

THE FLAME QUEEN



The Legends of Peradon
Book One

DAX MUNRO

Remember when we all used to believe in magic?
Perhaps it's time for us to believe again.

Dax Munro



Acknowledgements

I dedicate this novel to
every one of my friends.

Thank you for helping to
inspire this labour of love.

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To learn more about the author,
visit: Daxwrites.com

Lady Arsonist

To some, she is a symbol of danger:
A Demoness of the flames.
Her touch, so fierce,
Turning all she sees to ash.

With hair like untamed wildfire,
Eyes of crackling embers.
Lips of hot branding Iron,
And perfume of burning indulgence.

To some, she is a symbol of hope:
A Goddess of the light.
Her touch, full of warmth,
Embracing the cold hearts of men.

But she has a weakness:
Her flames of Fire,
Will extinguish to Desire,
Until her heart is needed again.

-Alex Scrine, 2017.

A Brief History of Peradon

Peradon. Once a united land with four ruling families, now four Realms separated for the good of all. Peradon's two main religious factions: The Purists & The United Sect, waged war against one another, leading to violent disputes.

While The United Sect wanted to exist in unity, allowed to worship their separate elemental deities, The Purists were disgusted by anyone different to themselves and decreed that only one God could bring the people eternal light.

Desperate to stop their people from warring, the Four High Mages of the time constructed a grand tower to stand as a monument to peace. When even this could not slake the people's blood lust, it is said that a powerful Air Mage was tasked with blanketing the whole of Peradon in an all consuming storm.

While the High Mages forged a new plan, those who dared to venture outside forfeited their lives to the very elements they worshiped. .

Desperate, each High Mage named a successor, before infusing their magic into four separate discs. Each was placed in a secure location and acted to split Peradon into four separate Realms, which would forever belong to one of the four seasons and house citizens who shared in the matching elemental power.

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So it was that the citizens of Peradon abandoned their faiths and were forced to start over in their segregated lands.

To bar these newly created Realms from attack are the borders; dark and insidious lands, like long barren graveyards, housing nothing but the bones of wandering vermin. People rarely pay a visit unless traveling between Realms and even then, it is no passing comfort.

Four specially constructed bridges were formed to allow safe passage. However, should a citizen wander too far, they will collide with magical barriers, which have been known to crush every bone in one's body.

With the great storm having abated, the four High Mages gave the last of their life force to protect four sacred discs before surrendering themselves to the world of the dead.

Since the separation of the Realms many eras past, no-one dares to discuss religion. At long last, there is peace in Peradon.

Or so it was thought.

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CHAPTER ONE

YEAR C-4 Month 1/10

Arlas

Emperor Jugan had stared into the jaws of death before, this Arlas knew. They had both awaited today's meeting with something he would have described as akin to joy and yet he could not shake the panic that coursed through his veins. If the Seer's foretelling was correct, then Arlas would soon be put to work.

The oppressive walls of the throne room made Arlas quiver. He watched as Emperor Jugan nestled into the grooves of his white gold throne. Jugan was the power of the grand Frost Realm and this was the seat from which he governed his land. His eldest son Ryore was due to turn sixteen. This was a good time to consider marriage for most, but Arlas knew that Jugan had other plans. He wanted Ryore dead.

To see his plans through, Jugan had enlisted the help of a powerful young woman. Reiza. Peradon's latest Seer apprentice was said to be one of the most enchanting

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young women one could lay eyes on. Enchanting, but deadly.

The emperor grinned when two of his most trusted guards approached the doors to the throne room and allowed the little creature to enter. Arlas gasped at the sight of her. The young girl shuffled toward the throne, her body shaking from head to toe. Her white hair and fair eyes lent her an innocent appearance. In truth, her beauty was nothing to be fooled by, yet it still had Arlas captivated.

'Welcome Reiza,' boomed Jugan, 'Tell me, are you certain about the visions you sent word of? Your scroll was rather specific.'

Jugan's lips drew tight as he studied the child. It was strange how one so young could wield such power. She still looked but a novice. Nowadays, even that marked her as a precious commodity as most Seers were long dead, leaving the few who were born to fend for themselves.

'I am certain, your Grace. Your eldest son is destined to marry the enemy. If that happens, then there is no doubt that he will have secured your throne for future generations and doomed his beloved home realm.'

