minutes if not.

“No, Dacian. Thank you for taking care of me.” Astraea insisted. “To say I was shocked was an understatement really... Although I was terrified, you still happened to inspire me more than ever. I wish to be as courageous as you are.” She spoke with care and respect for Dacian. Something that he never had for his own kin. Astraea and Dacian were polar opposites,

yet they bonded surprisingly well together.

“You’re crazy.” Dacian chuckled as he spoke. He hadn’t realized that he was some sort of ‘hero’ in her eyes. She was truly childish.

Astraea laughed along with him. “Perchance. Perchance, this is what being sealed to a Kingdom does to a girl. I dream of spreading my wings and showing others my blessings, do you know that Dacian?”

“I do. I dream the same as you, yet it’s the exact opposite in a way.” It was complicated, his objectives and his hatred for mankind.

The two of them talked in the break of dawn, stopping when the sun had spread its light across their faces. Astraea assisted Dacian with standing upright, patient steps were made towards their horses who had been tied to the bark of a tree. The horses made weird sounds at each other and snacked on a few pieces of grass that hadn’t been covered by the mount full of snow. Both of them got on their horses, ready again for their discontinued adventure and anything that comes to their path. The bonfire was left behind, the soldiers remained in their place, bloodied and frozen from a distance.

It did not take long for them to reach the front of the merchants. Dacian covered his head and face with a large hood that was a part of his warm coat. He could not risk showing foreigners his identity, Astraea was no problem, settlers had no idea of who she was, let alone know of her existence.

The merchants were full of people, despite the terrible given state of their nation. Bustling with men and women, it signified the shops were open.

Dacian caught the eye of a strange individual, neither a settler from the looks of it, nor a familiar face.

But they turned to the front before he got to look more, brushing it off as nothing but illusions, his health wasn't top-notch so that was possibly the case. They were definitely from the settler's land, for sure.

He needed a few things from here; with a simple glance and few words he could grasp his hands onto anything.

A mark that displayed his status, and only his.

## CHAPTER NINE

*Renna*

I watch as the hole I have just made in the universe close back up as if I was never there. I've jumped out from my realm to this one, quite interesting, truly.

Onto more important matters now. Unfortunately, father didn't have much more information besides his little story before biting the dust, so I have to find it myself. What a pain, but no issue, I do like a puzzle. I walk for what must be days before I finally reach a small town near the East. I look around the shops and first buy some proper food and water for both a meal and some to stand up on, I've nearly run out of the supplies I brought back from home. I sit on the grass in a random garden I found to eat and rest up for the night. It wasn't too bad, my blankets covered me and my pillow was comfortably pleasant. All I hoped was that the supplies I brought would be enough for both me and Angelus.

"Eat up. You're going to need the energy." I softly pet Angelus as he let out a neigh in return, the wind flowing through his midnight black mane as he shook his head slightly.

The next morning, I woke early and rubbed my eyes with a groan as I sat up, it's quite chilly today. I'm wearing thick garments and have brought thick blankets and pillows, but it might not prove to be enough after all. I braid my hair the best I can and begin moving. I need to go back to town, and I need to find someone who can help me find what it is that I'm seeking.

I stroll through the shops and ask anyone I can find about someone who

can help me find a ‘higher being’. A bit broad but... It will have to do, unfortunately. I can’t even tell anymore if I imagined the whole thing and maybe I’ve finally gone insane. I came to a halt when I found a man crouching in front of a flowerpot and whispering to it. Maybe I’m not the only insane one here.

“What are you doing?” My voice came out before the thought even registered, oh well.

“Making my flower talk, of course.” The man said, gracing his face with an easy smile.

I raise an eyebrow. This man might actually be insane. Has he lost his mind or is there something I’m unaware of?

“Right... and I suppose that’s entirely possible?” I say a bit mockingly.

“No,” he says as he gets up and dusts himself off. “I’m only joking.”

Oh. Right, I guess that’s what I should’ve expected him to say. I don’t think it’ll be any use asking this man and standing here I’m only wasting my time. I should get going, but as soon as I step forward to walk away, he speaks again.

“You’re not from here. Looking for someone? Or something? Maybe I can help, I tend to know my way around here.” He let out a small chuckle as if proud of himself.

“Yes, actually. Do you know about higher beings or someone who does know about them? I have a few questions.”

“There is a retired wizard down south, I think you will be pleased with

what he has to tell you.” He says with a glint in his eyes as if he knows something I don’t.

Perhaps the wizard will try to kill me or propose me a deal in which I lose something I’d prefer not to. Nonetheless, it’s the only clue I’ve gotten all day and I’ll take it.

“Great, where do I find him, then?” My voice carried a bit of hope, I was finally getting somewhere, and I couldn’t help be a bit happy.

“I’m... er... I’m actually very bad at giving instructions and I don’t know the way very well myself.”

“Terrific. Now what am I to do?” I sigh in frustration, the little fragments of hope I had gone and away.

“Well, I can come with you if you’d like. Perhaps I’d be more assistance than you presume.” He replied, finally standing up to his full height. He has almost comical blond hair and eyes the richest shade of green that almost light up with the sun, his stubble beard was evident under the sun.

“That... could work, I suppose. Very well, you will accompany me then.” I finally respond after a few seconds and we begin walking, him beside me. “We should begin now; it might take a while.” He only nodded at that, not further speaking.

I first took him to the garden which I now realize is actually a small forest, probably owned by someone of higher rank in which I’d tied Angelus to a tall, withered tree. He was very well behaved so there wasn’t truly a need for it, but just in case. I’d rather be safe than sorry.

Afterwards I packed what I had left. The man, however, did not for some

reason. He said he didn't need anything and that the trip wouldn't be so long. Of course, he was wrong. A two-day trip to the mountains which meant I had to share my own food with him despite him saying he was fine, which is completely ridiculous. I mean, obviously he needs food. Who wouldn't? I couldn't leave him there either, I still needed him to get me where I was trying to go!

Finally, after a long climb up we reached a cave at the peak of the mountain. I tied Angelus to a tree and sighed in relief, turning to look at the man, who told me his name was Nawel.

“Thank you for your help, Nawel. I couldn't have gotten here without you. Now...where exactly is this wizard?” I say as I turn to face Nawel, his light green eyes catching the sun somehow. He grins mischievously and I raise an eyebrow, but before I can open my mouth to say anything a large whoosh sound erupts above us. My eyes dart to where the sound came from and to my utter shock, a dragon is forming out of the mountain. Sticks, stone, soil, you name it. It was as if the dragon was inhaling it! Like ingredients of a complex dessert recipe coming together to bake themselves. When the thing — or rather, the dragon, was finally done, it roared so loud the mountain itself trembled beneath the pressure. I had to hold onto Angelus just to protect myself.

“What the hell is this? Don't tell me this is the wizard!” I badgered, turning to see Nawel standing and laughing his head off. I've fought in many wars and battles. I've seen the epitome of terrifying in an opponent and yet I've never faced a dragon before. Have I really turned into a maniac?

“Oh dear, I must have forgotten to mention you have to slay a dragon

to meet the wizard. He deems only those who defeat it to be worthy of associating with him.”

“You couldn’t have told me this information earlier? Now what am I to do!” Anger simmered in my voice as I chided but nonetheless, I reached for my sword in a desperate attempt.

“Stand aside, I have a dragon to defeat!”

I stride to where Angelus is and reach out to grab for my shield, one I thought I wouldn’t need. It’s good I took the precaution anyway. I draw my sword before running forward and leaping into the air, just high enough to graze its jaw. A few petals of leaves and sticks crumbled to the floor and the dragon soars high, seething as it releases a flame of fire up into the air. I race up different rocks despite the exhaustion in my limbs to be closer to the creature and barely protect myself with my shield just in time as it exhorts fire once again. I duck and twirl a turn — moving myself to be positioned behind it while confusing the dragon at the same time.

Think, Renna, think. How do I destroy this creature all on my own? I must outsmart it soon.

I try to go lower on the mountain to hide in the dragon’s blind spots and climb up onto a tree, crouching onto its branch. I glance to my left and see Nawel waving with a friendly smile while Angelus neighed with distress beside him. Good, they’re both safe. Thank heavens.

I look up at the dragon, and it seems to be becoming impatient. I look to my right this time and see a leaf catch fire — I jump down the tree and speed to where Angelus is. Before either of them can react, I grab a bucket of water and once again rush to the other side to splash it over the

small but growing fire. Thankfully I was just in time and perfect for the dragon's view in my fit of hurry. I glanced at the ashes on the ground and an idea like a hairpin clicked in my head. I dash back up the mountain towards the dragon and once again hide myself with my shield and direct it so that the sun reflects it and right into the eyes of the dragon standing before me. It hisses intensely, scurrying out of the way and roaring sounds of great pain. I sprint to it once again and repeat the same action but this time; in a fit of rage and pain, its self-defense instinct spiked and a distinct, fast-building rumble built in its throat. Unleashing an immense inferno directly where I stood.

I react quickly and shield myself with the armor and just as I'd suspected—the flame redirected itself to its owner. The dragon flew up into the air, trying to move out of the way, but my reaction time was faster and I adapted quickly, positioning the shield towards the dragon and causing the fire to hit the dragon ferociously. It first caught the creature's face, then rapidly spread to the rest of its body, causing it to incinerate before our very eyes. Making us watch as the ashes slowly fell to the floor, covering the area with a large amount of black dust.

My thoughts are abruptly cut off by the sound of increasing clapping and a low whistle from behind me. I turn around and see Nawel is the culprit. I let both my sword and shield fall as I walk towards them with a sigh, running a hand through my now loose braid. I shake it apart, so it's completely undone. I'll redo it later; I didn't do it properly today.

I pet Angelus and he nuzzles his head to my neck. Another sigh escapes me, softer this time as I run my fingers down his pure white coat.

“Congratulations! Very few have managed to destroy the dragon of

earth,” Nawel says. “It seems you are truly capable and worthy of meeting the wizard.”

“Yes, speaking of which, where is he? I defeated the dragon of whatever, didn’t I? Will he erupt from the air like how his little test did?”

Nawel chuckles lightly, hands clasping together. “I suppose this might be a good time to tell you my little secret.”

I raise an eyebrow, the gentle patterns I was tracing on Angelus slowing down. “What is it?”

“You’ve already met the wizard.”

“What? When?”

“Why about two days ago” He replies then begins walking inside the cave.

“You’re the wizard then, I assume?” I say as I untie Angelus so we can both follow him into the cave and lean against the wall once we get inside, fingers brushing over the rough texture of the rocks.

“You finally figured it out.” He says as he sits down on the ground, the whole cave suddenly lighting up with dim orange lighting. “Why is it you seek me? We can talk now.”

“Do you know of the Elysian Kingdom? They are located in the South-East.”

“I indeed do.”

“Do you know about ‘The Guardian of the Guise’? I’m assuming you

do and I'd like to find him.”

“The price of my wisdom and knowledge isn’t so cheap, unfortunately for you, Renna.”

“I fought and defeated the dragon. It should be more than enough.” I argued as I walked to sit across to him, Angelus neighing from his spot, hopefully in agreement.

A smirk curled up on his lips. “That’s only the price of meeting me. What I actually ask for in return of my help, is half your life span.”

My eyes narrowed and I leaned forward, both of my hands clasping together as I spoke. “And how do I know or trust that you’ll give me the correct instructions if at all?”

“Not to worry, I’m a retired wizard, not a con man. You will sign a contract and only after you reach your destination will I take my portion of the agreement, so you know you haven’t been deceived.”

“How will I know that you take your pay now or later?”

“I have to conduct a ritual and spell to actually go through with the process, so no worries there. But I will be keeping an eye on you so the thought of tricking me shouldn’t cross your mind, especially after you sign the contract.”

Of course he could very well still be lying. This whole situation is sketchy in itself. Regardless, I’m willing to take the risk and find out. I don’t have much to lose anyway and perhaps if half my life span is taken for no reason, I’ll be gone sooner anyway and won’t have to deal with much more of this.

“Alright, deal. I’ll sign the contract and I assume you will as well.” I finally speak after a few moments of pondering and considering.

“Very well!” He says and points at the space beside him. He takes a needle out of the pocket of his robe and pricked his thumb, spreading his blood onto the surface of it before using his thumb as a signature. He handed me the pin, presumably expecting me to do the same. I sigh and comply, pricking myself with the needle before waiting for enough blood to ooze out and then spreading it over the surface of my thumb.

“Quick, before it dries!” He exclaimed with a grin, and I raised an eyebrow but did what he ordered anyway. I think he meant to scare me. Either way, I’d only taken my time because I was reading the scripture to make sure it was exactly as he’d told me it would be, and it was.

“You aren’t from here. How can you read that?” The wizard says curiously, raising an eyebrow as if wondering if there’s more to me than I’ve told him.

“You’re not the only one with a little magic, Nawel.”

An amused look comes on his face, and he chuckles as he hands me a scroll. He’s chuckled more times than I can count and I’ve only known him two days and one night, what a bother. I get up and nod at Angelus, he understands the gesture, following me out of the cave.

I let out a small sigh, sitting down outside the cave and taking the time to redo my braid that had fallen loose from my encounter with the dragon. Although it was a hassle and took time. I must admit, it was fun. I did miss fighting a somewhat worthy opponent.

“Come on, Angelus. We have to get going, we’ve got no time to spare.”

## CHAPTER TEN

*Renna*

Clouds were cast over the sky as I heard birds chirping, music to my ears. It had been overcast that early morning on the way to the city; a few days had passed since I exited my realm. Things had been unclear in my head; it was clear I was malnourished and exhausted.

Angelus, my horse, had grown tired as well. I didn't care much about my health, but if Angelus was tired, then I wouldn't be able to finish my journey to the Guise. I needed to give him nutrients so we could continue; I could get a bite or two while I was at it. After what felt like hours of traveling, we ended up at a place that, from the looks of it, looked like a merchant's market. Salesmen were shouting to get a few customers and negotiating with them. Ladies with their bags and pennies. A good location, just too busy with residents.

I got off my horse and wrapped his leash around my wrist and gripped it securely with my palm. I looked urgently for any merchants selling produce, coming across one with a variety of fruits. Verily, it appeared to be fresh. I ordered the salesman to arrange me a couple of fruits of my desire and get some carrots for Angelus to snack on for quick energy. In the middle of my order, a strange man advanced towards the small market. I took a diminutive glance at him and watched the salesman put more effort into getting my fruits into a bag. Howbeit I couldn't ignore how everyone—and I mean, everyone—could not stop whispering and staring at this unknown man.

He couldn't be that strange to get everyone's attention, right?

Even the owner looked nervous at his mere presence, I guessed that this man was a very important figure to these people, important in either a bad or good way, but he had great influence on them to attract such attention. Out of my sight, I took a look at Angelus to make sure he was still with me even though I was holding his leash firmly. Thankfully, he was right beside me. I wondered if he were born a human; he'd be as confused as me in this situation. That thought made me feel embarrassedly lonely, and I stopped thinking about it.

The salesman had stopped what he was doing, welcoming the tall male as if he were a guest. Talking about being honored by his presence and such things, which confirmed my guess about this important figure. The only reason why I'm even paying attention to this man is because the merchant stopped my unfinished order to go straight to his.

"Unbelievable..." I said with a sigh. There were better things I needed to do and could have done if I wasn't standing here. What was this, some show? I didn't need to be entertained and certainly didn't ask for it. I heard the individual's masculine voice, ordering a variety of fruits as well. The owner quickly went on it as if he were being chased by guardsmen, even having the audacity to offer it for free of charge.

I put a pouch filled with a good amount of gold coins on the pile of fruit in front of me, not bothering me to get any change from it. Maybe I was impatient, but these goons were total airheads, and I think that's more of a problem. I snatched my bag of fruit and out of habit, I unintentionally bumped into the man. I touched his shoulder and he hissed in return. I'm sure I didn't injure his shoulder to that extent.

"Are you alright?" I checked up on him, not able to see anything but

his cheek and red eyes. “I apologize.” I spoke. “I was in a hurry; my impatience got the best of me.”

I watched as he turned his head and faced me, putting on a smile and nodding before saying, “You’re forgiven –” and “I can see that,” which was a snide comment in my perspective. I furrowed my eyebrows slightly, sensing cockiness in his smile.

I realized he didn’t answer my question, so I asked again upon which he grew irritated, responding with a cold “I’m fine.”. My hand gripped his shoulder to get a reaction out of him. “I don’t think you’re fine.” I started to pester him. It’s what he gets for making me wait for so long. Testing his limits like he was testing mine was the only way I could justifiably annoy him.

“Oh, really? I’ve been having a bad day, is all.” And I was ready to make it worse. You could easily tell he was holding his breath and trying to suppress his emotions. The gathered crowd looked at me like I was crazy and was in disbelief, some were even scared for me and started gesturing some sort of hand signs at me. All it took was a simple laugh from me for him to grip my wrist. I looked at him with no expression written on my face. I could see a crack in his picture-perfect facade.

I despised people who acted perfectly, not out of jealousy but because of realism.

It was good for him that his face was covered from the rest, a sight only I could see. Loathing, hate, and revulsion spread on his face. Despite this, fear showed. Fear so intense I could feel it; I wasn’t the empathetic type. He didn’t go easy on my wrist, so I didn’t go easy on gripping his shoulder as hard either. It felt like a battle of pride between the two of

us. “I recommend you stop being so noisy.” He advised me. “The only recommendation you need to bear in mind is to keep your hands off a lady.” I whispered. “Let’s stop before the both of us get more heated, I doubt you’d want to break that cover you’re barely holding onto.” I let go of his shoulder so as not to show regret or retreat, but a pause. We were strangers to each other, not enemies from the opposite sides.

He lessened his grip on my wrist, not trusting me enough to let go. Opening his mouth only to close it after, apparent regret of the words that may flow out of his tongue. However, he managed to say something.

“You’re not from around here. Where did you come from?” He mumbled with a stare that could spark fire, my eyes replied back with a shock strong enough to fuel the fire further. What will he even do with that information? Does it even matter?

He looked at my sword planted on my side, letting his eyes linger as if it were to disappear from his sight any second.

“The Velmorians, “ he said, his eyes back on mine. He exceeded my expectations for sure. He didn’t guess but was sure of it. He recognized the symbol on my sword, my family symbol, Velmor. There were only a few Kingdoms that even knew us.

“Impressive.” My lips accidentally let it out instead of it remaining a thought. “It’s best if we continue our conversation away from residents; gossip can be spread like wildfire.” Thankfully my encouragement got through him. Furthermore, he spread his left arm as a sign of respect.

~

“So... what did you want to talk to me about?” The man questioned, his facade up once again. “About how you recognize us—who are you exactly?” I answered the man before me, the risks were high as is; I could not risk anything more by not having careful consideration for everything.

“The name is Renna.” I put my hand forward to dismissing the tension that stormed between us and for him to at least trust me enough to answer my question. He surprisingly didn’t ignore me and held my outstretched hand. “Dacian. Dacian Elysian.” He looked at me blandly as he addressed his name. The Elysians—the main connection with the Guise. We shook hands and put our very rocky first interaction behind us; a new beginning had sprung.

“Pardon me if I sound assuming, but you, Dacian—” I talked after an awkward silence, “You seem to know your way around here.” I needed assistance if I wanted to meet the Guise. Dacian nodded confidently. “What are you trying to initiate?” He crossed his arms, the expression on his face evident that he was going to reject any request I told him.

I brought out my map leading to the Guise, pointing my finger to a part of the map, which from the looks of it looked like the start of the journey towards the Guardian of the Guise. “I would like to know where this is, since you’re an Elysian. I’ll ask nothing more and get off your ba—” My voice sounded truthful and formal before I got interrupted by Dacian. “The Guise.” He confirmed whether it was to me or himself, it was unclear. But he knew my objective, somehow, in some way, and that was no good news.

“I can show you the way.” His voice sounded more like a command rather than being informative. “On one condition do I propose my generosity:”

Dacian took his hood off, allowing his bangs to flow with the air. “I have to tag along with you.” I gave him a stern look when he announced his condition.

“How am I supposed to trust you?” I moved the finger pointed to the map towards his chest; I’d rather sacrifice my limbs than trust a random man I’ve just met.

“The whole town trusts me.” He said in a deeper voice than usual, putting an emphasis on ‘whole’ and even sounded offended by my question. “Besides, I was planning on going there as well... To the Guise, I mean.” No relevance to the topic, I suspected. But I could risk it all or nothing.

That was all then.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Dacian*

Vesper is interacting with that white horse, the one that belongs to Renna. I'm glad at the very least Vesper won't be bored and has made a friend. Come to notice, their color palettes are exactly opposite, aren't they? While Vesper's coat color is a midnight Raven shade— Renna's is a pure white, almost like a cloud. The contrasts spread to their mane as well, while Vesper's mane is a silvery white, the other horse's is black. A coincidence, I guess.

Renna comes up to me while I'm watching the two horses seemingly... talk. I suppose. I'm not in the mood to converse with her but I guess I have no other choice right now. I do still need to win her over, she's proven to be different to others who usually become fond of me very quickly. In fact, I think she might be a bit... annoyed? Or possibly aware of my act. It's probably best I win her over, just in case. A pawn is always useful in its own way. I will be killing her eventually so I suppose I can go all out.

"What's the name of yours?" I ask, moving forward to feed an apple to Vesper.

"Oh, his name is Angelus."

Vesper takes a bite of the apple rather solemnly and... ignores me? She finishes it as quickly as possible and turns her head back towards Angelus, seemingly more interested in him than me. Well, that's a first. Interesting. Angelus seems rather giddy, his personality being another thing contrasting Vesper.

“They seem to have become friends,” I mumble. “He must be rather unique; Vesper doesn’t like socializing usually.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t say the same, no matter where I take him if there are other horses around, Angelus will befriend them,” she responded.

Her expression and tone of voice are so dry I’m sure deserts have some competition. Even the way she carries herself is with precision and a coldness that seems to wrap around her like a shawl. How very, very intriguing. I want to get rid of her as soon as I can. That ought to be fun, something to look forward to.

About an hour later, Astraea returned from the shops with the food and supplies we’d need as a group for the upcoming journey. She’d insisted on going alone even after I’d told her it might be dangerous, especially considering she’s never actually gone shopping before. She remained stubborn, claiming she needed to learn how the real world works and do things herself for once. She is right, so I dropped the topic after a bit, it wasn’t worth the time and energy. She looks fine though, I guess everything went well, which is good. We can’t afford any setbacks at a time like this.

“I got everything, Uncle!” She chirped, gesturing to the items she’d set on the small wooden table.

“Good, did anything happen?” I packed everything into the baggage we had brought so we wouldn’t have to spend time on it later.”

“No, everything went well. I just bought whatever I needed and came back! Oh, it was so amazing Uncle, I loved it. When can I go again?” She put her hands behind her back and swayed side to side like a child.

She looks so happy about such a simple task, it must have been a little confusing trying to figure out what to do. I assume someone found her and helped her out, but she probably won't mention it. Either way I'm glad, she's as stubborn as I am sometimes. It's not that I don't think she can get the task done herself— I know she can't, or— well, couldn't. She's a fast learner so she probably got the gist of it after the first purchase and insisted on completing the rest of the trip herself. I really do forget just how sheltered she's been all her life. She's still a child, despite what many people with high-ranked positions think. What cowards.

“We've stocked up quite a bit, so most likely not for another while. Now come on, we need to get going before—” I paused when I heard something familiar. Is that my name I hear? It is. Soldiers, for sure, looking for me and Astraea. Renna and I shared a quick look of understanding before I reached out and grab Astraea roughly, shoving her behind a wall in a dark alley and following. I covered Astraea's lips with my hand to prevent her shriek from escaping. Renna was right behind us, slipping in to stand beside me.

“It's alright, Astraea. Just keep calm, they won't find us.” I try to reassure her the best I can but she's trembling in my arms. I glance at Renna and her expression is a bit softer. Barely noticeable. It returns to its now-normal state—that icy look. I sigh and stroke Astraea's hair with my other hand like I would with Vesper's mane. Am I doing the right thing? I don't want to be doing this. We could get caught and she's not even able to pull herself together.

“Look, we're fine. They'll go away soon enough.”

“O-okay,” she whispers, attempting to recollect herself.

“Why exactly are you hiding? Are you wanted criminals?” Renna questions, arching a brow as if questioning if she should just out us right now.

“No, we’re not. But we did sneak away from our kingdom, and they must be looking for us.”

“And why is that? You said you’re only the Prince.”

God. Must she question everything? How annoying.

“I am, but my older brother—the King, betrayed us and ran. I’m supposed to be acting as the Regent right now. The Kingdom most likely needs a leader. They would settle for the princess, but I’ve technically kidnapped her.” Should I have said all that? I don’t think it matters much but it’s a pain to discuss. It’s dull. This whole atmosphere is dull.

“Look, just keep quiet until—” My words are interrupted by a soldier suddenly standing before us, sword in hand. He looks awfully excited for some reason. Everyone at home must think something has happened to us, they might not have considered we left willingly.

“There you are! Ser Dacian, Princess! We’ve been looking everywhere for you two! What happened?” He starts making his way to the three of us.

I recognize this soldier; he used to cause trouble when he was just a teenager. He’s been climbing the military ranks quickly lately, though. Probably because of the ruckus my brother has caused. His eyes dart to Renna and the sword at her hip, immediately drawing his own sword.

“Ser, tell me, has this woman kept you both here with force? I’ll deal with

her!—”

Before he can finish his sentence, Renna drew her own sword with a frustrated sigh, as if this is a waste of her time. “Dacian, I’ll kill this man. He’s a threat.”

“Yes, that’s suitable.” Shock registers on his face as he immediately ducks and moves into a proper position. He’s probably figured out by now that we left willingly. What was his name again? I never bothered to learn it.

It’s a fascinating sight, really. I do wish I could join but unfortunately, I can’t in my state. I suppose it’s good to see the extent of Renna’s fighting skills.

I cover Astraea’s eyes as he darts his sword towards her heart. Renna ducked and lifted her sword to stab— but just as the Soldier tries to miss, she slashes the side of his neck with her sword. She must’ve made a guess to where he’d move after seeing her attack. She didn’t know for sure, but it was a risk worth taking. The man collapses to the floor, blood squirting out of his neck. He opened his mouth in a rough, weak attempt to scream but Renna placed her foot on his neck, causing both more blood to spill out and for the sound in his throat to die out.

Ironic, that’s what he’s doing right now as well. In fact, he already looks dead. I peek my head out from the wall, my hands still covering Astraea’s eyes as I check to see if the soldiers were still there and thankfully— they were not. I sigh in quiet relief and move back into the alley to press my back against the wall again.

“Uncle? What was all that noise? What happened to the Soldier?”

Astraea's light voice suddenly came through my ears and I cleared my throat, leading her out of the alley and not giving her a chance to look back as Renna followed behind us.

“Nothing, Astraea. We just got rid of him. Come on now, we have no time to waste.”

“Dacian, we best get going now. Once a dead Soldier—especially a murdered one—is found, there will be a lot more than just one group of authority coming here. I don't want you to prove useless and for our arrangement to fail, that's just more time wasted on my part.” Renna says sternly as we stride back towards where all three of our horses are still located. Vesper and Angelus are once again conversing with each other. I have to say I'm a bit jealous, I always liked the idea of being the only one Vesper will tolerate just she's one of the very few non-dull aspects in my life. I suppose it's only normal though.

I get onto Vesper's back, reinforcing my weight and running my fingers down her coat. Just who does this woman think she is? If it wasn't for the fact that she has a map leading directly to The Guise as she claims alongside her combat skills, I wouldn't even consider having a partner.

“Yes, I understand. Let's get going.” I said, smiling at her as I tie my hair up, grabbing onto Vesper's reins gently and pulling them back to tell her we're leaving. She does just that, neighing.

The actual journey begins now—but what will the future bring?

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Dacian*

Vesper was moving at a steady pace, while a blustery wind flowed softly through my hair. I pulled lightly on Vesper's reins to adjust our pace so I could get closer to Renna. She noticed and slowed down her horse's pace.

"There's a slight change in plans. We're heading to a nearby kingdom first." I speak. "We should drop the Astraea off. I never meant her to get involved, and she's not suited for these types of things. She should be someplace safe."

Renna nods before reaching behind to pull her complicated built braid free, allowing her hair to fly through the air behind her. "You're right. But which kingdom is it? Are you sure they're trustworthy?"

"Yes, I am. It's the Kingdom of Tensevil. The current king is an old acquaintance of mine, I'm sure he won't mind looking after Astraea until I come back."

"Alright then, let's go."

~

It's been hours of travel, thankfully we've finally reached the Tensevil Kingdom. Astraea looked unaware; she probably thought we were on the right track. She didn't really ask where we're headed to, but I did tell her some place safe beforehand.

A guard recognizes me and comes up to us, smiling.

“Prince Dacian? Is that you? We didn’t receive notice of your arrival, I’ll go inform His Highness at once!” He spoke eagerly and didn’t give me much of a chance to respond, gesturing to the other guards to welcome us in. Neither I nor the two women—or rather, one woman and one girl—went inside and insisted on staying in the garden. The king came out soon after, servants bowing as he walked past them, some nervous, some calm.

“Prince Dacian! I’ve heard that you went missing! What ever happened? I was so worried.” He looked at Renna and Astraea, raising an eyebrow. “Princess Astraea as well... I figured she would be with you. But who is this woman? I didn’t hear any news of you taking a bride.”

I chuckled nervously and awkwardly while smiling, patting his shoulder. “Of course I’m not married. Not amidst all this mess. And if I were, you would surely be invited.” How dull. Marriage is the last thing I need right now—a complete waste of time, in fact, I’m offended. Where does he think my priorities lie?

“She’s... a friend. I can explain everything at another time. And I don’t mean to be blunt, but I have a favor to ask of you.” I say, taking my hand off his shoulder.

“Yes, of course. What is it?”

“I’d like you to take care of Astraea, just for a small while. I have somewhere to go and I can’t risk her safety. Of course, I don’t trust anyone else to keep her out of harm’s way, do you think she could stay here? Just until I return.”

“Oh my. Of course I will—”

“Wait, what?” Astraea’s frightened but angry voice registers through the air as she darts to me, shaking a bit and tapping her fingers against her palm, a nervous tic she’s had since she was little. “You promised to take me with you! How could you leave me behind? I refuse to stay here. I won’t! You can’t force me.”

“Astraea, this is for your own good.” I try to say the words as gently as possible, a feeble attempt at calming her down. I hope she doesn’t begin crying.

And she’s crying... Angry Astraea is gone and now she’s crying, full on sobs even. I sigh softly beneath my breath and let her kick and punch against my chest.

“Why are you leaving me? Please take me with you. I want to stay w-with you Uncle, please. I’m begging you, you’re all I have left! I can’t be trapped again!” Her cries were shaky and desperate as she fell to the floor, her hands trying to wipe her still tearing eyes.

“Astraea, get up.” I crouch to the floor. How embarrassing this must look. “I promise I won’t be long, alright? I’ll write to you, as well. This is only to guarantee your safety. You won’t be trapped, King Luan isn’t like your father, he’ll grant you whatever freedom you desire. But only temporarily, as I’ll be back soon. Besides, he’s close to your age and he’s a friend of mine. Perhaps you’ll also befriend him. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

I guess my words calmed her down a little, as her sobs began reducing down to quiet sniffles. I stand back up and a few servants help her up and take her inside, most likely to the chambers she’ll be staying at.

I turn back to Luan, masking my face with a smile again. “Sorry about that, she’s quite attached to me. I trust she’ll be safe here with you.”

“No worries at all, she’ll be perfectly fine. I’ll make sure her life is no different than it was at home.”

“Thank you, truly. We won’t take more of your time, we’ll leave now.

“Are you joking? It’s nighttime. I insist you stay for the night; you can’t go out like this.”

“You’re too kind, your Majesty.” Renna suddenly spoke and I realized she’s been quiet this entire time, just observing.

Luan insisted that we stay and I figured it would beat sleeping in some cave any day. Two servants were ordered to escort us to the chambers we’d be staying in for the night. Two women, who looked eerily alike, they must be related. I waved a goodbye to Renna and followed the servant to the room I’d be staying in.

Once inside I immediately stripped of my clothing with a frustrated sigh. I feel caged in thick material, yet I have to endure it for the winter. I drop onto the bed, not bothering to clean the mess up. I hum softly, letting my hair loose as I nuzzle against the blanket. It’s still early, so I should probably seize the opportunity to take a bath.

After my bath I practically collapsed onto the bed. My limbs are heavy, my body is exhausted, both physically and mentally. Yet three hours have passed and I don’t get a wink of sleep. There’s not much time until midnight now. A tired groan escapes me as I sit up, reaching out to put my garments back on. I’ve gotten used to sleeping next to Renna by now,

Astraea as well I suppose, but Renna is newer to the equation. I don't think she's the reason I'm unable to sleep, though. I'm glad I don't have to sleep in her presence tonight, in fact. Perhaps a walk is what I need.

I walk around the palace and eventually find myself up on the rooftop. To my surprise, I found Renna already there. What is she doing here? How dull. I come up for peace, and her presence follows me here as well. Nonetheless, I shouldn't break the character.

"You couldn't sleep either?" I say, sitting down beside her and leaning back on my arms.

"No," She mumbles, voice low and eyes droopy. As if she were expecting me. "haven't been able to get a wink of sleep for a while now."

Great, she's upset for whatever reason. She's probably more vulnerable right now; I should ask her some questions.

"Renna," I say. "Why do you want to meet the Guise? I've been meaning to ask."

"I'm afraid that's none of your concern."

I raise an eyebrow, smirk, and deflating a bit. What is she planning? How big of a threat is this lady? I know her kingdom and ours were looking to form an alliance and her father had died recently. Based on what I've heard, she's always been very involved—unlike the new king, her younger brother. If she became queen herself, she could have arranged to meet who she seeks a whole lot easier. Is it possible she was the one who killed her father? At first, I thought she wanted to ask for something in the name of her kingdom, but considering it now, she probably has intentions for

personal gain. But what?

“Did you kill your father?” I suddenly asked after a bit of silence, turning my head to face her. I know it was bold, but her reaction was slight; it was there. Only a hint of surprise beneath her stoic exterior. I guess I was right then.

I let out a small laugh beneath my breath and began talking about random things just to pass the time, strategies, passages, shortcuts, jokes. Anything, to keep me from looking at her. She looks so calm, she usually does, but being so close to her is damaging my perception. Her hair—usually in a braid is down and her purple locks frame her face, a mix of purple hues and pigments in her strands. I’ve never seen anything like it, but I ought to admit it’s an intriguing sight.

My thoughts are interrupted by the sudden weight of something— or rather someone, going limp against me.

Oh.

She’s fallen asleep. Should I take her to the room she’s supposed to be staying in, or should I leave her here? I should leave her here, but at the same time if I were to stay out here, she could probably disturb me. With a reluctant sigh I pick her up into my arms, tucking her head against me to keep her secure and carefully walk to the room I’m staying at. I would take her to wherever she’s supposed to be, even though I don’t know the way, and it would be a hassle right now to wake her from her slumber. I softly lay on her bed and pull the blankets over her, careful not to wake her before I walk out and go back up the roof. I suppose I can rest here tonight.

~

The next morning Renna and Dacian took off and once again began their journey, but not before leaving a letter for Astraea to read when she woke up, reassuring her that her stay at the Tensevil Kingdom would only be temporary. They were traveling for weeks on end with nothing but their horses, sleeping in caves at night, both adamant and ambitious.

One particular day, after they were finally beginning to reach the end of their trip, an earthy smell filled their senses. They figured a river was nearby and tied their horses to trees to go wash up, but as they walked closer and closer, the earthy smell transfigured to a rotten one. It didn't take long to figure out where it had come from. Dozens if not hundreds of dead, bloody animals lay on the ground. From birds to turkeys to llamas, alpacas, and dogs! Each had been murdered viciously and left to rot in its own blood. The two exchanged a look but continued walking anyway until they reached the river.

"Who did all this, I wonder." Renna murmurs, sitting down at the edge of the river— just far enough to not become wet.

"A couple of hunters, I presume. I don't, however, understand why they would leave it all here. Especially such a variety of animals. Do you think it could be to drive away anyone trying to reach the Guise?" Dacian responds while crouching beside her and popping some berries into his mouth.

"Yes, that's probably it."

Renna leaned forward and collected a handful of water before splashing it on her face to refresh herself. They decided to stay at the river just a little while longer, even choosing to take one of the animals to cook dinner. What they didn't expect, however, was the river beginning to glow a bright green after the sun ended. Dacian and Renna both immediately got up in surprise and precaution, startled by the sudden change in color.

"I might be insane, but is the river neon?" Dacian speaks, trying to keep his lighthearted mask on and not freak out.

"No, it's definitely a neon. What is—"

Renna paused, noticing a text at the edge of the river. She walked towards the forming text, and Dacian raised an eyebrow but didn't question her and followed.