Fear crept into the emperor's eyes. His Eldest son, Ryore, was his crowning disappointment. Jugan had recanted his flaws to Arlas on numerous occasions, from his lack of reasoning, to a mind that seemed to be plagued by emotion, as no emperor should be.

Jugan eyed the young Seer, with her stark white locks and vexing beauty. The last of her kind. Her eyes roved

about the glittering room, seeming to memorize every detail, from its cold blue walls to the harsh glare of the light orb above. *All that power, and all you do is stand there, shaking*, thought Arlas.

Reiza's visions had brought shocking details to light for both Arlas and Jugan. While they knew she was conveying the truth of what she'd seen, there were certain details that had caused Jugan's mind to rage. His eldest was never to ascend his throne. Ryore made a weak prince and would only make a more pitiful ruler. No. Jugan would plot his own son's demise and Arlas was prepared to help.

Jugan stared Reiza down.

'Have you told anyone else of these visions?' he asked.

'No Sire.'

'Good.'

Her honesty was to be admired.

'Step forward!'

Jugan's words were like ice, cutting across the blinding space. When Reiza prepared to take a step, the emperor held up his palm.

'Not you child. Him.'

The emperor pointed directly at Arlas. Before now, Arlas had been content to wait in the shadows. He took a sharp breath and stepped out of his hiding place, cutting a towering figure in his stark black robes. He grinned at the way Reiza stared, in awe. Like a night-time shadow, Arlas glided along the cool stone floor, intent on reaching the waiting emperor. With him came the powerful

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sensation of Air Magic; a tingling that Jugan said started within the toes and gradually worked up the rest of the body. When the brilliant light hit Arlas' skin, every one of his solemn features was revealed.

Jugan chuckled at Reiza's stifled gasp.

'Do not fear him.' The emperor held his stomach from the raucous laughter. 'He is no more a thing of shadow than you.' As usual, Jugan was correct. Arlas stood before the child, his pale flesh reflecting the light of the room. What caught the girl's attention, or anyone's for that matter, were his eyes. Reiza gazed into them with a silent fear that Arlas had grown accustomed to. His irises were blood red. Like shimmering rubies, they stared others down, piercing into the deepest depths of their souls.

'Emperor Jugan, a pleasure.'

Arlas' deep voice reverberated off the walls. He performed a low bow before the emperor, his mane of silvery hair trailing down his neck.

'Welcome, Prince Arlas. You may rise.'

Arlas immediately straightened. He looked to Jugan as a servant would its master. He could feel his eyes glowing their fearsome red.

'Still dressed as the stealthiest of shadows, I see.'

Arlas grinned at the emperor's joke, a set of pointed fangs protruding from the base of his gums.

'I suppose you're wondering why I summoned you, Arlas.'

'The thought had crossed my mind, Sire.'

Arlas gave the emperor a good-natured wink.

'Young Reiza here is quite certain of the visions she's been having of late. She believes that the daughter of our greatest enemy is destined to become Ryore's wife. As you can imagine, this presents a problem for me.'

Emperor Jugan worked his fingers into the soft flesh of his chin.

'If that were to happen, then Ryore would gain a firm grasp on my throne, particularly if he is able to produce a strong male heir. As such, I will be needing you to do me a favour.'

He shot Arlas a serious look, which would have stricken terror into any mortal man. But Arlas was no mortal. Despite his youthful appearance, he was an Air Mage; an individual known to live well into their hundreds, as long as they were willing to make the occasional sacrifice.

Arlas gave the emperor a polite nod, wondering what such a favour could entail.

'My price, Sire, for carrying out this *favour*?

Jugan's gaze passed from the Mage to the young Seer beside him. Arlas followed the direction of his gaze. If Reiza's predictions were in fact true, then he would need to act swiftly. But, what could Jugan offer him? He was already immortal.

'Power,' came Jugan's answer. 'I can grant you access to magic that you've only heard of in your wildest dreams, provided you do not fail me, of course.'

Arlas considered the offer in silence. He scratched at a mess of stubble on his chin, nodding once to agree to the bargain.

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'Good. As you know, I would like my youngest, Prince Fadius, to take my throne once I am gone. In order to make sure he becomes my successor, I need you to dispose of the girl who is destined to become Ryore's wife.'