"Keep me steady." Renna says to Dacian. He nodded in response and held his arm out for her to take. She reaches out and holds his forearm, using it to balance herself as she moved lower into the river. There, at the very bottom of the edge, carved somehow:

[ All things are an exchange for fire, and fire for all things. ]

"Is that poetry or something?" Dacian asks, a genuine confused expression on his face for once. While he had a lot of intellect he was never very interested in poetry. Renna, however, was the opposite of him.

"No, it's a quote. I recognize it, in fact. Heraclitus said this in his book called 'On Nature'. It's a lost book but late Greek authors have quoted parts of it." Renna's voice was softer when the topic came up; she was heavily interested.

“Who exactly is Heraclitus?” Dacian raised an eyebrow, making Renna scowl as her moment became ruined.

“He was a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher. A brilliant man, truly. He also—” Her voice was cut off by Dacian suddenly coughing roughly, pulling her back up and collapsing onto the ground.

“Forgive me for cutting you off but is it just me or does the air feel... tighter?” Dacian’s voice was ragged now, and Renna quickly realized he was right. There was barely any air here! Dacian turned out to be right, this place isn’t designed for humans, it’s meant to keep them away, and it seems it’s doing a good job.

Dacian looked down at the bright green river as a thought crossed his mind. He forced himself up and walked back as hurriedly as he could, lifting a dead llama and stumbling back toward Renna. Just as Renna was about to question him— he threw the llama into the river with all the power he could and before either of them could process what was happening, it all ignited into flames.

Renna watched in horror, suddenly gripping Dacian’s arm while he started laughing out loud, barely able to contain himself.

He looked to the side and just as he’d hoped— a portal had opened. He grabbed Renna’s arm and lunged inside, pulling her along with him. By the time the portal closed, he was still smirking from ear to ear, standing up to adjust his hair.

“Would you mind explaining what just happened?” Queries Renna, pulling him back by the back of his garment, wanting an explanation.

“Oh, right? Well, the text said, ‘All things are an exchange for fire, and fire for all things.’, right? We were on the right track according to our map, yet it appeared to be a dead end. We needed some entrance, a way to get in. I considered that the quote meant we needed to start a fire to open the passageway, but we’d already created a fire earlier when we cooked the animal for dinner. So, I thought, what must we do then? Then I remembered that there’s a certain element known for glowing green in some conditions and capable of being used as a fuel, known as Phosphorus.” He started explaining but was not done with his explanation.

“When it interacts with any sort of air, it’s said that it will burst up in flames. This confused me until I quickly realized that our air supply was somehow cut off. An intentional action, to stop the fire from starting and to keep us from getting in or even staying alive, I suppose. I thought about it and figured I needed to make the river somehow interact with whatever little air was left before it disappeared, therefore I got the nearest heavy object I could and threw it into the river in hopes of making whatever it’s filled with interact with the air and cause a fire, which would ultimately open our passageway. It was a risk and I wasn’t sure if I was correct, but I suppose I was. A close one, actually.” Dacian cleared his throat; he had spoken quite proudly, and rightfully so.

A sort of awkward laugh escaped him once he saw how concentrated Renna’s eyes were in him, eyes glancing away.

“Good call, then.” Renna says, even though she could admit she was impressed. He’s more intelligent than she thought, clearly. The thought process was risky and hurried, especially in the circumstances.

“Thank you. Now, where exactly are we?” Dacian probed, eyes looking around their new location.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Renna*

A domain unimaginable—a separate sacred world in itself lay upon the grounds of this earth. Renna’s eyes roam around her surroundings, clearly fascinated by the scenery. It seemed that Dacian was showing the same expression as well. What lay in front of their eyes was a place oh so holy and nothing like the previous place they passed. A garden with beautiful grown trees embellished with ripe fruits; the scent was so powerful it had reached Renna’s nostrils. The tall grass had reached beneath her knees; a flowing river and deer could be spotted from a distance with their young. It was truly a breathtaking view, a sight like Heaven.

“Have we just entered Heaven? I thought... I thought we were going to meet the Guise.” Dacian joked but he was just as shocked as Renna. Renna sneered in response, seeing Dacian’s dark hair flowing with the wind.

“It may as well be. However, we must continue our journey forward. Contain your feelings.” Renna proclaimed. They needed to suppress their joy for now; their objective was further ahead and possibly very close.

Renna walked towards one of the trees, stopping to investigate. The atmosphere was stupendous; it felt like every weight on Renna’s shoulders had been lifted. A sentiment that felt too great to be true. Just as Renna was observing the trees that bore fruit, she noticed a large gold gate, locked with a big lock and chains wrapped around it. Was it possibility that they were trapped here?

“Dacian, look over there!” She pointed to the big gate, wanting him to

pay attention and be aware of it.

“A gate...” Dacian confirmed, turning his eyes toward Renna. “My best guess would be we have to defeat a creature to pass through the gates.” Renna said, stating her words with experience. Random creatures had always come to her path; it was the only reasonable guess.

Dacian made his way to the large gate through the green trees; Renna followed right after. Seeing it up close was far better. A silver gate with precise little designs carved into it, surely it would’ve been an easy fight, right? They were technically located in Heaven. A place known as the most peaceful place, where no blood would drop and no tears would dare to fall.

Renna was so so wrong.

She heard a voice in her ears; Renna wasn’t exactly sure if Dacian could hear it too.

“A trial has been initiated. To pass through the gates of this realm, you must adhere to the following poems and rules.”

“A trial? Of what sort?” Renna thought it was a safer choice to keep it inside her head. She did not want Dacian to think she was insane. This trip has made her think she was crazy over a hundred times already, now she was hearing things.

“Of Man’s first disobedience, and the fruit

Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste

Brought death into the World, and all our woe,

With loss of Eden, till one greater Man

Restore us, and regain the blissful seat.”

The voice had echoed in her brain, a poem that made sense but didn't at the same time. She stared intently at Dacian, looking for a reaction. However, he seemed focused, eyes looking at the grass beneath his feet.

“One cursed and forced to feel great excruciation. The other desperate for a cure. There lies a fruit that causes disobedience, a dangerous toxin flows in your body. And there lies a fruit that cures all sickness.” Renna was still confused about what was going on, was the voice going to keep on talking?

“Just get to the point.” Renna whispered beneath her lips.

Just when she had said that a great pain struck her body, causing her to crash into the grass.

Dacian looked at her with caution. “Why'd you just... randomly fall? Are you alright?” He put his hands on both of her upper arms, kneeling before her to see what had caused her to trip. Renna hissed in pain, her mind felt foggy and distant. “I... — Damn it! I don't know! My whole body feels like it's tearing apart and my head is going to burst any minute.” She informed her teeth. She recognized the symptoms—it was a toxin flowing through her body. Her body was trained for any type of assassination; toxic fluid being injected in her was one of the basic things she did for training.

“I've been injected with toxins. I recognize...—” Renna was out of breath; this toxin was unbearable. She could survive it for at least a day

but at what cost? It felt like all the weight that had been removed from her shoulders had been placed atop her neck, slowly suffocating her. “I recognize the symptoms.” She finally continued.

Dacian sighed as if he had known this would happen, standing up in front of Renna and his eyes darted, inspecting the trees.

“That poem is from a certain book I know, a religious poem regarding Adam and Eve. That voice said there was a forbidden tree that bared toxic fruit, and another that had the cure.” He explained while adjusting his arm’s cuffs. “You’ve clearly been cursed with pain as the voice said, and I have to find a cure to get us straight out of here. Stay right where you are, I’ll have to look around.” He looked at Renna with a softer glare than usual, what if he was lying and trapping her here? This would have been the end of Renna Velmorla.

Renna knew the story of Adam and Eve; she just didn’t recognize the poem. She watched Dacian walk away a bit quicker than how he usually walked. Like the voice had said, he was desperate for a cure.

Adam and Eve were two individuals that had fallen in love and lived in the Garden of Eden. Paradise on earth. The Garden of Eden looked exactly like how Renna had imagined it, it’s awful it had to come with anguish. However, Adam and Eve were urged to stay away from the fruit of the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil. Eve was tempted by a serpent to eat its fruit, disobeying the Higher’s orders. Which is the reason why Renna was poisoned, serpents had the deadliest of venom and now the both of them had to suffer, one after the other’s death. That would be the case if Dacian couldn’t find the cure.

Dacian was the one who knew most about the forbidden tree, after all

it was his path of life. He wasn't a strong believer, rather a collector of the information inside his books. It was strongly believed that the trees that bared Apples were the forbidden fruit, otherwise known as Malus in Latin, therefore he distanced himself away from those trees.

After searching for half an hour, his eyes caught a tree that had white bark. An odd one out. The fruit was shaped like pomegranates, the rich and vibrant crimson color on the exterior. Its graceful seeds are used for many benefits, including abundance.

"Found you." He got a ripe pomegranate from the tree branch, spinning it delicately in his hands and returning back to Renna before it was too late. For her and for himself.

~

"Take it easy." Dacian let Renna grip his wrist in pain, crushing the seeds with her sharp teeth and drinking it like nectar. It was one sight, really. The side of her mouth had splashes of the pomegranate that were easily chewed into refreshing juice. Dacian threw a cloth he carried onto Renna's lap, who was still savoring the seeds.

"Was the pain really that bad?" Dacian questioned, not taking her strength seriously but still having a questionable amount of concern for her. Renna glares at him for a moment and Dacian decides it's best if he doesn't bring up the topic again.

"So it was that bad." He whispered, Renna heard but was unsure if he said it to confirm her pain or to feel a shred of sympathy for her.

Despite this, Renna trusted Dacian a lot more now. He did not abandon

her, regardless of whether it was for himself — he still took notice of small details like the stained juice on the sides of her mouth and lips. He had some sympathy and did not doubt her strength even though she was cursed to be a woman in this day and age. She didn't have to prove that she was worthy to him, and it felt like a relief. It had certainly been years since someone looked at her in any way but pure misogyny and hatred for her.

She grabbed his cloth and tapped it on her lips, cleaning whatever resided near her mouth. The pain was now replaced with a healing and soothing sensation. Taking a deep breath in and out in relief, furthermore exhaustion.

“How are you feeling now? Any better?” He remained kneeling in front of her sitting body; no signs of worry were expressed on his face. Only his furrowed eyebrows.

“I'm good, the pain went away instantly. Thank goodness.” Dacian put his hand underneath her shoulder and lifted her up to her feet. Putting an arm around her lower back to secure her. Renna had not been healed immediately; she had to be careful with her steps. Dacian willingly helped out.

“I was fed the cure, right? So why isn't this irritating voice opening the gates for us?” Renna said while looking up at the lock in anger. The door wasn't open even after they completed the trial.

Clink!

“Speak of the Devil.” Dacian sarcastically said. The lock had been opened, its chains disappearing into dust and granting the two visitors

entry after the misery they went through in the supposed 'Heaven'.

A complex, strange feeling had started to form, forming a knot of emotions she couldn't comprehend or understand. The core of her heart starts thumping more and louder, creating a slight flush on the tip of her ears. She silently hoped that Dacian wasn't aware of such thoughts, quickly shoving them aside as if he were a mind reader. He might have been a mind reader; it wouldn't be an impossible situation. Making her feel such... strange and twisted emotions on purpose, she'd actually kill him out of embarrassment if he was a mind reader and was playing with the threads of her heart like a toy. No such thing should ever happen as long as she was alive.

They pass the large gates, closing tightly behind them with a swoosh. There was no time to waste.

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Ultimately, Renna and Dacian reached what seemed like a forest. Both of them hoped this forest was not deceptive. The forest was unlike any other. Tall, lanky, and thin trees were spread across a vast area. The sensation made Dacian feel like it was a cycle, an infinite loop. Dacian even made the consideration to tell Renna if she felt the same looping sensation too, but it had seemed like she was out of her mind. That toxin has taken a lot of energy out of her body; Dacian noticed that. He noticed that even though she insisted on continuing forward. Convincing him to walk more even though her body started to grow frail after each and every step they took.

Dacian had had enough and insisted repeatedly.

“Alright, alright! Stop right here, we can just rest here until we feel recovered. Is that satisfactory for you, Dacian?” Even her anger made his lips go upward, just a tad bit. “It’s very much satisfactory for me, Renna.” Renna put her arm away from his shoulder, stumbling on her feet and walking slowly but thankfully, normally. Her state had gotten better throughout their walk.

Dacian felt like they were dangerously close to the Guardian of the Guise. An irking sense filled him whole; something will probably go wrong. Although, he had to lift his chin up and put himself first. He needed to get revenge; to put everyone in their place and make them regret thinking they could toy with him. Everyone would show him great honor.

Renna had laid out a cloth that seemed like a bed alongside a pillow, yet Dacian had neither. All of the things that he had were just patches and medication; he brought nothing concerning to sleep — actual relaxation. He put his back to a tree and slowly shifted his legs to the ground, now sitting with his back against the bark. Leaning his neck in a more comfortable position.

He watched Renna lay down with a steady exhalation. The rest was for sure necessary for the both of them.

“You know, Dacian.” Renna’s voice started, more gentle than usual. Softer. “I had a best friend. A companion. He was the sole exception to all the agony that was thrown onto me as a lady.” Dacian had closed his eyes but opened one eye to hear what she had to say. A story that could possibly let him intertwine his fingers through the wires of her warm heart.

“He was a soldier alongside the many soldiers that were under me as their

leader. Our Kingdom had engaged in a war. A deadly, gruesome war that had a negative effect on our Kingdom in its entirety. One of the many soldiers had betrayed me, he had the audacity to betray me because I was nothing but a useless woman in his eyes.” She started talking about her past whilst looking up to the sky, which was nowhere to be seen. Covered by the tree branches and its full, dark leaves. Dacian didn’t intervene and crossed his arms, listening, he was there, alive and available. Renna liked that.

“He was the cause of my best friend’s death, my only childhood friend. He was one of the pillars I relied on, the only person I had trusted. That war—” she paused for a minute before continuing. “It was living hell on earth. I still have nightmares, recurring thoughts of what I could’ve done better when it was not my fault. I was drowning in an ocean of my own guilt, and I wanted that rascal I called a soldier to feel just a drop of it.”

“Was that how you got your burn mark as well?” Dacian only questioned, no comfort was given. Renna stared up at the moving leaves. “It was. A permanent mark made on my neck of the greatest horror I had to endure.” She lets her fingers feel the texture of her healed but burnt skin on her neck. A sight not worth seeing, a reason why she tries to cover it up but to no avail.

A comfortable silence was planted between the two of them. Renna was satisfied with Dacian listening, his own type of comfort. His eyes looked at her thick eyelashes and amethyst eyes, feeling a heavy thump in his chest. His golden, forbidden, and cursed blood was flowing so fast he had become concerned; his body grew warm.

Dacian fixed Renna’s hair that was messily placed on her face, gently

letting his fingertips go through her hair. He took notice of his actions, and his hands immediately go stone cold, stopping in his tracks and putting his hands to himself like a respectful Man.

His eyes were getting heavier by the second; maroon eyes finally put to rest. Forgetting that, he even touched Renna for a slight moment.

But Renna couldn't forget that. A small and intimate act. A familiar sense of love—just like it was with her best friend. He always used to take care of her hair since she never bothered. Renna knew and swore this type of affection was different. It wasn't platonic.

It couldn't possibly be romantic... right?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Renna

Early in the morning, I'm already awake. Drinking some water and looking around for whatever food I can gather. Out of nowhere, a creature that looks like a small white bat appears and giggles before speaking in a bird-like voice.

“Renna of Velmoria, you have reached your destination! I am here in place of the Great Wizard Nawel; he has sent me to claim his payment!”

Oh, this. Right. I almost forgot I agreed to give up a quarter of my lifespan in exchange for the map. No matter what, it's best to get over it.

“Alright then, go ahead. Do what you need to do.” I say, I was still tired even after many hours of sleep. Perhaps I'll sleep again.

The creature nods and suddenly a small glass filled with a thick purple liquid comes into the clutches of its tiny hand. I never noticed but bats apparently have small fingers on their wings. This bat was not just a regular bat though, it's a bat that has speech ability. Nothing too shocking coming from that Wizard. The bat tosses the glass to me and I catch it, thankfully it didn't spill. I gulped the strange solution down; I couldn't back down now. Nawel was great help for me, despite the conditions almost having me killed. It will most likely be soon. Seeing how a quarter of my lifespan had slipped from my grasp with just a simple liquid.

“Done?”

“Yes, Renna of Velmoria. Your debt is paid off, and I shall take my leave now! “

It chirped and suddenly disappeared into thin air just as it came. I groan as I head back to where Dacian is sleeping, long hair down. His features are much softer when he's asleep, I've noticed that since he's always tense and cautious for whatever reason. He almost looks like another person entirely. I inhaled a bit of air and moved to lie down to sleep again, this time with some distance from him.

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I heard some sound. The sounds of rustling of leaves and walking. Something tells me I need to refrain from opening my eyes just yet. I don't think Dacian is awake, he feels limp.

Oh.

I must have fallen asleep against him, again. This is so stupid. Whoever is so close right now is stupid. I open an eye just to peek and see another human in my peripheral vision, with his hands around... Dacian's neck!

I swiftly turn as soon as I see him squeeze and reach for my sword, turning to attack the man, but to my surprise Dacian has already pinned him down and seems to be cutting off his air supply. He has that smirk he always does on his face, the one where he's performing a fake personality. I sometimes wonder if I'm the only one who's noticed it, then I remember most people are idiots. Or maybe I'm the only one who's gotten this close. Eh... I'm thinking too much.

I clear my throat and step forward, placing the heel of my shoe on the man's chest.

"Why haven't you killed him yet?" I question, raising an eyebrow

to Dacian as the man's neck turns into a shade of blueish purple under Dacian's grip. He's not able to do much fighting because of his condition, but perhaps he was a strong fighter before all this. Hopefully He probably will be soon again.

"You said your map isn't of any use anymore since the wizard said that's all he knew, right? Let's use this one to help us reach where we want." Dacian says with a grin as he grabbed the back of the man's shirt and pulled him up, dusting him off.

"Surely you jest! How low do you think of me, thinking I would accept such orders and help you two? I work here, after all." The beaten-up man spoke after catching his breath, though he was still gasping for air.

"Why do you work here?" I interrogate, pushing him back onto the ground and slitting his cheek just enough to bleed with my sword.

"I'm here not out of will but out of compliment," he choked out. "I made a deal with one of the Gods many years ago and I'm now here to work as her servant until my debt is cleared."