'Sire, if I may?'

Jugan signalled for Arlas to speak.

'Why not simply do away with Ryore? After all, who would suspect a father of murdering his own son?'

Jugan's lips curved into a sneer.

'Alas Arlas, my eldest has quite the few tricks up his sleeve. He will be hard to take out. No, impossible. It would be better to break his soul and ensure that he cannot gain future claims to the throne.'

Arlas nodded his understanding.

'And then, I can have Ryore for myself?'

Reiza's small voice had surprised him. It chimed out through the room, filled to the brim with desperation. Jugan waved his hand in the girl's direction.

'I suppose, so long as you are still pure when the time comes for him to wed.'

Jugan's guards, having seen the dismissive gesture, began to approach the elaborate throne. They were beefy men, with more muscle than any one man should have. 'Sire?' They gave brief bows, their eyes focused upon the Seer. 'Are we to escort the young Miss out?'

Reiza glanced up, clearly horrified. Tears had begun to form in her eyes as the large brutes pressed in at either side of her, waiting for the emperor's command.

'Please do. I've had enough of her visions for one day.'

'Yes, Sire.'

Arlas watched as each guard seized one of Reiza's arms, hauling her toward a pair of grand double doors.

'Sire. Wait!'

Her wilful protests echoed along the halls. Before long, they were no more.

'You know Arlas, I think this might actually work.' Jugan beckoned the prince towards the throne. 'Young Reiza named a Miss Violetta Flame as Ryore's future bride. She is the one I would like taken care of.'

'Is there any particular way you'd like her dealt with?' asked Arlas.

The emperor rose up, out of his icy throne. His eyes locked onto the Mage.

'I would like you to put an end to Miss Flame.'

Arlas frowned. He understood what was expected of him. This was his chance to prove himself to the emperor.

'Arlas, you look troubled. Tell me, does this task displease you?' asked Jugan.

'It seems like a bit of a gamble, Sire.'

'Life is a gamble! All we can do is play the cards that we are dealt and make a little extra of ourselves if given the chance. I'm offering you the cards that lead to power and influence. Play them!'

Arlas contemplated his choice of actions. Immortality was lonely without a partner and he did

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despise being seen as inferior to his brother, Jork. Perhaps Jugan could offer the power he sought.

'Now, I'll ask again,' called Jugan, 'Does this task displease you?'

Arlas stared into his master's eyes.

'No Sire. The task is mine to carry out.'

Jugan relaxed back into his throne.

'Good.'

He dismissed the boy with a wave of his hand.

'Oh, and Arlas?'

The Air Mage glanced across his shoulder.

'Do you think your brother will suspect?'

'No Sire. He will not suspect a thing.'

CHAPTER TWO

Violetta

Keep up, Darius!" Violetta cried.

The moat islands were her favourite place to play, with no shortage of hiding spots and with trees as thick and as tall as the palace towers that shadowed them. The gentle trickling of water warned Violetta away from the edges of the bank, where the moat would eventually curve into the Aum River.

Her brother, Darius, hurtled toward her. The ball they'd been chasing rolled down the incline, gathering speed.

'Oh, no you don't.'

Darius was still some distance away when Violetta pelted forward, after the gift. She strained to keep an eye on the stunning patterns. They had never failed to bring a smile to her delicate features. Even amid the excitement of the game, she could recall Lord Jork's words when he'd presented it to her.

'Violetta, dear child. Let this always aid you in your troubles. Let it heal any holes in body or spirit.'

'Hey!'

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Violetta was pulled out of her reverie by Darius' call. He was gaining on her now and made no attempt to slow his pace.

'Keep up, slowcoach!'

Violetta met his gaze and grinned. There may have been three years between the pair, but Violetta could still outpace him. Despite his exhaustion, she saw Darius smile. It was a rare smile that her brother only gave her. There was a hint of playfulness at its edges, that showed every bit of his love for his sister.

'You know, I will beat you one day, even if I die trying.'

Violetta could feel blood rushing to her ears. She heaved in several short breaths as she tried to maintain her focus on the ball. It was hurtling down the banks now, with little intention of coasting to a stop. Her brother's heavy footfalls vibrated against the packed earth, like the thrumming heartbeat of the world itself.