"Are you saying there are other Gods here? I suspected it from the beginning, but I wasn't completely sure." The smirk was off Dacian's lips now. It's odd, it looked like his appearance just 360'd completely, turning him into a different person.

"Yes, multiple. Were you not aware? How can you come to a place you're unfamiliar with without knowing anything?"

I press my heel down harder to shut him up before leaning down to grab his arm and dragging him up.

“I guess we have you to help us now, don’t we? Get moving or I’ll slit your throat.” I lean a little closer, just enough so my breath is tickling his ear. “And I won’t hold back, so I suggest you comply before we make you. Yeah?”

“Yeah. Sure, whatever! Which deity are you guys here for, then?” The man grumbled as he smoothed out his all-black clothing, partially stained from being squished into the dirt. He dusted off the dirt he saw and began walking.

“The Guardian of the Guise. Do you know him?” Dacian asked, moving closer to me as we began walking, following the man.

“Oh, that one. Yes, I do. He’s arrogant– constantly looking for entertainment. Not to disrespect him, of course. But he is a deity that constantly seeks entertainment. It’s his whole purpose, really. I recommend you put on a show...” He laughed before continuing. “Make it a Circus, if you really wish... Oh! You can call me Sylus. I happen to have a name, you know.”

I didn’t respond, but Dacian looked like he wanted to. He looked like he had the urge to ask him a question with a look on his face; he resisted. Typical Dacian. It’s my first time seeing the man so shocked. Did he not expect the Guise to behave that way? A great possibility, however, I couldn’t assume with the little information I have of the God.

We’ve been traveling on foot for about an hour now. On our way so far, Sylus has been telling us about how we’re in the underworld and for some reason, even though neither of us asked why he himself is here. Dacian, of course, paid attention and engaged in conversation whilst I stayed quiet, tuning them out eventually. It’s too early for this, really. I

wanted to have a bit more rest.

A small shiver runs through me, and I shudder, inhaling a sharp breath. I don't think anyone notices but me until I feel a heavy coat slip around my shoulders. I look up from the ground and recognize Dacian's coat.

I look at him and he's still in conversation with Sylus. The two now look like friends, in a way. Dacian was a smooth talker; he somehow made Sylus like us. I don't have the ability to talk without plunging a weapon into someone's throat. Maybe it was just a preference, or maybe it just helped me get my answer since nobody listens to women. I could not distinguish anything anymore, so I pushed the topic aside and focused on the clothing that's sitting on my shoulders. Should I accept it? It's too late to return it now and I'm still cold so I might as well keep it I suppose.

I let out a light huff and continue walking, only this time the warmth coming from the coat makes it easier to walk.

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After about 10 more minutes of walking, we reached somewhere with a door that was composed of... a bright pink fog? More like a flame, in this case. The middle of the flames was decorated with a cherry-like red. You could feel the scorching heat from a distance.

"Alright you two, step back and let me ask for permission." Sylus clears his throat and hesitates before knocking on the would-be doors. A sweat drop falling from his cheek to his neck, either from the heat or from nervousness. It didn't take long before an abnormally large man with extremely pale skin opens the door. I looked up slightly to see his face that showed a huge grin, like he just won a game of go. Is this the Guise?

He gestures for us to go in and doesn't say anything, simply expecting us to follow, which we do. He sits on a throne that was compatible with his body and clears his throat.

"I've been expecting you two, you're finally here." He finally speaks; his voice is incredibly happy, I note. But why? Is he going to kill us?

"You knew we were coming?" I ask with a hint of surprise in my tone, gesturing my fingers between me and Dacian.

"Why, of course I did." He turned his head to look at Dacian. "And you, your older brother broke a part of the deal. My sacred eye has bestowed upon him," The Guardian of the Guise puts a strand of his pin straight hair away from his left eye. A red eye exposed alongside a red, complicated mark etched on that side of his skin. I wouldn't call it skinny. It looked like a plaster mask, similar to a porcelain doll. His right eye seemed to have been carved to make it look like an eye.

"That's why I've come, my Lord." Dacian says, stepping forward to being closer to the Guise. "I'd like you to get rid of the curse. I wish to live."

The Guise smirked in response; it must be very intriguing for him. What cursed blood does he mean? It's only now that I realized Dacian never told me why he's seeking the Guise. I made a mental note to ask him later on.

"Rid of the curse, do you say? And why should I do that?"

Dacian paused for just a moment, contemplating his options before speaking again. "If you do, I will take back control of my Nation and rule

it myself. I won't let the foreigners take over."

The Guise sighs lightly and leans his head in his hand. "Alright, very well then. I can't undo the curse, since it's a deal made and done, but I will help you. You will be granted the power of Hemokinesis, blood manipulation."

"... Excuse me?" Dacian has a crooked smile on his face, as if he doesn't know whether to frown, be angry or burst out into laughter.

"With the power, you can control your blood to ensure your survival. You're a smart young man, I'm sure you will grasp control of it quickly. But beware, if you do not take control back over your Nation, your gift will be revoked, and you will die immediately. Now, go out, will you? I must speak to the lady in private."

The guise's eye is on me now. A case ready to be judged.

Dacian looked skeptical, probably because he wasn't given much of a chance to speak or negotiate, but he seemed to accept it. Was he worried about leaving me alone with him? I give him a small nod to at least try to reassure him I can handle myself, and he nods and exits the room without another question.

A small smile creeps onto my lips because of it; he didn't doubt me.

Nowadays most respect me and know I can take care of things myself because I did unspeakable things to earn that role. Dacian hasn't seen me do even a quarter of those things and yet he trusts I'm strong enough. He's refreshing. His attitude is truly refreshing.

“Tell me, why is it you’re here, then? What can I do for such a fine young lady like yourself.” My gaze snapped back to the Guise who is now speaking to me. His hair long and until his waist. A wisp of his hair covered the crevice of his mouth.

I nod and keep my arms flat at my sides. “I have heard rumors. Rumors of how you and the Elysian Kingdom became involved with one another.” My eyes narrow and I watch the lazy smirk spread wider on his lips. “Is it true you can resurrect people?”

“Resurrect people? My, I haven’t done something like that in years! Over a millennium, in fact. But yes, I can. Is there someone you wish to return to your side?”

I nod once again as I reply. “A friend of mine. His name was Aseomon Gable. I’ve heard great things about you, and I will give you whatever you wish if you complete my request.”

“Hm... No. No, I won’t. You see there would be no benefits for me, and there’s nothing I want from you.” My expression drops, what? This can’t be. “But I will also bestow a gift upon you! You will receive... Hmm... The power to use force to control objects... yes! Perfect. No need to thank me, I’m doing this out of the goodness of my heart to help you—”

Pure anger is plastered over my face as I cut him off with my sword pressed horizontally against his matte neck. I had leaped towards him in a moment of anger.

“I travel all this way to find you, and do you refuse to help me? I’m sure you know very well what I’ve sacrificed to come.” My voice was low and sharp, but the anger in it was noticeable. “How dare you? You

then insult me by bestowing upon me a useless gift!”

I don’t register the hurried footsteps coming inside and rushing towards me. All I’m thinking of is murdering this man, if it’s even possible. A pair of hands I recognize wrap around my shoulders as Dacian pulls me away and off the Guise, repeating apologies to the Guise and restricting me from slashing the deity’s neck from pure wrath.

“Leave her be, I apologize in her stead, your Greatness. She did not mean anything of it.” Dacian urged continuously while keeping his grip on me firm. He sounds almost... anxious. I haven’t seen him anxious not once in the time I’ve known him. I wonder why but my ears are ringing and my vision is blurry and all I can feel is someone helping me walk away.

My legs don’t stop for a while, and I think Dacian is scolding me, but I’m filled with such rage I can’t comprehend his words. Eventually we sit down and he lets out a big sigh, reaching out to brush my hair out of my face. He did that the other day as well, but he stopped himself after one touch. He must be too out of it to stop himself right now.

“What happened? What did he say that prompted you to attack him? He could have killed you! Cursed you! He could have done literally anything!” Dacian’s voice comes through my ears, and I sigh as I bring my knees up to my chest, hugging them. I don’t answer for a moment in an attempt to regulate my emotions. Dacian was only worried for me after all.

“Remember my best friend? The one I told you about. I came asking for him to be resurrected as I heard in the original tale. Of how the Guise got involved with the Elysians and offered something in return. He

refused and instead granted me some useless power.”

“A power? What is it?”

I raised my hand and decided to test it. I wonder if I’ve already gotten it. I try to make some air go through a tree nearby us and to my surprise, it works. Almost breaking the tree in half. Hm.

“That. Something about being able to push things together.” I mumble, putting my hand back down.

I look at him and I can’t really tell what’s going on in Dacian’s head based on his facial expression, but he looks a bit angry. Is it for me? Against me? I don’t know, and right now, I really don’t care. What do I do now that my plan has failed?

Aseomon was the whole reason why I came to The Guise.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dacian

I can't get my mind off it.

These burning thoughts have seared their way into my brain, sometimes I get subconscious and slowly feel these murderous thoughts in my veins and my blood flow. I have to kill her, to make a plan and use her as sacrifice. Hell, I need to kill her just because she's gotten too close to me. How can this happen to me? I need to be conscious and in control, I can't lose power and let someone take possible advantage over me like this.

But I can't kill her. I know that deep in my heart I shouldn't. I always listen to my brain; the heart is not ideal for decision making. Maybe just this once can be an exception. I don't understand myself, really. I feel alive when I'm around her, but I also feel fear. Not afraid of her but afraid of my own self. My greatest desire is control, and I can't let her get in the way of me achieving that.

My mind goes on and off repeatedly, overanalyzing my plans and Renna. Renna was not a part of my equation, but she meddled in and came along. And now I don't know the outcome of my solution, thanks to her.

I stop my detachment from the world and come in contact with my surroundings; overthinking was not great for the mind and soul. It's best if I figure it along the way I suppose.

I told Renna about half an hour ago that I was going to go on a stroll for some fresh air, I'm not used to being so surrounded by people since I always preferred to be in the comfort of my own self. It was a stupid

thing to say because there was no fresh air. We were both kept in a room that surprisingly had everything you really needed to stay for a night, considering that we're in the underworld and everyone else were... well, Deities or different creatures of such.

I had to opt for the hallway of the place we were staying, which felt like a maze. I tried not to lose myself in the process of this “stroll” for “fresh air”, which was mainly necessary to determine what I would do with Renna. I went back to the room we were staying in with no clue and no good answer to my question. Fisting my hand to make knocks on the door.

I enter the room after I hear a faint “Come in!” and witness Renna taking care of her blade. It had seemed like she was sharpening it, as if it weren't sharp enough already.

“How was it lik—”

“I have someth—”

We both interrupted each other, talking at the same time.

I give her a sign with my hand to continue. “You go first, Renna.” She looks at me, eyes resembling raspberries. I come towards her and take a seat next to her in the uncomfortable lounge.

“So... How was it like? The stroll.” Right. The stroll.

“It was quite... alright, it's not fun when you're trapped within four walls after days of being in the nature.” My tongue made a lie, and it came out before I could even comprehend it, it felt too natural. I wasn't going to tell her that I was having thoughts of killing her. Getting rid of her for my

own sake.

“Makes me want to go back to that garden. You know, the Garden of Eden.” Renna stated. Her voice seemed soft in a way, or maybe it was my ears acting up again.

“You don’t say! It was a tough one for you, why do you want to go back anyway?” I replied, not really thinking too much of her statement or at least I didn’t get in depth of her words and its meaning.

Was it because we resembled Adam and Eve? The first two people made on Earth, and the first couple. I was going back on my old acquaintance’s words about marriage; did we seem that way in the eyes of man?

She laughed. Wait, was she making fun of me?

“Why wouldn’t I want to go back? The sight was one to behold. It was one fascinating scenery. Though, you are correct. Despite that it was still an amazing experience.”

That answer was not what I expected at all. I tried to hide my anger, but my clenching fist showed more than just wrath. Technically, I just got rejected. One of my biggest triggers mainly because it made me feel out of control, intolerable.

I hated rejection.

I responded with nothing, giving her the silent treatment. I couldn’t let her see that side of me. The side of me that I couldn’t control, I am a livid man and I admit it.

There was silence, neither comfortable nor uncomfortable. I watched her

clean off the dust and any residue from her sword. “It’s only fair if you say your part after I said mine, Dacian. Now I feel regretful.” She said while her eyes paid close attention to her sword, and I into the distance.

After an eerie silence, I finally mustered the courage to say what I had intended to. “After all of this is done, you should visit me sometime. It wouldn’t hurt to come over once in a while.” That sentence came out of my mouth with a small knot in my throat. Making it hard to swallow.

It was yet again another lie, another false promise. I couldn’t stop that. I had no idea what would happen to her, if she would die on the way or if she would die by and in my cold anemic hands. My curse could affect her more heavily than it affected me. I couldn’t understand if I despised her or liked her tolerated her.

I saw her pupils widen, suddenly turning her eyes from her sword to me now. The sides of her lips were lifted, wearing a heart-felt smile. I couldn’t even pretend to smile back; my feelings turned into nothing but numbness towards her. Her rejection is still at the back of my mind. Blinking and looking at what was in front of me instead, which was nothing but cabinets and a dusty old painting.

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“Leaving so soon?” The man before me said, looking at me with a smirk. Our guide to the Guise, Sylus.

“You say that as if staying in this realm brings us any pleasure.” I responded simply, Renna standing right next to me as always.

“Well, we didn’t know we’d have any company. At least, not humans.

Your kind cannot survive this realm's conditions; it was best to put you in a safe space instead." Sylus said before creating a distance between us, turning his back on me. Waving his hands.

He was performing a ritual before us, carving a strange hexagon shape on the ground with the help of his power. Sylus was creating a gateway to get us out of here and back to Earth after I requested so. There is no purpose in staying here, we met the Guardian of the Guise and there was nothing else we could do, objectively.

It also made me realize a lot of things about the Guise. A lot of things about the realm in general. I wasn't so sure about the Guise being a holy deity anymore, considering there were other 'Gods' alongside him. Besides that, Sylus told Renna and I that we were in the Underworld.

The hexagon. Underworld. Other Gods. Trials and Punishment. It all clicked in my head together, but it was all too late. There's nothing I can do about it. This realm was not Heaven, but the opposite. It made me wonder what the Guise could do to me since I was cursed with Golden blood.

A dark portal formed before our eyes, a whirling effect in the middle. I nodded at Sylus, offering him a small thank you before I went inside. Renna came after me, I couldn't hear what she said to him before she entered.

We were brought back to the place with the river, the same exact place we were at before entering the Guise's realm. The river still flowed its waters, our horses were still tied to the trees, the sole difference was only one.

“No more dead animals, how weird.” Renna said those words like she was going along with my mind. Yes. No more corpses and the smell of rotting flesh.

“Pay it no mind, it was certainly a hallucination to lure us off.”

“We ate a hallucination?” She expressed to see if I was in the right mind. “It’s still uncanny, no matter how you perceive it.” She was right.

“At least it’s done with now.” I pet Vesper’s coat with care; has she had her fill while I was gone? I wonder. Renna brushed her long fingers through her horse’s mane, lifting herself up to sit on her horse comfortably. I do the same as she goes forth first.

Before we started going anywhere, I searched my pockets and small bags gripped onto me for any small weapon. I needed something to protect myself with, my current blade was now chipped and dull. This wasn’t going to work, especially since I had enough coins on me for just one meal.

Renna turns around to look at me and notices my struggle.

“My sword’s been chipped, there’s no difference between this and a child’s toy. I can’t buy one either.”

“Don’t worry, prince. I’ll be your personal bodyguard.” Renna says in a sarcastic manner. She laughs right after not able to hold herself. I tried to hold my laughter, but a small chuckle accidentally came out.

“Seriously though. I need a sword, a weapon of some sort for protection.” Who knows who or what we could encounter? Renna was a strong lady, she had her wits, but she was only human as well.

“Hm... Well...” Renna started. “How about you use your power to your advantage? Hemokinesis, correct?” That’s true. My power given to me by the Guise. Hemokinesis otherwise known as blood manipulation.

“I would, notwithstanding my lack of knowledge concerning the power. I have no clue on how to use it.”

“You would have to use it sooner or later, Dacian. Testing it out would cause no harm.”

“And who do I use it on if not me? You know I’m ill, I am anemic. Hemokinesis is the antithesis of Anemia.” I’m fully convinced that the God my family believed in, the Guise, had wanted me dead. What use was there to a power that was directly harmful for someone like me?

“You can use it on people. Who knows, play with their blood pressure and you can convince them to do anything you want. That’s the whole point of manipulation.” One hand on the reins of her horse, the other swaying around and eventually patting particles off her shoulder.