'Getting close!'

Violetta weaved past her favourite tree, where it was said her mother had given birth to her. She spied the ball rolling past its roots.

'Hey! You're going to kill yourself at the pace you're going!' Violetta jolted. She hadn't realized just how fast she'd been sprinting. Darius had drawn up alongside her, his arms, which had begun to pack on muscle, stretched out in a vain attempt to steady her.

Violetta giggled and chanced a sideways dodge, intent on trapping the ball beneath her skirts when her legs buckled. Time passed in a prolonged wave. She could

feel her heart beat in her ears as she watched the ground rush up to meet her.

'Violetta?'

With a throbbing head, she blinked her eyes open. Darius knelt over her, his face framed by a glowing mass of stars. Wait. Stars? Was it really that late? Violetta studied the look on her brother's face. Concern etched his every feature, one arm extended toward her, glistening with traces of sweat. 'Here.'

Violetta watched her body respond. Her hand met his, the skin oddly cold to the touch. It almost seemed to vibrate. No, not his hand. Something else.

Darius pulled her to her feet. Once Violetta had regained her balance, she felt the sensation grow stronger. 'Darius, can you feel that?'

A tingling sensation seeped into her bones. It pulsed through her, prickling the hairs on the back of her neck.

'Darius, something feels wrong.'

Violetta turned and was surprised to find Darius facing away. His tall frame appeared to have frozen beside her much loved tree, his face turned up toward the sky. 'Brother? What's wrong? Tell me.'

Violetta followed her brother's gaze.

Darkness stole over her. Violetta could see the storm a mile off and it showed no signs of letting up. She flinched as she felt something hit her face. Water? Darius began to stir, but Violetta's eyes remained fixed on the sky. She had heard of rain. It was said that the Air Realm was frequently visited by such cool showers, but never

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had she heard of a storm in the Flame Realm. At least, not since the Almighty Storm of the Ancients.

Violetta felt her courage flee her. She let out a high-pitched squeal; a reaction to the hands that had forced themselves around her arms.

'Shh, it's just me.' Darius stroked the golden waves of her hair. 'We must get inside. Understand?'

Violetta gazed into her brother's dark eyes. She nodded.

'Yes.'

'Good, we haven't got long before the storm hits.'

Violetta dove toward Jork's ball. She trapped it between her wrinkled skirts, gathering it up in her slender arms. The rain gathered speed.

'Darius, I've got it!' she squealed. Silence greeted her. 'Darius? Where are you?'

Violetta could hear raised voices in the distance. They were muffled, likely from inside the secret passage they had used to get down here.

'Darius?' She spotted a limp shape stretched across the lap of her tree. 'DARIUS!'

Something struck Violetta hard in the shoulder, lifting her clean off the ground. Her mouth formed a silent scream as she flew through the air, clinging tight to Jork's ball. To Violetta's surprise, she landed on her feet.

Violetta's vision swam, her shoulder screaming in agony at a chunk of ice that had pierced the flesh. She glanced about, searching for Darius when something else zipped past her ear. Violetta tried to put thoughts of the

pain aside. She gazed above her, where the sky had become a blinding white.

Violetta's fingernails dug into her ball and the agony she felt appeared to diminish. Her eyes snapped down to her shoulder, which only moments ago had been spiking with pain.

'That's not possible,' she gasped.

Violetta's skin was pale and smooth, not a cut or scratch anywhere in sight. Her eyes wandered down to Jork's ball, before flocking back to the pale skies above. This had to be a dream. The sky here wasn't white. It was a bright and beautiful blue, always.

Remembering how Darius had been struck, Violetta returned her gaze to her tree. For a moment, she couldn't breathe.

'Darius?'

Her legs carried her over to him, aching with the sudden chill. Violetta was unsure of what she was going to find. She drew close and saw the tree's tangled roots embracing Darius. His mop of dark hair was slick with the rain, his eyes only just glazing over.

'No.'

Violetta knelt down and gasped at the sight of her brother's chest. A large needle of ice had speared his flesh, spilling ruby liquid around its edges. A banshee's wail exploded from her.

All sound escaped Violetta's world. The edges of her vision darkened, leaving her only with eyes for her brother.

'Good Lord, Prince Darius!'

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Clarisse's harsh voice cut through the silence. The elderly nursemaid sprinted past, her cold stare fixed on the limp form of their Realm's heir. She bent down to examine the prince's wounds, shooting an angry scowl Violetta's way. 'Just what did you think you were doing?' she snarled.

The veins in her forehead began to rise, as though attempting to escape from their fleshy prison.

Violetta's face was devoid of emotion. She could do little more than stare when a startled scream sounded nearby. 'My boy!'

'Mother?' Violetta got back to her feet. 'Mother, ice is coming down from the sky. We must go. Darius said-'

Violetta locked eyes with her parent. Tears ran afresh down Queen Isobel's face as she raced through the rain to reach her child. Her golden curls, which were usually pinned atop her head, now hung loose and trailed limply down her back.

No-one noticed the shards of ice soaring past. Violetta wanted to run. She wanted to warn her mother before it was too late, but her body felt like it had frozen in place. She strained against her fear with all her might.

'Mother, we must go! Now!'

The queen darted across to the great oak tree. She scooped up the body of her only son, wailing against his dark mop of hair.

'Darius!'

The despair in her voice matched the feelings that stirred within Violetta.

Queen Isobel refused to part from her son. He lay there, still as stone, his flesh growing colder by the moment. Violetta would remember this day for the rest of her life. She clung tight to Jork's gift and prepared to race, to grasp hold of her mother, when another shard shot out of the darkness. A struggling scream filled the air. It was a scream that would haunt her forever.



Violetta swallowed her fear. Her heart thundered within her chest as she thought of what her father would say. She and Clarisse stepped over the sopping threshold, lowering their burden for the briefest of moments. They knelt down, panting with the effort of the bodies they'd carried. Both were exhausted and in no fit state to venture on.

Violetta's skirts were bundled and soaked, her body trembling as she raised her head. When the colossal doors permitted them entry, the sodden entourage were gazed upon with fear.

'Goodness!'

Waiting guards clapped eyes on the unconscious forms of the queen and her son and rushed forward to unburden the women of their still forms.

Violetta's lips trembled as her mother and Darius were laid, quite unceremoniously, upon the grand hall's floor. She heard maids being called to fetch warm towels as tears slipped down her pale cheeks. She stared at the

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bodies that lay on the floor. *It was my fault. If Darius and I hadn't gone down to the Moat Islands...*

King Eagan appeared from around a bend, having been summoned by the senior staff. As soon as he saw the bodies, he froze. Violetta stood there, bedraggled and carrying Lord Jork's ball. She tried to blink. Her head felt too heavy for her shoulders to carry. She could feel that same weird energy from before, as though it were calling to her, mocking the unfortunate situation.

Violetta looked to her father, who hadn't yet spoken a single word. He was gazing down at his wife and son. Both looked so frail, their bodies frozen in an eternal embrace as Queen Isobel cradled her first bom child. Her mother's energy, her very essence, seemed to have fled from her stiffening fonn. Even her familiar fragrance; the jasmine and lilies Violetta had adored, was no more. She could do nothing but stand there, powerless. Even her father; a mighty king, could neither move nor speak with the pain that held him. He bent over his precious wife, knowing that it was too late to do anything but arrange a burial.

It was late into the night when her father sent for her. The ice storm lingered, rain joining to lick at the palace windows. The servants had done all they could until the royal bodies could be taken away. There was, after all, a limit to one's duties as far as death was concerned.

Violetta stood at her chamber window, her figure pale in the moonlight as she digested her father's news. Dead? Part of her didn't want to believe it, yet how could

she not? She had seen it with her own eyes. She felt her world growing distant; her surroundings like some grand illusion given to her by a merciless god. Sounds grew fainter, moments dragging out as though stretched by some elaborate machinery. Even the rare sight of the twin moons in her realm could not save her.

The undertaker had arrived not long ago. Violetta watched, helpless as the funeral carriage drove away from the palace; away with her beloved mother and brother in tow. Her nails gripped the edge of the window frame. She was convinced that they could have been saved.

'Why?' She whispered into the night.

She felt so helpless, staring out of her bedroom window. She could still feel her father's pain when he'd arrived to find his wife and son lying cold on the sodden floor. And here she was, in the room that had only last night housed the sleeping form of her brother.