Then it clicked in my head. No wonder she’s a warrior.

~~~~~

The only source of light and warmth during the winter, the Sun, had set onto the horizon slowly but surely. The vibrant hues of the Sun spread throughout the sky; cold air went into my nose and later exhaled out of my mouth. We had seen a village from a distance and decisively planned on going there, it was getting late and cold. We needed somewhere to stay and something to feed our appetite.

We finally reached the rural village, the snow here had become less,

particularly because it was surrounded by people, not isolation. Of course, and ideally, the people would shove the snow away.

I get off my horse, handing the lead rope to Renna. Vesper was in good hands. Renna looked a bit confused by my actions.

“I’m going to borrow a sword; I wish that this does not cause us any more trouble than we already have.” I clearly stated to her; she no longer looked confused and knew what I was about to conduct. With her nod of approval, I fix my bangs by raking my fingers through my hair.

I got to the nearest blacksmith, evidently trying to show my neck. If they knew I was an Elysian, they would further fall for my manipulation. Sliding my hands on my glowing tattoo in the middle of my neck while one of the blacksmith’s assistants finally looks at me.

“How may I be of help, Sire?—” the boy, who was similar in age to Astraea, said to me before looking at the glowing mark on my neck. A pattern made on my neck to show my status. Every Elysian had a glowing mark on them to symbolize their royalty. Although, only natives could see the marks of an Elysian. This means that Renna couldn’t see it. It was no wonder that she thought of me as a regular resident.

Instantly, it had seemed my mark had struck him like lightning internally—he appeared more terrified than nervous. How dreary. No human could be so terrifying to react so dramatically.

“Your majesty!” He bowed. “What can I ever do for you?”

“I’m in a hurry.” I looked at him with focus, trying to grasp what he’s thinking and use it to my advantage. “Could you give me your sharpest

blade?" I felt my power activate in between my fingers, slowly putting his blood pressure down. It was apparent, the young boy looked pale and unsteady. Sick even. Somehow, he composed himself and grabbed the sword next to him. Newly sharpened.

I take the long blade into my grasp and hold it to my side. The boy was subconscious now, unaware of what he's even doing. His thoughts had turned into mine; I loved the taste of control.

I turned away, walking towards Renna with a successful yet prideful smile. She gave me an impressed look and clapped for me from a distance, a power like mine was useful, but only in short ranges.

I got my leash back from Renna and hopped on Vesper, wearing a prideful smirk that showed my canines.

"Congratulations, Dacian. I believed in you."

"You're only fooling around with me." I respond to her, letting our horses rest for the time being.

"Fooling for what reason? I'm happy for you." She looked at me, the stare in her eyes seemed genuine. She was not lying nor was she being sarcastic.

Happy. Happy for me.

It made my heart smile instead of my lips, a sigh came out of my mouth. Her nose had turned pink from the cold weather. "Thank you, Renna. You've been big help."

"I only stated the truth. Nothing more." Still. Your words captivated

me. I couldn't say that, ever. I composed myself and my mindset. I had to remember why I was here, and why Renna was here. She was only here as a pawn in my two games. I could use her, then later throw her away. Being interested in someone was not on my list, mainly since it was not necessary for my growth.

“How about we spoil ourselves tonight? Let's celebrate our growth with some pastries.” A random thought, I had to do anything to get my mind off her. She nods before she starts talking about what my favorite dessert was. We have a conversation, a friendly and truthful conversation, with nobody but each other. The air felt special, a once in a lifetime feeling lingered between us as we made our way to a pastry shop on our horses.

~

“I've always wanted to ask you something, Dacian. May I?” Renna asks before putting a small pastry in her mouth.

“Go ahead, m'lady.”

“Back then, you said you were cursed.” She initiated. “What did you mean by that? As far as I know, you didn't get what you wanted from the Guise either.” She is finished.

“I am cursed, Renna.” I speak. “My family has made a lifelong commitment and contract with the Guise, to be specific, my ancestor has. The Guise offered peace and control over our soil, which is not going great as you can see. However, the Guise could not offer anything without getting anything back in return. His only requirement was to make sure to spread the Royal blood.”

“That was it?” Renna questioned. “That was it.” I confirmed.

“I choose not to spread it, as a personal preference. The Guise swore to curse anyone that did not listen to him with Golden blood. It contains toxins of all sorts, repelling the human body.”

“So, you went to the Guise for a cure.” Renna figured it out and I nodded in confirmation.

“Yes. There is no available cure for my condition; only a few in my family have had it so far. I have a partial cure for now. And it’s this... blood manipulation.”

“I see now. How didn’t you burst out in anger?”

“Trust me, I was very close to snapping.” I said before opening another topic.

“I... I never really cared about these fancy things. Maybe that’s the reason why I didn’t spread the blood. I ought to do things my way and not be restricted.” She looks at me, slouching her back and resting her head in her hands.

“Family means nothing when they don’t have an ounce of respect for you. The same goes with my status.” I looked at the scenery in front of us, the glowing candle lights and fires of the village from far looked pleasing.

I closed my mouth before I said another word, did I say too much?

“I agree with you, Dacian. Well, partially since I’m not cursed. I understand how you feel; we’re similar yet worlds apart. The way we

handle things is what makes us different even though we share similar experiences.”

Renna gave me a thoughtful response; I felt my heart tugging me before looking at her. Looking at her feels natural nowadays.

“I need your help, Renna.” She snaps her eyes from the lights in front and then to me.

“I want to get the Kingdom back, our journey with the Guise is over. Would you offer me a hand with the planning?”

Renna looked at me in surprise. A slight smile carved on her face. I unknowingly returned it back.

“You know my answer.”

“Good. Staying up till the break of dawn, are you in for the challenge, Renna?” I show a genuine smile.

“I’m in. Get prepared to lose by this pretty face!” She smirked.

Laughter fills the atmosphere; the air was not cold anymore. It felt warm, just like home.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dacian

“Have you decided on what to do yet?” Renna comes towards me, holding two loaves of bread to eat with the fish we had bought for dinner. She hands me one and I take a bite as I lean back, my back pressing against the tree.

“Yes, I have. I asked around to find out who’s currently in charge of Elysia. Whom is Jeffery Sanderson, I need to kill him. Afterwards, I will reclaim Elysia and end the settler’s reign. I won’t allow them to take over any more of our lands. Not mine and no other kingdoms either.” I say, running a hand through my hair for the umpteenth time as she sits beside me and begins eating as well.

“Then, will we head to the kingdom tomorrow?”

“That’s the plan,” I tilt my head and look at her. Her eyes are a mix of Plum and Imperial purple. Her hair carries nearly five different shades of purple; it’s currently in the usual braid. A crumb of the food I now realize I forgot about falls from the edge of my bottom lip, and I clear my throat, chuckling awkwardly as I get back to eating. I’d better rest up tonight; it’s going to be a long day tomorrow.

~~~~~

The journey back to Elysia takes weeks that feel endless, but we still get there eventually. The kingdom looked different, the flowers in our gardens destroyed and replaced and several banners of men I do not recognize hung on the palace walls. I sneaked Renna and I in through

the same secret passageway me and Astraea escaped through, which somehow hadn't been discovered as it stayed how I had left it. It was at the back of the palace, near one of the many gardens. Vines that looked as though they were leaning on a huge rock, when it was actually an area outside the palace. A secret door. We quietly entered the palace grounds, but not inside the kingdom just yet. It's quiet out, so quiet I could hear the movement of leaves.

I glance at Renna, who's standing not far behind me and waiting to go. "I assume he's taken the Master bedroom; my brother's former one. Once we get in, I'll have to kill him immediately."

"Let's hope he isn't awake; I don't want to deal with trying to silence him." Renna says under her breath as she uses her new power to lift me up on to the balcony of the master bedroom on the second floor. She really hates silencing, huh? I'm not sure why the Guise gave her this power, but it is useful. Could it be to make sure I don't kill her? But why? What significance does she have for him? No matter, that's not my mission right now anyway.

Renna lifts herself up onto the balcony next and I try to open the doors as silently as I can and Renna follows after me. I consider using my power to kill him. Should I? It would be much easier. Well, I suppose so then. I walk towards the man, Jeffrey, and breath in. It's quite easy, making his blood stop all circulation, the process only takes a few minutes. Only a few seconds for his breathing to become irregular and for him to begin gasping for air, his muscles limp, skin clammy. I go closer and lower myself so he can look at me, look at his killer. His eyes widen with both recognition and fear, he's trying to speak but too focused on breathing. It took exactly 7 minutes and 18 seconds for him to die. Quick, he is—was a

fighter. His skin is pale and blue now, and his eyes are still wide open. I reached out and shut his eyes.

“It ends here, Jeffrey.” I murmur before covering him completely with the blankets and turning back to Renna. “I’m tired, I’m heading to my bedroom to rest up for a bit.” She simply nods as I exit out of the room. I walk to my old room and as soon as I’m in, collapse and give in to exhaustion. My eyelids were heavy, and I didn’t get to look at the room I missed; my body sank into the soft mattress.

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Throughout the night, neither Renna nor Dacian get the amount of sleep they need. The two tossed and turned all night, awaiting the following day’s contents. When the clock hit eight– which is the exact time Dacian knew the workers and servants would be up, he walked past the throne room and inspected it through the small gap between the doors. Counselors, advisors, high ranking officials and courtiers were all currently exploding furthermore fuming over their leader’s recently discovered death. Dacian swore he could see steam coming out of one of the men’s ears in anger, his loud laugh was spread throughout the hallways of the castle in victory. Did these settlers think he was laughing matter? Dacian encountered Sebastián just as he was about to step outside to inform guards alongside soldiers of his plan.

“Your Majesty! Where have you been?!” The man in front of Dacian said with a heavy accent rolling off his tongue.

“Was it fun without me here?” Dacian jokingly said and didn’t answer Sebastián’s question. He changed his facial expression from sarcastic to serious immediately and ordered Sebastián to inform all Guards, Soldiers

and Knights that they had to kick out any “intruders” as Dacian said. Which in reality, were non-natives forcefully taking over their land. Dacian stepped outside with Sebastián following him when a group of Guards all turned their heads to Dacian’s way.

The moment their eyes landed on him, it was as if time had stopped. He stole attention with a single look, and his own guards were too entranced, or perhaps intimidated, to say anything. Everyone in the kingdom, including Sebastián, did not expect Dacian’s sudden arrival. He had been missing for almost three months now and was presumed dead. Clearly, they were wrong. He strutted outside with his usual confidence and paused, turning his head to talk to Sebastián.

“I have returned once and for all, and I will take back my nation.” That was all he said before an ambush occurred, it all seemed to be the settler’s soldiers. They ran towards Dacian to capture him, or kill him, maybe both. Dacian draws his sword and so do the few Guards by his side while Sebastián hides behind Dacian to protect himself. Dacian fights off a dozen soldiers who are coming from the side, the front and back. His own Guards grab their shields and shove them to the ground. Dacian kills a few more soldiers on his own before deciding that he’s bored. What does he do instead? Attempt to focus on his power. Luckily for him, he’s a quick learner and before the next man can lunge at him, he’s figured out how to control blood simultaneously from more than one place at a time. He looks around as five foreign soldiers collapsed to the ground; their breathing now labored.

“Now!” Dacian says with a radiant smile as he clasps his hands and looks at the other now horrified soldiers in front of him. He hears multiple footsteps behind him, who are the counselors and such coming outside

of the castle in curiosity. Most of them were shivering in fear as they saw their forces lying dead on the ground. “As I said, I will be fighting back so unfortunately, it will be our last time meeting.” Dacian said loudly for the settlers to hear and turned around fully to face the fancy dressed men.

“Ser Dacian! What is the meaning of this?” A voice finally cuts through tension. Stepping forward was a man who Dacian had many discussions with in the past. He now stood before Dacian as a counselor. “A treaty was signed fairly! You cannot just return whenever you feel it is right and take our rightfully owned—” The man, Arthur Colten, was now on the floor gasping for air. Dacian testily runs a hand through his locks and clears his throat before killing the rest of the subjects settlers around him. He didn’t even need to move– he killed them all internally. By the time they were all dead, his surroundings were all dead bodies, except his own people, of course. Not much blood has spilled, thankfully. Only the blood of the soldiers he had killed with his blade, his power didn’t pour out any blood. A pool of blood reached his boot, cleaning the bottom of his boot by smearing it onto the ground.

Dacian sighs, and several knights whom Dacian recognizes from a distance salute and bow to him. Most were unsure if the news of Dacian’s return was true, but now? Now, everyone would celebrate, all thanks to Dacian. They will find themselves indebted to him. He was careful not to step onto the bodies and ordered Sebastián to clean the remaining mess up. Sebastián nodded but gulped with disgust, looking at the dead bodies. Dacian stepped inside with the intention of talking to Renna.

“A young woman arrived with me last night, where is she? I wish to speak to her.” Dacian asks one of the servants, who then leads him to the room Renna is currently staying in. He opens the door and she’s not

there. He then went out to the gardens and correct in his assumption; there she stood by a fountain. Which was not working due to the cold weather.

“Is it done?” Renna inquiries calmly, raising her hand to graze her hand over a withering flower.

“Yes, I killed the rest of the foreigners rotting here.”

“Good job, Dacian.”

At that, a flicker of surprise crosses Dacian’s face before he masks it with his usual beaming smile. “Would you join me for a ride through the woods? There’s a river I think you’d quite like. It’s relaxing, and the forest itself is most beautiful.”

“Yes, that sounds pleasant.” Renna responds, a shadow of a smile dancing on her lips.

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The next day Dacian immediately sent carriages and knights to bring Astraea back from Tensevil, and about three weeks later she arrived, excitedly rushing to the gardens where Dacian was crouched over a bush of berries, examining them. She pounces on him to hug him and surprise flashes over his face before recognition settles in his eyes and he laughs quietly as he hugs her back and pets her as if she was a cat.

“I knew you could do it! Oh, I’ve missed being home so much.” Astraea sighs contently as Dacian sets her down and steps back, smiling. A veil on her head as always, her dark hair grown quite a bit of length since the last time Dacian had seen her.

“I told you it would be over and I would bring you home, didn’t I? Everything will be okay from now on.” Dacian promises, fixing his messed-up clothing and hair.

“Where’s mother? I can’t wait to see her; I’ve been looking forward to reuniting with her! Now that father is gone, I don’t have to get married anymore and the kingdom is also saved from outsiders. We can finally be happy at last, uncle!” Astraea enthuses, her voice nearly a squeal as happiness remains plastered over her face.

Dacian’s expression, however, drops as he clears his throat. The smile had before no longer been on his lips.

“Astraea, your mother, she’s... dead. When she refused to give the settlers information on where we were because she didn’t know, they did not believe her.” Astraea chokes on her gasp as she immediately drops, trembling from the news. Dacian crouches and helps her up, but when she stays refusing to move, he sighs and stays in his position, frustrated and slightly sympathetic at the same time. Her fluffy skirt made a big circle on the dry grass.

“Oh, my Lord, it’s my fault. It’s all my fault mother died; I should’ve never left! If it weren’t for me she w-would be alive and—”

Dacian cuts her off, extracting his cotton handkerchief to wipe her still spilling and ongoing tears. “That’s ridiculous, don’t say that.” He starts. “It’s as much my fault as it is yours. Something would have happened either way if you hadn’t come with me. Astraea, if you were here while I wasn’t they would have most likely hurt you as well.”

Dacian stayed with her until her sobs and cries quieted down and

ordered a guard to take her back to her room and servants to change her into something more comfortable so she could rest easy in her own bed.

Over the course of the next few weeks there was silence from the settlers, not a word. The people had begun celebrating, joy spreading throughout the kingdom on Dacian's return and in the foreigner's exit. The other kingdoms put honor to Dacian's name, calling him Elysia's true leader and savior. Dacian reveled in it all, even though he knew it wasn't over. It didn't take long for people to start insisting Dacian become king and his resolve was beginning to wear down slowly but surely day by day. Renna encouraged him, telling Dacian it is his responsibility and rightful position, that the people and his father intended for Dacian to take the crown anyway.

Astraea, still grieving her mother's death also agreed. The pain was still fresh in her heart, and guilt pricked at her like thorns on roses. She stayed in her chamber and refused to do anything, and Dacian decided she needed the space and to let her be, leaving her to process her grief.

These were all predictable outcomes for Dacian, he figured it would happen and it did, so far things were going according to plan. Well, they were according to his assumptions. What he didn't expect was waking up to his soldiers calling for him one morning just to tell him that Calian had returned, demanding to see and speak to Dacian. Calian, being a traitor, was taken into custody immediately, but the soldiers did not know what to do without Dacian commanding them, so he was alerted as soon as possible. Hearing the sudden news, Dacian rushed outside immediately, and sure enough, Calian was right outside the palace gates, being held down by two men.

“Brother, what a surprise. You should’ve sent a letter telling me you were coming; I wasn’t prepared at all.” Dacian’s tone carries the same mockery that Calian once held when speaking to Dacian as if he were the ants beneath his feet.

“What have you done, you are an incompetent fool! They forced me to leave! I’ve never been so humiliated before in my life!” Calian yells back in response, teeth grinding against each other in anger while Dacian simply smirks in amusement.

“What have I done? You mean you really expected me to stand by and wallow in self-pity while you live happily with the same people I warned you about? Multiple times in fact! You sold all of us.”

“I’m cursed now! All because of you, my life is ruined! The curse has fallen upon me because you decided to step in and ruin my plans!”

“Everything that has happened is entirely your fault. I told you that the Guise would charge you with his curse if you allowed this, did I not?”

“I—”

“You decided to leave. You decided to plot behind my back and go against what I told you was the inevitable.” Dacian says, “And then you escape and leave your duties, your wife and child behind like a coward. I’m ashamed we are related.”

“You don’t realize how much trouble we’re in. They’re coming, and they are coming for war.” Calian finally responded, and his brows furrowed in anger. “It’s over. Not just for me, but everyone.”

“Then let them come, I will personally destroy every single one of

them.” Dacian looks at the guards holding Calian. “Take him to the dungeons, he will be executed for treason against Elysia.”

“Yes, my Lord!” The guards say in unison and drag a yelling and protesting Calian away.

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Calian was executed a few hours ago. They say my coronation is tomorrow— in fact it’s being planned right now as I lay in this bed. I told them I’d nap since I haven’t gotten much rest these few days. I haven’t got a wink of sleep.

King.

I’m going to be king tomorrow. I don’t even want this role, and yet I must take it. The settlers will be here soon, Calian wasn’t wrong about that. It will be a difficult battle, I’m not sure it is worth it. The only reason I’m agreeing to becoming king is so I can fight with the power necessary to put the opposing force in their places and show them they should never have underestimated me. Not understanding your enemy or what limit their power exceeds is the biggest mistake as a fighter.

I am a fighter.

and I will win this war.

I huffed and took my blanket off my body in hopes of the air giving me some peace, but it didn’t work. I get up to walk out, but just as I do Renna appears right in front of me.

“Dacian, I wanted to have a talk with you.” She says in her usual stoic

and composed voice.

I lean against the doorframe with a small smirk, crossing my arms.  
“Yes? We can speak now.”

“I heard you will be crowned king tomorrow.”

“Yes,” My eyebrows raise in amusement. Where could this conversation be going? Will she ask to stay? Probably. “You will attend my coronation, right?”

“Yes, I will.” Renna starts, “And... I believe it’s time I take my leave. I will be returning to Velmoria after the coronation.”

My expression changes immediately to a mixture of shock, anger and disbelief all at once. “You can’t be serious. Why would you leave?”

Renna raises an eyebrow, a confused expression on her face.

“I am leaving, the war is partially over, and I have nothing else to do, nor any reason to stay.”

“You’re staying, you can’t leave me now.” Panic is starting to creep into my voice. I didn’t mean to say the last part.

“Yes, I can. I can and I will. You can’t force me to stay for whatever reason, Dacian.” She says, like she can’t understand why I’m refusing.

Why am I refusing?

“Fine, then. Leave. Leave if you want to so very badly!” I slam the door shut before she can respond again and don’t do anything when she begins knocking on the door and demanding to let her in so we can speak.

I don't want to deal with this. Why is this happening? Who cares if she leaves or stays?

I care.

She is of no importance, let her leave.

Don't leave.

I was better off alone.

Not after I met you.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

*Renna*

I was such a fool.