Violetta leant forward, watching the rain spatter against the window. Its furious pounding imitated her heart as tears began to pour down her face. Her broken sobs restored the sound to her world, her body quivering with each uneasy breath. If only the storm would envelop her. She wanted to be with her mother once more, to hear her soothing voice as she drifted off to sleep.

Violetta sucked in a breath and stared down at the ball she held in her hands. She shuddered to think of what it represented. She longed to be rid of the wretched thing, to simply send it out of existence so she could go and reclaim the family she'd lost. Her eyes zipped between the rain strewn window and the tiny sphere.

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What use was it now when the very object she held was the source of her family's demise.

Violetta struggled against the free flow of emotion. She could feel her body heating, but paid her growing rage no heed. Her body tensed, veins bulging with the effort of her slight form containing such raw power. She screamed into the darkness and her anger gave birth to flame.

Fire sprung from Violetta's tear-streaked palms, gorging itself on her delicate flesh. The beauty of the flames danced in her eyes.

'Violetta!'

The princess whipped round, her face contorted in the throes of rage. King Eagan appeared, his face stem.

'What in the name of Peradon do you think you are you doing?'

The ends of his hair shimmered, igniting at the tips. Violetta could see him searching for restraint, his eyes focused on the flames she wielded.

'Well? Do you think magic is a game? It was rogue magic that killed your mother, and Darius!'

Violetta didn't trust herself to speak. Instead she aimed one hand in the air and allowed her power to consume her. Crimson flames ignited about her, enveloping her from head to toe. She turned back to the window, peering through the heavy downpour that was no match for her tears. Her worst nightmares had been realised.

'Enough child.'

A sigh escaped her father's lips as he drew close, resting a large hand upon her shoulder. Her roiling flames immediately extinguished.

'Father, I—'

'You must not be so careless, child.'

Violetta could see the pain in his eyes. She reached out to take her father's arm, but he drew back, keeping her at bay.

'Magic is dangerous and such power requires extreme caution. Do you understand?'

With a stifled sob, Violetta nodded.

'Here.'

Violetta felt herself being embraced, allowed to nuzzle into her father's side. He stroked her golden fall of hair; the same coppery shade as her mother's had been.

Violetta withdrew from her father's arms and pulled him to sit by the rain-flecked window. Together they strained to see the under-taker's carriage as it disappeared into the pouring rain. There they sat, Violetta with her knees pulled up to her heaving chest, in the company of her only family.

CHAPTER THREE

Month 2/10

Arlas

Arlas, my boy. How goes the plan?
The forlorn prince stepped into the throne room, his body weary from his strenuous task. A month had passed since he'd been charged with Jugan's favour and the emperor looked just as happy to see him. How could Arlas tell him that he'd failed in his task? He peered through the harsh light of the throne room, his stomach roiling the closer he got to his master. The emperor wore a sly smile and stood up to welcome the Mage.

Arlas stopped short of the glistening throne, his eyes fixed on the stone floor.

'Arlas?'

The prince refused to speak even a word. He heard Emperor Jugan sink into his throne, his bulbous fingers drumming on the arm, restless.

'Come now, Arlas, why so silent?'

The emperor's words only made him more nervous. Arlas couldn't bring himself to gaze up at him, for fear that he would be struck to the ground.

'The thing is, Sire, we may have run into some complications.'

'We?'

Arlas faltered.

'Forgive me, Sire. I meant *I* have run into complications, of course.'

He bowed low, ignoring the trails of sweat that coursed down his back.

Silence stretched on between the pair. The emperor appeared to digest his news slowly.

'I...see.'

Arlas was glad of the broken silence. His eyes raised up, to find Jugan's face pursed in a look that spoke of tart lemons. That one glimpse was enough to make him stare back at the floor, when a foreign sound commanded his attention.

Jugan's eyes snapped down to him.

A harsh sneer bent his lips as he began to draw magic from his core. Violent waves of frost rippled into life before Arlas. They surrounded Jugan's clenched fists, threatening to storm the Mage's space. Arlas bit his lip. His eyes scanned the room for some means of escape. He felt his lip tear open, oozing the familiar tang of blood.

The Frost surrounding the emperor's fists grew thick. Tall waves of it appeared before him, promising to deliver Arlas into a world of pain.

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'Are you sure there's nothing you'd like to add, Arlas, before I accidentally lose control of my powers?'

Arlas stared into the voids that were Jugan's eyes.

'I will try again, Sire. You have my word.'

A low crunch sounded overhead. Emperor Jugan was withdrawing his powers. Arlas watched in awe as tiers of frost magic zipped back into flesh and bone.

'Very well.' Jugan reached up to his face with one large hand, scratching at a patch of dark stubble. 'But, you'd do well to understand that you are not out of the woods yet.'

The emperor continued to stroke his chin in thought, as though considering all that Arlas had told him thus far. 'My youngest, Fadius, shall accompany you on your Quest.

Better yet, so will Reiza. You shall remove Ryore from the throne by any means necessary and ensure that Fadius serves as his replacement.'

Emperor Jugan rose from his throne, frost forming back around his palms.

'Do you think Reiza would agree to such a thing?' Asked Arlas. 'She appears to be quite taken with Ryore.'

Jugan waved his frosted palm, as if he could dismiss the issue with a mere show of magic.

'Let me deal with her if need be.'

Arlas sucked the blood from his lower lip.

'Of course, Sire. And the princess?'

Jugan's fingers danced through the glistening air, creating symbols that would appear foreign to most.

'Forget her. It is Ryore you must focus your efforts on now.'

Arlas gave a weak nod.

'Yes, Sire.'

'Good.' Jugan brandished his hands in the Mage's direction. 'But heed my warning. You and your new accomplices shall complete your task by the end of year C-8. By then, my eldest son will have reached the age of twenty. You cannot allow him, at any cost, to produce an heir.'

Jugan's hands continued to spin of their own accord, sending coils of frost to shoot in Arlas' direction. He grinned as Arlas was accosted by a sharp stab of pain. It wormed it's way into the depths of the Mage's heart, where it would continue to pulse, now as much a part of him as his heart or lungs. Arlas glanced up at his better to find that Jugan's sneer had returned.

'That curse will not lift until your task is complete. Fail me again and even my youngest son's life shall be forfeit!'

CHAPTER FOUR

Violetta

Violetta lay in the folds of her bed-sheets. She thought of all the mornings she'd awoken, knowing that she had been blessed with such a caring mother who would hug her as soon as they'd meet in the hallway. Knowing how her brother would scold her if she hurt herself, then help to soothe her troubles away.

It had been a month since she had lost mother and Darius. Violetta found herself thinking back to their funeral. It had been a quaint affair, hosted by their neighbouring Realm, yet it now served as little more than a hazy recollection of coloured shapes and raw emotion.



Violetta loved travelling by carriage. The sights, the smells. Everything was new to her and that was the way she liked it. Today, things were different. There would be no joy or excitement; just a sight that would cause her heart to weep.

Her father had no need for guards to accompany them. King Eagan's magical abilities were legendary and were more than

enough to obliterate even the most formidable of foes, should they be so bold as to attack their transport.

It hadn't been long before the landscape had changed, the heat little more than a whisper on the wind. As the carriage rumbled up to their destination, Violetta caught sight of the Earth Realm's Palace. The mighty building headed a slight incline and looked to be constructed from a towering rise of golden wood.

The funeral was to be held in the palace's private gardens. The carriage had passed marble fountains aplenty, each with water spouting from its top when the driver heaved back on the reins. The horses drawing the carriage slowed to a stop.

'Come, Violetta.'

King Eagan urged his daughter out of the carriage, signalling for both driver and horses to take a well-earned break.

Violetta followed her father through a set of wrought iron gates. She could still feel his lingering anger from when she'd recently summoned her powers. She trailed her father's glittering form, noting the drooping heads of bluebells nearby.

Her father stopped short. Violetta glanced up and froze at the sight of twin coffins. They were perched side by side atop a ceremonial alter of polished wood. She felt her stomach drop. Here they were. Her lost kin.

As a child, Violetta had longed for the tales of the other Realms; of the breath-taking landscapes and strange delicacies that existed elsewhere. Now that she was here, she felt nothing. Her mind was numb to the beauty around her. From the apple and daisy scented air, to the shifting colours within the sunset sky. Nothing could penetrate the sorrow that bound her heart.