How could I like such a person? No. How did I believe that he reciprocated these feelings of mine? We were opposites, for sure. However, opposites attract. We made jokes, helped each other, talked to one another about our past and goals while watching stars glitter. He caressed my hair oh so gently, I spoke words of reassurance. Did he do all of this to get a reaction out of me? Was the facade he used with others, just a different mask he used with me?

I couldn't stop overthinking as I left the large palace; my mind clouded with rage and thoughts that were too much to process. My fingers fumbled when I finally got my hands on Angelus' rope. I let him be free earlier that day – his loyalty never lied, unlike someone.

I despised Dacian just as much as I loved him. I am a strong woman, and he needs to know that if he has not gotten it through that thick skull of his. I would not tolerate any sort of lashing out. That was only something that men like my father and brother would do, whom I despised. I would not allow anyone to yell at me, no matter who it was and no matter how I felt towards them. Dacian acted immaturely, and he got mad at me for it instead of just taking responsibility.

In a way it hurts me to see it, because I know he's better than that.

But I can't excuse a man's behavior like that either. Empathy could not clash with my line of reasoning. My feelings had formed up into a knot

impossible to unravel. The same as the strands of my hair, I brush my tangled hair with the tip of my fingers. Braiding the different shades of purple. Maybe my comfort hairstyle would help me calm down. But it didn't.

Everything my eyes locked onto reminded me of Dacian. With unsolved loathe for the man, I go to the only place I know in this foreign land that could solve this problem for me.

~~~~~  
“In conclusion... you're willing to offer me half of your soul? For?” The Guardian of the Guise stated in a wise manner after hearing what I had to say. Eyes bore into mine; I knew that he would be excited for this, but he's intentionally hiding it.

“For you to resurrect my best friend. That is what I came here, for after all.” I said my reason with confidence is flowing in my blood. Gods could smell fear, right?

“It's a deal then!” He smiled and opened his arms in joy; the Guise signaled to me to get closer. I stepped on the stairs leading to his throne, inching closer. Stopping just two steps from where he sat. The Guise brought his hand out, making smooth movements with his hand and flicking it to himself. With that, I feel a part of me is gone. Not burning, not heavy but just empty. I was making myself a major sacrifice in moments of desperation.

“And what about your other friend? Perhaps lovers? I thought Elysians loved to be in my presence.” I grip my fist as hard as I possibly can, holding back my anger. No answers came out of my mouth; my eyes

already gave him one. A glare crashing into the Guise's; he knew then not to burden me more and to give me my side of the deal.

“It was just a question, little lamb.” Right, just a question. It's ironic. Lambs are commonly used as sacrificial animals; he was referring to me as a sacrifice. I was giving every part of myself away to meet my goal. I almost forgot that my actual goal this entire time was to find my father's murderer. At the very least, that's what I told my brother. I only hope to God that rascal hadn't burned the kingdom down during his ruling. Silas better not expect me to clean any of his messes, just as I told him prior to my leave.

The Guardian of the Guise brought out some shards out of thin air; looking closer, it appeared to be some of my memories they turned into fragments. He stood up and held the fragments in place, a person forming slowly from it. It took me a while to realize just how giant the Guise was compared to me; I doubt that the Gods in this realm looked any different than him.

My eyes focused on the person, being born anew from just my memories.

Aseomon was right here, before my eyes.

I couldn't see his face properly; my tears clouded my sight before I could take a good look. I jumped into my best friend's arms after years of heaven and earth separating us. He was stiff, maybe in confusion, but he returned to his warm embrace. Droplets of tears come out of my eyes, tears that were bottled up many times so I could remain fierce and standing. I gripped his arms as if he were to fade away, I was afraid he would. It could be a strong possibility.

“Renna, is this you? What...– I’m so confused. What on Earth is going on?” He was clearly confused; it was his right – he had just been resurrected. My childhood best friend, at last.

“Not even greeting, Aseomon? How rude of you. I guess the dead did not treat you kindly.” My voice was laced with sarcasm with a hint of seriousness. I stay back from the warmth of his presence, now standing before him and appreciating the features of the guy who was like my own blood.

“Your appearance. It has changed, you’re way older than I am now, haven’t you?” Aseomon smiled and understood quickly. He was glad, I could tell. He was glad I managed to grow without him. I don’t know how I did it, really. Years felt like decades with these nightmares of the war screaming in my brain. Each and every nightmare was the same; my cries for help while gripping his cold body with Tears that were bottled up many times renewed after each repeating nightmare. I have looked at the face of the traitor more than I’ve seen mine. Every single time, the traitor’s face distorted into mush. I pushed the only memories I had over the years aside and focused on who was in front of me. His eyes rush off to the scar on my neck, an evident burn mark that he never got to see. Aseomon died a young martyr before he could see any of his dreams come to life.

“Correct. I’ve grown and grown. However, Aseomon, the events that happened to me in that tragic war have wounded me deeply. Things have changed severely.”

“Would you care to tell me all about it? You can tell me all the things that have happened and that you’ve been through.” A small smile graces his

lips, “I can braid your hair. Just like we used to.” Just like we used to. When we were both kids and acting foolish, we were unaware that our actions would soon have consequences and come up with responsibilities. I could have saved you, maybe things wouldn’t have turned out this way if I had. My guilt drowned me whole every time I thought of Aseomon.

I thought that Aseomon would see my changes, my mistakes and my accomplishments. I really and sincerely thought he would. He always did before, I don’t understand why he will not get it into his head now.

I happened to be mistaken. He did not see me as a girl that had trouble with the chunks of her own hair, not as a girl that he would spar with for fun.

But he saw me as a woman who slaughtered others. A woman who made others quiver at the thought of her and a woman whose blood was far more superior than others. Everything that I once was, it was all wiped away from his head. My childhood best friend, the pillar I had relied on. He looked at me with disgust. As if I had blood on my hands, and he despised me for not washing it off.

“I don’t believe you, Renna. I refuse to! How deranged have you become to murder people like it’s nothing?! You killed your own father, your blood and parent!”

“You don’t understand me. I had to! I needed an excuse to get out of that Kingdom of torture.” I explained and explained, trying my best to make him understand. I felt the need to overexplain, the need to overprove somebody I was not. I needed to get rid of the image he had of me. I’m still me. A part of me was afraid while the other remained angry.

“And that was an excuse to murder your father? Oh please.” He turned around in frustration, Aseomon out of all people should understand me. So why won’t he? “What? You resurrected me to get a fill out of your murderous greed? Are you planning on killing me now too?”

What now?

“Do you actually hear yourself, Aseomon? I resurrected you so you could live the life you wanted. Your life was stolen, I’ve given it back, and this is the repayment I get?” I grabbed a fistful of his collar and bring him towards me. “Out of all people, why have you suddenly decided to turn your back against me? You haven’t even heard an ounce of what I’ve gone through. Hell! I went through the burning lands of Hell and back barefooted!” I let go of his collar and pushed him back with force, a bit of my power came out by accident and made him stumble more than he should have.

I looked at him attempting to get back on his feet; his short hair was dark with blonde highlights. Just as he got up, my mind started to play tricks on me. I saw Dacian standing right behind him. I took a step back to regain consciousness, but I still saw him. Was this an illusion? It had to be. I was alone this entire time; he couldn’t have just popped out from thin air. A thick coat of fury covered my soul, similar to how Dacian’s coat was wrapped around me in this same realm.

It makes me angry to just think of him, and now having an illusion of Dacian in front of me?

“I know I am a sinner. I may be destining Hell, but I would gladly accept my fate if it meant you to be happy, Aseomon.” He couldn’t even look at me or say my name out of sheer disgust. If my existence made him feel

that way, so be it.

I turned around and immediately stormed off. I couldn't see Aseomon in this state, maybe that was just an excuse to stop myself from looking into Dacian's deception eyes. Those red eyes. My immense emotions had been bottled up for too long; I had to let it out on someone. I was furious, so much to the point I could not hear the shouting of my name. Aseomon had ended up in the same pile of men I despised, in which Dacian's situation was conflicting yet still the same.

I had grown, changed, and defended myself. Aseomon had to understand that eventually. I am not the same girl he knew before, I admit. However, my heart and soul say otherwise. I am hurt and bleeding emotionally and cannot afford to do so any longer. Everything I've done was in the hopes of affection. Conversely, I had received everything that was needed to bring me to the end of my rope. If I was destined for a doomed death, then I would kill Dacian before it to relieve the ache residing in my heart.

Maybe it was because I couldn't stand him pushing me away when all I wished for was for him to pull me more to the crevices of his soul.

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On my way to the kingdom, my eyes caught a group of armed men. I counted them one by one. Knights with their armor and soldiers with their swords, some riding their horses while others were walking. It was strange because I hadn't seen this ever since I arrived in this nation. The chatter grew louder as I slowly passed by Angelus. Miscellaneous residents started to gather by the appearance of the army. Angelus and I walked past them, but it left me curious on the way. Those were certainly Elysian forces, meaning they were commanded to do this by the one and

only Dacian. What was he possibly planning? Especially with an army that large, there was discernibly no good happening.

I continue my path, avoiding the group of people when I shouldn't. It was none of my business to get into.

Angelus had slowed down; it seemed like he was hungry. That was fair; he had been walking all day, left and right, with me on his back. Undoubtedly, he was exhausted, I muttered a small apology to him before getting off his back and opening the small bag on my hip. I fed him a snack or two and let him rest for the time being. I guess there was no need to rush; sitting down did not seem like a bad idea. I sat down on the wet ground, not caring if my back got dirty and noting that the snow had visibly become less. It was still winter; the phases had not started to change yet. Spring had not arrived and winter still annoyingly lingered, as much as I appreciated the presence of winter it did not provide the warmth of spring. My mind went blank, evidently overworked from thinking so much. I was not expecting everything to go like this. My life has never gone on a smooth path and after years of anguish I finally started to think that my road has somehow become steady. When in reality, it was the exact opposite.

It didn't take long before I saw Angelus getting up slightly and nuzzling his muzzle against my shoulder. I let out a bitter laugh.

"Can you sense how I feel?" Angelus didn't do anything but nuzzled me gently, letting out a huff after a while. "Thank you for your comfort, Angelus." My hands reciprocated his care for me, my touch was as gentle as the breeze. I thought I saw someone from the corner of my eye, but it seemed to be just a hallucination yet again, it must have been the Guise

playing with me. I almost forgot he had half of my soul. Nevertheless, I turned around and I imagined Dacian next to me. Not as an intimidating figure, but as a comforting one. When I did, I realized that we had come here previously during our travels. No wonder it was so easy to imagine Dacian here with me.

“He’s been by my side for a while now. It’s hard to imagine him not being here with me; that is most likely why I think of him so much.” Or maybe because it felt right. It felt right when I imagined him here with me. Just like the day we spent here together, our footprints made a dent in the shallow snow. Writing our names and of course — Astraea’s in the snow while our fingers were pink and freezing from the sheer cold. When we had a snowball fight, I accidentally threw it in his ear and Dacian gave me silent treatment until the next stop. I teased him for his silly behavior. Those moments were the purest joy of my memories —the last seven minutes.

“I think about him as if he were deceased, when in truth he’s not.” He had died in my memories and will die from the wrath of my hands, the hands that held Velmorla still as a Kingdom.

Angelus had risen from his place fully and huffed as a sign to continue onward. He was truly a warrior, more than my army of men could ever be. “Here we go,” I say. “Back to our adventure, isn’t that right Angelus?” Tiredness took over my body as a whole. Thankfully, it didn’t take much energy for me to hop on his back, I rested while Angelus did the work. I would need to collect energy if I wanted to fight Dacian.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me, Angelus.” I said as I pet his soft dark mane. Strangely reminding me of Dacian’s platinum black

hair.

Ultimately, with hours passing and the sun daring to set, we reached our destination. The Elysian kingdom. Clicks and claps were heard from my horse's hooves on the hard concrete floor; I had enough energy to spar with Dacian for approximately two hours, and I could hold him off for about a quarter of an hour without dodging. I doubt he could keep up with my stamina and strength; with the knowledge of his weak points, I technically have him wrapped around my finger.

Though, the moment we got to the gateway of the Kingdom, several guards were restricting the front yard. All dressed in their uniforms, tall blades on their sides and backs. It hadn't been this protective and strict the morning I left. Angelus stopped when I patted his side gently, I could see about ten guards from there, looking at me with suspicion. Some even kept a hand on their swords, considering me a threat.

"I want to meet Dacian Elysia, who I presume to be the king." My tone was confident, and my point was straightforward.

Dacian had been taking over my mind, and I know that I was taking over his. I hoped that I would corrupt him with nothing but guilt and worry.

Just when I said that and before anyone could respond, a figure had summoned behind the couple of guards. Two other guards assisting their side. Seeing Vesper and immediately recognizing who it was without looking up, my body churned and tightened with unrecognizable feelings. I looked up to see red eyes staring back at me, almost with a plea and worry. Deep down I know those eyes are just a mask, Dacian is a smart man — he surely would know that someone could instantly tell how they feel just by looking into their eyes. Conflict stirs within me because

Dacian lies but eyes don't, I think he wanted to say something; however, I could not hold a conversation right now. My eyes clashed with his and soon enough,

We'd have to clash swords.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Renna*

“Renna?”

Dacian’s voice simultaneously breaks the silence and tension that was building up between us. I clear my throat as he tells his guards to let me pass. Angelus takes the hint and strides through the gate, his face enthusiastic when he sees and recognizes Vesper. I suppose he’s missed his friend.

“Where have you been? It has been nearly a month! I sent a letter to your brother; he said he had no idea where you were. You certainly weren’t in Velmorla this whole time.” Dacian chastises, and I noticed now he carries much greater authority than he did before he was crowned king. I hadn’t even witnessed the coronation, and I wonder if it went well.

“I... had matters to attend to,” I say. “I see you’ve become king now.”

“I have.” He pauses, then speaks again. “Come on in, I’d like us to talk; there is certainly a lot for the two of us to discuss, Renna.”

“That’s not what I’ve come here to do.”

“I don’t care what you’ve come here to do. We have much to discuss.” His tone is final, not wanting me to argue. But I wasn’t the type to back down so easily.

“I’ll talk with you on the condition that we spar.” I say as I get off Angelus’s back and hand him over to one of the soldiers who takes both him and Vesper, caring for them in the stables. His expression looks

confused, like he didn't expect me to propose a compromise of some sort. Regardless of this, he returns his confused expression to a normal one and nods.

"Alright, then. I agree, if that has to be the condition then it'll be fine. But I may need to ask why." Dacian asks me, was this act out of character for me? I really did not think so.

"Simply because I say so, Dacian."

He chuckles and nods to someone to fetch him his sword, his blade was not the dilapidated sword we had gotten on our travels before. It was one of his own personal swords, customized and I can see his initials carved into the shiny blade. I see a reflection of my eyes in his sword until he put it to his side. He puts his lengthy hair into his usual hairstyle to get it out of the way.

"Where do we have this spar, then? How about in the middle of town, that way everyone can see us." He said with a hint of excitement in his voice and face, if it were any normal person they'd shriek. What human would just accept a tussle with a freakish smile on his face?

I pause in my steps, hesitating and considering my advantages and disadvantages to his offer. "That seems unusual, however... I suppose it's only justifiable if you add a condition on your own." Considering the fact, I'm the one at an advantage in this spar, but I don't say this. "I have no issues with sparring in public, do as you wish, Your majesty."

Dacian stopped in his tracks; I almost bumped into him for not being careful. Auspiciously and by chance, I managed to step back without crashing into his broad back. This random act makes me raise an eyebrow;

I expect him to say something, but he never says it. He looked stiff furthermore uncomfortable; his body was tense as he continued walking, and my eyes caught his clenched fist. I feel if Dacian put any more force into his fingers, his palms would bleed.

“I would prefer you not to call me that, Renna. I’m not a stranger to you.”

Was that what this was about? I tried to be smart with my words when on the other hand it was the opposite. We had not seen each other for approximately a month or so, it was only fair that I thought that.

I nod whilst I am behind him and I don’t know if he sees it, but it’s not a matter for me to be so worked up on.

~

We go to an open courtyard for the actual ‘fight’ itself, if it should be considered one. I watch as people slowly start lining up to watch us, a look of confusion hidden in their eyes. They’re most likely wondering why their king has come, no less with a girl they do not recognize. We both prepare our stance as we draw our swords; the crowd eyes are all on us. Some begin asking what his majesty is doing, why he’s out here and has his sword drawn. What they don’t expect is for me to then attack Dacian, my sword grazing his cheek only slightly as he quickly moved into a defense position. I hope he won’t just be defending the entire time; there’s no fun in that. And I wonder if that cut will scar.

He smirks and swipes the dripping blood; several gasps are heard from the watching crowd. Both at me attacking the king and at me daring to graze his beautiful face with a sword. Nonetheless, I simply huff and move to attack again, this time spinning and almost catching him off

guard. I continue attacking, and he keeps dodging, but not doing anything except defending himself. He wasn't given a blade to not attack; what was the point of this?

It's irritating.

What is he doing? I know for sure he can fight; he can hold his own and I've seen it with my two eyes. He slaughtered and manipulated multiple people just a few months ago on his own!

So why then?

Why was he resisting fighting back? Then, just as I strike again, our swords clash, and an irritating sound rings through my ears. The sharp metallic impact was just as annoying as the first time I heard it. There is barely any adrenaline flowing in my blood. There's no amusement to it when your opponent does not actually try. What is flowing through my bones, however, is anger, building the tallest structure imaginable brick by brick. I decided to try a different approach this time and dart forward, shove him into the ground, and point my sword at his heart first, then his chin. Some of his soldiers step forward, but he holds up a hand to gesture to them to not come any further while not taking his eyes off me.

"Why won't you attack? What are you planning!?" I hiss, my eyes flickering over the still bleeding cut on the right side of his face, a mix of maroon and gold oozed out of his small cut. I glanced at his eyes, and they appeared to be the same mix of colors; his eyes sparkled like gold for some reason.

"You never stated that to be a condition, my dear." Dacian says complacently with that God awful smirk on his face. His back shifts

against the soil and his molar teeth looked like spikes. A bear trap. And why's he calling me that? Fool.

“Don’t call me that.” I say, and I swear I see a pout forming in his lips. As much as I’d love to humor him, I’m afraid I’ll take his teasing for affection.

Because it can’t genuinely be affection he’s trying to show.

Right?

I cleared my throat and continued speaking, realizing I was standing there silently, and we probably looked weird to our surroundings. “Get up. Let us start over and duel for real this time or I’ll—”

I get cut off by what seems to be a high-ranking military officer rushing forward and facing Dacian. “Your highness, I have urgent news.” He states. “The settlers’ forces are incoming. They’re entering and damaging our military bases as we speak.”

Dacian, who was still on the ground, turned sharply to see the military officer. With this news, he stood up immediately, and he visibly wobbles a little side by side. Right. He was anemic. As he shook off the dirt from his clothing, he started instructing his guards to accompany citizens and to leave them out of sight, it was a surprise to see from Dacian. He was not the man to protect and care for others. But that was the duty of a king, to defend his homeland, including children, women and young girls. I understand why he could not go against the rules, as he would be punished for it. Some soldiers split to inform other groups of knights and soldiers that war was coming. As the Commanding General of the Velmorian kingdom, such a sight was common to see. The ruckus and

struggle of wars, and I have managed to get the hang of it all.

“Where are they? We must head there and draw our swords right at this moment! Tell the Commanding General to get the army ready as soon as possible. War is starting now. We’ve been preparing for this; it’s been long overdue.”

Dacian’s stressed face ties it all together, it was written all over his face that he was nervous. It was fair, I assume that this was his first time leading in a war. I remember he told me he couldn’t engage in fights and such as much as the others for his own safety. I try not to lose my attentiveness and bury myself in my thoughts. Before I knew it, several foreign soldiers ran up to us with their swords and shotguns. This was an advanced country if they had access to guns. Screams were heard from all sorts of directions; some civilians were still outside and rushing into their homes in fear of a sudden attack. I grip my sword tight in my hand and three soldiers rush to me and attack me with no mercy. I don’t reciprocate their so-called respect and slash deeply into their skin, dirtying my clean sword with their thick blood. Dacian’s face was long gone and had disappeared from my sight. All that was left was a messy and gory sight to look at; I stealthily ran away from the crowd. This was not my problem to take care of.

My heart was thumping so loud I could hear it in my ears. From a distance, I hide behind a house and look at the clashing of swords. A tall figure spotted my eyes, somebody that I was hoping to see before drifting off. His silver armor and black fur collar matched his long hair, Dacian. His tan skin blended perfectly with the small red details on his coat and pants.

I admit, I was nervous about him.

“Please God, protect him.” So, I may see him once more.

Selfishly, I didn’t want him to die by the hands of a settler. I wanted him to die with the wrath of my hands for not caring for the beats of my heart.

I take one more glance at him before I rush away; I need not get involved. My braid had opened loose, and I let my hair breathe in the wind, running into the distance.

Everything shifted; time had passed as quickly as water flowed into the rivers. I was now under a large white tree; its leaves are crimson, and one of them happens to fall on my lap. My fingers automatically picked up the leaf and inspected it; the leaf looks darker under the tree’s shade. It was as delicate as spider lilies, here I laid, mourning someone who is probably dead. Two weeks have passed since the war started, and I have no connection to the outside world. Not ever since I came to the Guise’s realm. It’s my third time coming here and regardless of how many times I visit and stay over, it never feels like home. I have never understood what a home feels like, I stayed in a castle full of men who despised me to death and women who were either workers or courtiers. No place was a safe place for me. Perhaps home was never a place, but a person. From the corner of my eye, I see a figure inching closer and closer towards me. However, I always kept my eyes on the leaf, keeping myself busy by appreciating its beauty. The figure was now standing in front of me; Aseomon. I stand before him as he looks like he has something to say.

“You look like you came here with a purpose.” I say, spinning the red leaf between my fingers as I looked at him.

“... In truth, I did.” I knew it. He was my best friend after all. Before I ask him anything, he comes to me. “I’ve gotten some news from Sylus,

regarding the ongoing war.” My eyes widen and my hand stops before accidentally dropping the leaf onto my boot. The war? I gave him the look to continue and his expression screamed nervously. Why bother delivering news that brings no hope to an individual? I yelled at Sylus three times this week, and I was going to have to make that into four.

“The war is actually getting serious now, it was serious before, it certainly was. However, Sylus just informed me that the situation has gotten worse. Elysia is in grave danger at the moment. Several nations are getting their hands into this, making it larger and larger. To make matters worse, many soldiers alongside citizens have lost their lives. I won’t be surprised if Elysia remains nothing but a graveyard in the following week or two.”

The news, which was passed from Sylus to Aseomon, was indeed bad news just as I suspected. I don’t know what I was expecting, but I wasn’t expecting things to go south so quickly. Time passed quickly in the Guise’s realm, I’ve realized that and I was thankful for it. However, with nothing to do but exercising from time to time was boring. Even beautiful locations in this realm started to bore me; this was all so bitter.

“We need to stop this, Renna. Like old times.” Like in old times. Yes... That was true. The idea of sparring with Dacian and murdering him has long disappeared from my mind, I needed to stop his antics. This man can act so... foolish when he is undeniably struggling with a situation. He rushes and gets all in his head without foreseeing the consequences. I was wise for my age; I had to grow up quickly and perhaps that’s why I view Dacian as a bit immature from time to time. This is why I am the Commanding General, now I understand that. “I have to stop the king, before everything takes a turn for the worse.” I nod at Aseomon and walk to the side so I can see more of this place.

Strange. I've seen nothing like it. The whole place was white, a large white room of a sort. I was on a hill surrounded by shallow waters, a little island with a large tree on it. There was no color in the room except for the red leaves, everything else, from the grass to the walls and even the bark was white. I've already made a strategy in my head; it is either this or nothing. With the situation worsening day by day, just my strength and Aseomon's are not enough to stop an ongoing war. I need to summon someone, and it is perfect that I am already in the Guise's realm.

I turn around and see Aseomon on his tip toes attempting to snatch a few leaves like a kid, I sigh and slowly go down the hill and straight into the shallow water. The water only covered my feet, and I gently walked in it before Aseomon started screaming that an ant bit him and started squealing when he realized I was going to leave.

"You're too dramatic, Aseomon!"

He starts rushing towards me, and as a result, his feet all the way leading up to his knees got wet. He was troublesome, for sure, but he matched me in a way I couldn't really grasp. Despite living in a realm that was not designed for humans, I have to say we've gotten the hang of it. More quickly than I thought I would. I put one arm into the portal leading to the main room of this huge realm, slowly letting the portal consume my body. It's a strange feeling, warping from one place to another with portals, I try to avoid it as much as I can as I feel that it has started to affect my body negatively.

As soon as I arrived with Aseomon behind me, I walked to the large gates that looked like flames. Sylus stood in front of the doors, and I recall last time I came here he mentioned that his master had gifted him to

the Guise for whatever reason. Now, whenever I needed him or inquired about something, he was there. Like he spawned out of thin air at just the thought of him, knowing I need some sort of assistance. It was creepy... but I ignore that and get on with my main objective.

“Sylus! You’re liking your new job, it seems. Anyway, Aseomon and I would like to talk with the Guise concerning the ongoing war.”

He bats an eye at me with his hands behind his back. Sylus offers a way as if he were expecting this, and the doors open with just a clap of his hand, no words spoken. I stopped in my steps but continued forward anyway, Aseomon was now next to me.

I entered the room with caution; the last few memories I have of this room are not so great. That goes for the two times I have come to the Guardian of the Guise’s room. Let’s hope things don’t end up badly or even take turns for the worse.

Stopping in my tracks, I realize that Aseomon was no longer beside me. He was outside the gates for some reason.

“Renna, we don’t have an offering, do we?” Aseomon spoke and he reminded me. That was right. We need an offering for this Deity; blessings did not come without something of the same value in return.

“... That’s right. I cannot offer the Guise anything, as I have already given him half of my soul. I doubt he would take anything from me.”

“Me neither, Renna.” Aseomon swayed his right hand. “I’m afraid I can only help you with anything you inquire.”

Anything I inquire... Yes!

“We’re going to resurrect someone very important and well... historical as well.” Aseomon gave me a ‘Resurrect, again?’ look and I rolled my eyes and continued. “We will need a body in exchange for another one. It’s the only way I can stop the war, Aseomon.” He nods with every word and agrees to be of help.

“Hey! Be careful on the way, alright?” I warn Aseomon and he turns to face me, giving me a bright smile that suited his dark skin. I take in a good look of Aseomon’s emerald eyes before he takes off to get a man to serve as a sacrifice. The gates close and I turn to see the Guise, sitting peacefully on his throne and smirking at me. I gave him a dirty look in return.

I’m uncertain if Dacian has realized this but, this realm, including all of its Gods were not the Gods they’re supposed to be. My eyes have taken in all of the details of the Guise’s realm to even the smallest of details.

This realm was not a Holy one.

And neither were its deities.

Having golden blood was a punishment served for the Elysian kingdom if they choose not to spread their blood, has nobody questioned why in fact? Or was everyone too scared to even question why? Why does this God care about this family’s bloodline so much? What benefit does the Guise seek in all of this, if any at all?

There had to be a reason why The Guardian of the Guise cared so much, his name was in itself. He was a supposed Guardian, not a true one. It revealed his identity; however, it is not clear to me just what type of creature he is. It is all too eerie.

I also decided to explore a bit, and when I return, I find Aseomon standing before and facing the Guise who's now grinning intriguingly. I walk up to them and find a man that I assume Aseomon must have found tied up to a pillar.

"I see the body is ready. Shall we proceed then?" I say, clasping my hands together, not bothering to acknowledge the Guise.

"Wow, Renna. Not even a greeting? I'm rattled." His hand clutches his chest, feigning distress.

"I assume Aseomon told you why we're here."

"Yes, quite intriguing I must say. I can't wait to see how this turns out."

"The quicker this gets done, the quicker we leave." I say, composed and stoic as usual.

The Guise laughs a bit under his breath and nods towards the man tied up to the pillar. I raise my hand and create barriers of air to push his body towards us. He slid quite easily for a ground composed of several different rocks.

Aseomon walks towards the Guise next. "Whatever are you doing, Aseomon?" I ask; he shouldn't be interrupting the process right now. He looks back at me and comes back, pulling me into his arms to hug me suddenly. My eyes widen just a bit, but I hug him back, he is a bit sensitive to death. I suppose he feels sorry for a life being lost. "Is something the matter?" I ask, pulling back at the same time as him. He smiles and ruffles my hair before stepping back. "No, nothing is the matter." He turns back towards the throne, and the Guise clicks his fingers, a smirk

still on his face.

Aseomon is no longer in front of me.

Where is he? I look beside me and a man is appearing out of thin air. Is this Dacian's ancestor? But the man Aseomon brought is still here. Oh, no.

"Oh Lord. This can't be, can't it? How am I back to life—" I shove him back against the wall, using air barriers to keep him locked in place just in case he's dangerous. I feel my whole body shaking and trembling.

"Where did Aseomon go?" I demand, simultaneously charging at the Guise and drawing my sword. He stops me with a flick of his fingers, pushing me so hard against the wall that I hear a crushing sound coming from the bricks. I cough and choke on air, gripping my sword so tight I'm sure my palm will bruise.

"Your friend offered to take the sacrifice's place. How noble, right?" He snickers; his head leans on his hand as his pale white hair cascades and frames his face. Mark my words,

I will kill this Deity.

"That wasn't part of the agreement! Why did you not alert me of this? Bring him back!" I yell and shout and demand yet the God standing before me does little but grin at me, so very amused.

"Bring him back? Are you joking?" He cackles, wiping the tear that falls from his red eye. "Please, don't make me laugh anymore. Do you think this is a game? Of course I can't bring him back! He's gone now. Take what you've got and be grateful, because I won't do you any more favors.

And make this your very last visit, little lamb.”

I blink and both me and the man who appears to be Dacian’s ancestor are outside the Guise’s realm. I kick a rock to the river out of anger, groaning before walking backwards and dropping to the ground, back dragging down the bark of a tree. I want so very badly to cry but I can’t.

I cannot.

I just got my best friend back, and he’s gone before I could even settle down. I’m an elder sister, but despite not being blood related, Aseomon truly feels like an elder brother to me. He always treated me as his little sister, even though we never spoke of it. When I was upset as a child, he’d tease me while braiding my hair, purposely trying to make me angry at him so we could laugh together after. He’d defend me against the adults who were the ones I feared in life. And until he died, I was never truly independent. I was co-dependent on him, relying on him for everything. I had always just... thought he’d constantly be here for me. It didn’t cross younger me’s mind that one day he wouldn’t be there to complete the tasks I left half done and lukewarm. God, I missed him so much. It hasn’t been long since he was back, yet he’s gone again. I guess it was his final message. For me to figure it out without him one final time. Very well then.

“I’d hate to interrupt your grief but er... How am I alive again? And who are you? If you don’t mind me asking.”

I sigh, collecting myself emotionally as I stand up, reaching out to shake his hand. I noticed one of his eyes is dilated, he must be blind. “My apologies. You must be Orpheus, am I correct?” He nods, shaking my hand back before I pull away. “I’m Renna of Velmoria, pleased to meet

you. My older brother sacrificed his life so you could be resurrected.” Aseomon may as well be my brother at this point. I have always considered him one. “And we need your help,” I will continue. “One of your descendants, Dacian of Elysia, has caused great havoc and I need your help to make him see sense in his actions. If he’s not stopped now, he may very well destroy his own land and if nobody steps in, it can possibly cause dangers worldwide.”

“Oh, my.” He looks surprised, worried and conflicted all at the same time. “If it’s a matter of life and death then, of course I will help. I don’t see how talking to him will help in any way whatsoever.”

“Tell him I’ve brought you.” I say, “He will listen.”

It takes about two more weeks to travel back, and it caused us great trouble to both sneak around and find where the actual battle was happening. It is happening in the forest, and everything seems so... so much worse than when I left it. Not to mention having to help a man from over a millennia ago about modern things and times and foods and of course, he made me talk about Dacian. He asked all sorts of things! I was close to finishing off the old man again myself. Despite being a great warrior when he was alive, he himself is quite old. The man is sixty-five years old; I was genuinely worried he wouldn’t make it back to Elysia.

Me and Orpheus decided to meet up a good distance away from the actual battle. The plan is this: Orpheus will sneak into the battle and go up against Dacian. Once he does, he’ll tell him who he is and hopefully Dacian believes him. Orpheus did mention that the Elysians have markings on their body unique to each individual that only their family can see, and along with his blind eye that has been mentioned in scripts and passed on

from generation to generation. I hope Dacian isn't stubborn and believes him, furthermore, stop this ruckus for once and for all. At least enough for him to come to the meeting spot so we can talk things out.

~~~~~

It was raining when Orpheus was given a sword, shield, and armor by Renna before he emerged into the intense war between the many nations. He fought intensely like the known warrior he was and put down many knights and their men whilst looking for Dacian at the same time. Renna provided him with a thorough description of what Dacian looks like so he could easily spot and find him. Even though he was sixty-five years old, he truly lived up to his great reputation. He killed at least a dozen men before he found himself face to face with Dacian. Dacian, the descendant he'd heard so much about. The current ruler and king of Elysia. He had a fierce and bloodlust look in his eyes that Orpheus had seen in many different warriors in his own lifetime before. Dacian's eyes flicker with confusion as he looks at the man's neck and face. He had black markings that only Elysian blood would see, but Dacian seemed to have brushed the thought off as he easily pinned the man to the ground, his sword under his chin.

"Are these the Elysian family birthmarks?" Dacian demands, pressing his sword close enough to show he wouldn't hesitate to kill. He was eyeing the man up and down with suspicion and calculation.

"Yes, they are. I never thought I'd see a warrior so great and powerful again. You are Dacian, correct?" Orpheus responds, coughing a bit from the pressure applied to his neck.

"I am. Who are you? I'm quite sure I've met every single member of

my family.” Dacian speaks with mockery and smugness, his usual grin framing his lips.

“I am Orpheus of Elysia, and I have been brought back to life recently. I’ve come to look for you, Dacian. You are a descendant of mine, it seems. We share the same eyes.” It was true, both of them shared the same striking crimson red eyes that had been passed down for generations in the Elysian family.

Dacian’s eyes widened with sheer disbelief and then anger. He applies more pressure on the sword. “Nonsense! You must be lying, who do you answer to? Tell me. I need to know which suicidal fool loathes himself and his life so much that he would send you with such a lie and risk your path.”

Orpheus coughs once again and gasps for breath. “I am not lying, and I am not a traitor. A woman brought me here and specifically asked me to call for you. As I said before, we have lots to discuss for the future of this land.” The rain grows heavier, droplets falling onto both Dacian and Orpheus.

“What woman? Whomever do you mean?”

“Renna of Velmoria. I’ve come here to get you, she’s waiting for us at a designated meeting spot.” Dacian’s expression drops at that, and he nods quickly at the mention of Renna, removing his sword from the man’s throat, pushing his sword into the dirt to help himself up first, then offering a hand to his ancestor.

“Show me the way.”

They walk through the forest for about thirty minutes before they reach an empty area. The space in the middle, however, had rocks lined up in a circle. Dacian then turns and pins Orpheus into one of the nearby rock pillars. His grip on the man's throat is not gentle, suffocating sounds came from Orpheus's throat.

"Tell me where Renna is and exactly how you were brought back to life." His smirk falters. "If I find out you're a lying old man, it won't end well for you. Mark my words, you will beg me and grovel at my feet for me to kill you."

"Don't be so rash, son. I would rather the limits of my tolerance not be tested." Orpheus chokes out, voice low with danger and warning. Yet it does little to scare Dacian. Dacian does recognize the man's birthmarks and blind eye as "Orpheus the Great" features, since it had been described in scripture and stories that were retold by his parents. Still, He ought to be careful and sincere in his actions. Orpheus clears his throat and continues when Dacian loosens his grip. "Renna Velmoria herself brought me back, and she went through great trouble for it."

"Where is she then?" Dacian asks, a sense of urgency creeping into his voice.

Renna then steps out from behind of one of the rocks, striding towards Dacian. His eyes blink a few times before he inhales and composes himself, putting on a radiant smile. "Renna," Dacian says, losing his hold on Orpheus completely as he moves away from him and moves towards the young woman. "I didn't think it was true, but it seems it is. Did you resurrect Orpheus the Great?"

"Yes, I did. I brought him to help me bring some sense into you." Renna

responds, voice low. The distance between them lessens by the second, and the tension builds as high as the mountains. Dacian quirks up an eyebrow, a bit confused.

He then turns to look at Orpheus, a small “huh?” sound escaping his lips before he looks back at Renna. “You prove to be incredible once again. But why? I don’t see any use for him, quite honestly.” The rainfall was growing heavier by the minute; the pressure of the wind was growing. By this point all three of them were soaking wet and were grateful the ground they were currently on was a concrete one, otherwise the soles of their shoes would be muddy and messy.

“Dacian, stop the war.”

The smile from his face shifts into confusion and then a frown. “What? And let them destroy us? Give up our land?”

“That is not what I said. You are making this battle a lot more severe. They might have started it, but you were the one who brought in another nation’s help. This won’t go anywhere good Dacian; people will be doomed! Their families, their homes! Think about it.”

“It is necessary, Renna.” Dacian’s face hardens and his jaw clenches. His hopeful expression is gone “Why are you trying to stop me? You know how war is; you’ve seen it firsthand many times. I can’t go back now, I must.” Both of them fall silent, Renna shakes her head with a sigh, turning around and rubbing her temples as she quietly groans. Dacian hesitates about his words, a small part of him considered joining Renna and giving in. He, however, brushes the feeling off and tells himself this is how things must go.

“Join me, Renna. I know I will win this battle. I want to win it with you by my side.” Renna turns back around sharply at that, looking into Dacian’s ruby eyes.

“Here I am, telling you to stop. And you dare ask me to join you?” She asks, anger seeping into her voice.

“... I suppose that is a no?”

“No! Of course I will not join you!” Renna pauses to think for a bit; she continues to encourage Dacian to stop in his tracks. “Dacian, I urge you to stop. This war has no benefit.” She stares up at him, the height difference is only small. A mix of hesitation, regret and anger swirled in Dacian’s eyes.

“I’m afraid I cannot, Renna. You don’t get the years of having to sit back and watch the land that’s been passed down for generations in my family slowly to be taken away! This is what everyone wants, hell— needs.”

Orpheus was still behind Dacian as he and Renna conversed, well, rather argued. As much as he wanted to get involved and help Dacian stop, it was too heated to step in, and it was difficult to stop the two. He leans back against the tree when Renna stops talking and stops in her tracks.

“Fine. I’ll join you; I will help you along the way and make sure you don’t absolutely destroy everything.”

What?

Orpheus was confused at Renna’s sudden decision since that was not her intention at all, hell, not both of their intentions! She specifically resurrected Orpheus to convince Dacian to stop the war, and now this?

Dacian smiled from ear to ear, like a kid that had been given enough sweets to rot his teeth. Before Orpheus could even get involved in asking about the sudden change in plans, Dacian moves forward to Renna to embrace her warmth despite the fact that both of them being soaked and cold. Renna froze still and just in that moment before she could think twice, she grabs Dacian's sword, which was at his hip furthermore stabbed him in the dip of his chest. She dug the sword deeper into Dacian's chest and Dacian's hands remain at his side, a look of shock and disbelief coating his expression. Orpheus was stunned by Renna's antic as well; nothing was going according to plan. Agreeing to participate in the war was not a part of the plan, let alone stab Dacian through his chest.

"Renna! What— What are you doing?!" Orpheus asks, almost too shocked to form proper words. "This was not what you said at all, I didn't agree to this, and you know that."

"Go! Stop this damned war once and for all! Dacian was stubborn, he wasn't going to listen, and this was the card I had to forcefully pull out."

"That meant you had to stab him? You could have knocked him out. I will not engage in the war just because you said so, young lady. I am not your puppet, and I certainly won't be listening to you. Not anymore."

"It is too late, what's done is done. I have made many sacrifices to get to this point, and I will not be backing down no matter what. I hope you know that very well, Sire."

Not only did Orpheus disagree on Renna's part, but he was also quick to act and brought his sword out, charging her way. Luckily, she dodged the attack and the sword got stuck in the tree behind her. She held Dacian's body on the ground, placing him right next to her. Having an awkward

sensation to protect the body even though she was the one to put him in this position— literally. Although that was the plan from the start, she hadn't told Orpheus about it, deciding to keep it a secret. Renna did not have the time and energy, nor the intention to spar with Dacian's ancestor right now. Especially when they kind of look similar in a creepy way. She snatched a rope from Dacian's body; the rope was attached to his side and now it was in her hands. Renna smashed Orpheus's back to the tree bark and punched his stomach to make him semi-unconscious, and it worked. The man groaned and ground his teeth together in the awful pain. She tied him back tightly to the tree so he wouldn't flee from his restraints, clapping her hands together to get the dust off it.

In that instant, Renna decides to finish off the war herself. Although she was skilled physically, she was not mentally prepared for this. The horrors of wars had consumed her whole, she was afraid that she would lose this battle just like how she lost Aseomon previously. Renna gripped the sword's handle and wore a stern look; she had to focus. She needed to do this for Aseomon, it didn't matter what she had to do next with her life. Dacian's body remained still, his gold blood pumping out of the sword similar to how Renna's heart pumped in her chest. With a deep breath in and taking one last possible glance at Dacian's face, she heads out for war and uses her powers to her advantage, using them to arrive at the location as fast as possible.

Renna arrives at the battlefield in no more than ten minutes; there were several soldiers fighting with and without their blades. A few men notice her and question her sudden presence, a woman, of all people. She stabs one of the men and they were alerted almost immediately. With the bodies of multiple men falling onto the ground, heavy rain and winds started to pick up. Heavier than before, so much so that trees started bending and

were verge of splitting in two. Before Renna could process this weather, a hurricane had started to form. Renna is surprised and several soldiers screech, she witnesses many bodies being flown and tossed around by the natural disaster. It didn't take long for Renna to be caught up in it, she tried to manage her composure and body weight, it was to no avail as she got tossed to a random tree.

“What in the?—” A sudden crash happened below her feet, and she just realized she was stuck onto the branches of a tree. She fell onto the ground and swore she felt a bone or two break. She groans in pain, her body ached, and she was heavily injured. On top of that, she could not see very well due to the weather, however she saw multiple people running for their lives. She looks down and quickly realizes her own sword had managed to stab her lower left stomach from the awkward position she was currently in. Great. Gripping her side that was actively bleeding, she forced her body up and walked a small distance safe enough to use her powers. She could barely walk in her state, her air barriers could help her get to somewhere safe. There was no need for her to kill anyone if they were being killed and knocked out by the natural disaster.

“I need to get to Dacian, r—” she coughed out some water and continued. “Right now.” The natural disaster stopped after two more minutes, and the whole place was flooded; she raised herself higher with her power to avoid the waters. Renna could barely keep up; her consciousness was slowly getting the best of her and with how much blood poured out of her, she would be a cold body and no more. This might be the end of Renna Velmoria.

With the number of injuries placed on her body, it felt like it took ages to get to her destination, to Dacian. The pain slowed her down, and so did

her surroundings. Renna didn't know how much strength she had left, whether it was physical or mental. She finally reaches the forest with the pillars and notices Dacian in a different position than before; she pays no mind to Orpheus, who was still tied up to a tree and seemingly knocked out. Her power had its limits, for sure. It ran out just when she faced Dacian and she collapsed to the concrete ground, her body finally gave up on her, but she still tried her best to inch closer and closer to Dacian.

Dacian witnessed this from a distance, trying to control his bleeding with his own powers. Upon seeing Renna, he grows irritated; he became angry, rightly so. He could not decipher whether his anger was toward Renna or at seeing her so damaged. He lifts his hand and he visibly shakes, however he uses his blood manipulation on her to restore some health to her. Dacian's attention was only on Renna and attempting to bring life back into her veins.

It worked. It's a miracle.

He couldn't muster the energy to talk, seeing Renna slowly move parts of her limbs was enough for him. Dacian grits his teeth in pain and the amount of force he was using, not using his powers on himself made the bleeding worse. His crimson eyes watched Renna bleed in the same shade she had seen in his irises many times. She was limping and towering over him, a blur in his sight.

"Wake up already, I want to go to the forest." Dacian kisses Renna's forehead to wake her, but in response she only groans and pulls the sheets over her head, refusing to wake up.

"Must you have so much energy so early? Let me continue sleeping." She mumbles out, voice still raspy with sleep.

“Oh? You think you can escape that easily?” Dacian grins and forces the sheets off, earning another groan from the girl. “Come on my love, you promised. We can go have a picnic for breakfast!”

“And I will follow up on that promise. We can have a picnic there for lunch... Let me sleeeeep!” She kicks him as he pulls her down by her legs and right out of bed, chuckling as he sees her frown. He then starts moving towards the mirror to run his hands through his hair, ultimately deciding to leave it down today. Renna comes up from behind him, arms wrapping around his middle as she leans her forehead against his back. “Your hair smells nice.”

“Is that so?”

“Mhm.”

For a moment, he spaced out. Dacian imagined what they could have been, they as in Renna and him.

The two of them could have continued their adventures, just like the months before. Green scenery, puzzles to solve and the love they denied but still held for each other; even the slightest action made Dacian smile. Everything was natural with her; the world stopped, and his blood rushed faster. Dacian could have seen her in white; they did not have to invite family or friends, just the two of them. Because nobody ever treated them right, they deserved each other’s embrace only. He thought marriage was dull, but it all changed in a snap when he met Renna. Adorning her with jewelry she did not ask for, but he would spoil her anyway. Running through the wheat fields in the sunset, a symbol of life. It had to be ruined with crows and then stormy skies, bringing in death and representing the one and only Van Gogh’s many paintings. For Dacian, Renna was the

only woman in his life that he truly cared for most. There was something more to their relationship, he knew that very well. More than friends yet less than lovers, the lovers that never reached each other, perhaps in another universe they will. But for this one, it was all too late, nothing could be reversed to how it was before. Money and status meant nothing if you did not have love. He realized he found out the purpose of his life at the very last of his breaths, it was quite ironic, he couldn't help a small laugh escaping his lips which quickly turned to coughing up golden blood.

Dacian blinks open his eyes, looking over at Renna who is still bleeding, but breathing. Barely. He knew he couldn't keep both of them alive much longer. His power had been weakened enough on his own account, but including Renna's as well was more than he could do. Typically, he could use his power on as many people as he'd like. But there seemed to have been a difference between using the power to kill someone and to help keep them alive, and he knew that. With a shaky sigh, he deactivates the force he was using to keep himself going. Four to six minutes. He thinks to himself and compels his trembling body to sit up. He then stops using his power on Renna as well, who gasps, feeling the absence of her blood moving. Dacian raises both his hands, clenches, then unclenches. He repeats the process a few times before raising his arms to the air and clenching his fists. With a growl befitting a lion, pulling his fists back towards himself. He collapses back onto the ground and immediately tries to use his powers on Renna once more, but he couldn't. He is too weak now. Not after what he had done moments ago.

A massacre.

Dacian Elysia had just murdered every single person standing foot in the

kingdom as of that moment except Renna. It was a blood bath. His final play against the Guise and everyone else. Dacian discovered not long ago that the Guise was only so powerful because he was feeding off the souls and spirits of people of Elysia. That was why he had struck that deal with Orpheus— growing the Royal family and not wanting the land to be traded in any way. It was only to keep himself alone powerful and mighty. Dacian did not know what exactly would happen to the Guise, but he knew his time was over. And he hoped he'd die.

Which, unbeknownst to Dacian, did happen. The guise's life ended at the same moment the people of Elysia's did. He would have been alive but very weak if Dacian were alive, but he as well was on the verge of death. Dacian's body simply couldn't take it anymore. Renna, noticing the state Dacian was in, tries to drag her body over to his and reaches for him just in time for him to exhale his last breath.

“Renna—” Eyes wide, mouth agape. Dacian's ticking clock had officially stopped.

“No, no no no no this can't be.” She shook him and yelled, but to no avail. “Wake up, I tell you! Wake up! Don't you dare die on me!” Her head drops as quiet tears escape her eyes, unstopping and falling onto Dacian's face. She'd stabbed him herself, yet in that moment she would do best about anything to see him wake up. To tease her again with that radiant smile and provoke her. To feel her skin tingle when he looked at her as if she was the most delicate and entrancing woman in the world.

Oh, God.

Renna thinks as her labored breathing is now worsening, more tears dropping onto Dacian's face and sliding down. She reaches out to gently

slide the ring Dacian always wore on his finger that she never paid much attention to off, slipping it onto her own finger.

“I’ll meet you in another life.” Renna whispers out, her lips quivering. “I’ll give this ring back when we do, my darling.” She snuffles and doesn’t bother attempting to wipe her ongoing tears, reaching her pale blue numb fingers out to shut Dacian’s eyes close. She couldn’t bear looking at the eyes that once looked at her so gently. She then leans down, brushing her lips against his now pale forehead.

“Wait for me.” She barely pulls herself up before she collapses right next to him, reaching her end with a soft breath. Eyelashes fluttering as she gripped the same sword, she had killed the man she loved with. Leaning her hair against his shoulder in a final act of affection.

Both of them together, lying next to each other as heavy rain started once again, another hurricane and most likely a flood, coming forward. Washing all the evidence of what has happened.

The universe had truly played its final card this time.

EPILOGUE

“Oh my God, they’re so lame! I can’t believe we’re being forced to go to some stupid museum “because our school won’t bother taking us anywhere actually fun.” Jaden says, complaining about our trip like all the other students were.

“Oh, come on, it’ll be fun. You never know, you might learn something for once,” I say with a chuckle before turning back away from him.

“Very funny.” He replies sarcastically before switching to talk to one of his other friends. We’re still on the bus, so we’re not at the museum yet. Despite the others being unhappy about this, I’m actually really excited. I personally suggested to the teachers that we go to this museum, since I’ve been wanting to go for a while. I would go by myself— but this place is totally exclusive, and I wouldn’t be able to get in on my own. So here we are! I put my earphones on, leaning back against the seat as I looked out the window.

“Lyra, come sit in the middle! Come have some fun with us, will you?” Rosa, my friend, squeals as she drags me into the middle seat. I laugh quietly, settling in as I accept my fate for the rest of this ride.

“Alright, students, this is the status of Dacian of Elysia, former king of Elysia.” The teacher— Mrs. Vaughn says as her students follow behind, most of them were not paying attention while some supposed ‘nerdy’ students were scrambling to take pictures or notes. A worker in the museum comes by, clasping her hands seeing the fifty teenagers who probably didn’t notice her.

“Hello, and welcome! Would you like me to retell the story of King Dacian? I have to say, it’s my favorite. He truly is inspirational.” The woman says, pushing her round glasses up her nose as she smiles.

“Oh, that’s okay, it’s my favorite topic to discuss and I’m disgustingly educated on it, so I’d rather do it myself. Thank you, though!” Mrs. Vaughn replies as she practically shoos the worker away.

“Anyway! Children, are you as excited as I am to hear the story?”

Silence.

Well of course, silence for what Mrs. Vaughn had to say. Otherwise, followed a bit of chatter, whispers and giggles as usual.

“Okay... Well, I’m sure many of you have heard of King Dacian. But do any of you know what happened?”

Silence again, but only for a few seconds until I raise my hand in front.

“Yes, Lyra?” Mrs. Vaughn smiles; she’d hoped the few history-loving students in her class would at least know what was going on, and it seems they did, as a few people had their hand raised.

“Dacian of Elysia was—” I can barely get my words out before a boy in the back rudely interrupts me and cuts me off, having the audacity to talk over me!

“Oh, I know! Isn’t he that one guy who signed that treaty and became leader of Elysia?”

“Er... No, Jaden, that’s not quite right, you’re thinking of Jeffrey

Sanderson.” The teacher corrects him, but before she can tell me to continue, I speak on my own.

“No, you idiot. That’s the colonizer guy that king Dacian killed in his sleep, allegedly at least.” I immediately jumped to correct, a proud grin on my face.

Jaden rolls his eyes and crosses his arms, mumbling something incoherent under his breath before responding. “Whatever... I was close enough.”

“You went the opposite way, actually.” I spoke, turning back towards the teacher and clearing my throat before speaking again. “He was Elysia’s king for approximately four months and was one of the only nation’s back then who defied the English regime taking over. He stood on his ground and practically stopped a world war from happening. But during his last battle, Renna of Velmorla— a vicious, blood-lusted woman who insisted he carry on the wars and expand, killed him when he refused to kill more people.”

Mrs. Vaughn smiles and a small clap pass through the students before Lyra smiles and steps back.

“Very well, Lyra! It’s also said an enormous hurricane and flood happened the very day he died, so we unfortunately don’t have much information on what happened. But we did find the king’s body, somehow, along with Renna’s. It’s said that she was found with his ring on her finger, so historians say she was his fiancé as well.”

“Actually, some historians say she just stole the ring after killing him, as a sort of present for herself maybe.” Another student in the front says to which Mrs. Vaughn nods.

“That’s right, but I suppose we’ll never know now what their true relationship was, will we?”

“She seems horrible. Here this guy is a huge hero, and she just needs more people to die. Things back then were definitely crazy...” A male student in the back speaks, to which he gets hums of agreement in response. They all look at the statue once more, Dacian in a pose with his sword drawn, and with armor on. Most likely depicting him in a battle while the crown sculpted atop his head was sitting perfectly.

We went on to view a ton of curated collections of historical artifacts, art, natural history specimens like fossils, taxidermy, and scientific tools! I think today might have been the best day of my life. I’m humming softly, skipping as we walk back to the entrance so we can leave when I suddenly feel my phone bounce out of my jacket pocket.

“What a pain...” I mumble as I crouch down to pick it up. My friends pause, waiting for me to get up but I shoot them away since I have no idea where my phone is and I urgently need to find it. I’d rather not hold them back. They tell me to hurry back as they continue walking and I turn around.

Alright now, where is it?

Just as I tilt my head to look in one of the dark corners, I accidentally bump it against a sculpture of Michelangelo’s David piece and lift my upper body too fast, this time accidentally hitting my head against a vase and falling over with it. Great. Now I’ve really embarrassed myself, and I think I got a few scratches as well. I groan and hold my head in my hands,

I'm flat on my back at the foot of another statue. I turn my head to look at and realize it's the one of Dacian of Elysia. Hm, I didn't notice earlier but there's something written at the bottom.

“God save the king.”



KING'S SCHOOL

A deity can't be so difficult to find, can it?

*At least, it's what these two believe.
Two warriors bored with their daily lives,
taking up a new challenge they are sure
they will complete.*

*Dacian, a man and prince of Elysia
with cursed blood seeking out the Guardian of the Guise.
At first, his intentions were simply to save his own life,
but later things took a turn when settlers claim
Elysia after the king surrenders and flees to another land.*

*Thirsty for revenge, justice and power
Dacian takes off to find the
Guise known famously in their family
from a deal made over a millennia ago.*

*Renna, The Commander General
and princess of Velmorla
who's been looked down upon,
ridiculed and reduced men all around her*

*She hears about the Guardian of the Guise
and is determined to find him to complete a certain wish of hers.*

Will they succeed? Or will they fail along the way?

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