Standing there seemed like a cruel dream, designed to torment the weak of mind. Violetta saw her hand reach out toward the

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caskets when a fierce rustling sounded from the hedges behind. A tall gentleman emerged from the bushes, his brown hair softened by the light of a thousand candles, which seemed to have appeared alongside him. His floor-length robes, the colour of gold, glistened with every' one of his steps.

'If it isn't the mighty' Eagan himself.'

The newcomer extended his arm, his dark eyes passing between Violetta and her father. Violetta noted how her father reluctantly' reached out an arm.

'Aemon, good to see you.'

The two rulers placed their palms together in greeting. Despite her father's warm smile, there was something about the interaction that felt, to Violetta, somewhat forced. 'Violetta, this is King Aemon. Our host.'

Violetta brushed the skin on her arm as she took in the dark eyes of their host.

'It is good to meet you,' she said with practised grace.

The tension between her father and their host had not abated by the time the funeral was in progress. While King Aemon gave a touching speech, Eagan merely sat and stared. Rows of redwood chairs had been laid out before the caskets, seating all manner of exquisite beings.

Elves with flawless skin sat to the left, while pale humanoid figures ringed their right. A boy with corpse-like flesh and ruby eyes was just one of the few that had caught her attention. His piercing gaze passed over her, his tongue running the length of a set of fangs, as though contemplating whether to drink her blood.

A shiver ran the full length of Violetta's spine. Those eyes were hypnotic, born from the likes of hell below. She found her lungs

suddenly gasping for air. The boy's eyes fuelled a rage within her, one that needed to be released.

'And that's why,' called Aemon, 'we shall forever remember Queen Isobel and Prince Darius.'

The silent guests had begun to applaud when they noticed Aemon's mouth fall open. Violetta flailed about as vicious flames sprang to life around her. She was powerless to stop them as they began to swirl about her form, extending out from her fingertips.

People screamed and began to flee from the grove as several bushes caught alight.

'Eagan!' Their host summoned Violetta's father to his side, all too aware that her power could kill countless members of his clan. 'We need to stop her! Her powers are out of control!'

Sure enough, the flames that had previously been restricted to Violetta's form, had begun to engulf the entire funeral arrangement. Violetta felt nothing, save for the emotional turmoil that rampaged through her. She thought she registered a glint of emerald green, before the blur of flames in her vision departed. A sudden onrush of air overtook her, before her body crumpled to a heap on the ground.

'Violetta?'

Violetta's eyes attempted to open, but her eyelids were stiff and crusted with dirt.

'Violetta, can you hear me child?'

Lord Jork's familiar voice filtered through her subconscious. Violetta blinked her eyes once more and slowly found them beginning to open.

The first thing that greeted her was a fierce pain as light pierced her eyes. She felt arms beneath her, hauling her up by her slender waist.

'My lord?' she asked.

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'No, it 's me.'

'Xyboni?'

A pair of emerald eyes shimmered before her as King Aemon's honorary son pulled her to her feet.

'Yes.'

Violetta clenched her arms around him.

'Xi!' The tears were instantaneous. 'What happened? How did I—'

'Shh. 'Xyboni held her close, running his fingers through her golden hair. 'Don't fret, everything is under control now.'

He was so calm. Violetta glanced around the side of him, where the remnants of bushes trailed smoke into the air. 'I-I'm so sorry'.'

She pulled herself back from the boy's grip and gazed upon his familiar form. Xyboni stood before her, his warm copper hair swaying in the breeze. His eyes locked onto her, an opalescent emerald green. In other circumstances, Violetta could have lost herself in them forever.

'I didn't mean to,' she wept.

Xyboni noticed her eyes darting around the grove.

'Don't worry' about it. You couldn't have foreseen what would happen.'

Xyboni had always found a way to lighten her grief. Violetta felt a warmth spreading through her veins. Unlike her power, it worked to soothe her. She wondered if she ought to smile. She didn't feel like it, but as she gazed into those beautiful eyes, she found the corners of her mouth beginning to curve.

'Xi, thank you and your father- Aemon, for this.'

She gestured around at the once enchanting sendee, its surrounding foliage now charred beyond recognition.

Xyboni gave her a half smile and Violetta felt her cheeks heat up. She peered up at him, while her fingertips brushed the side of her arm.

'I'm sorry for your loss.' Xyboni's emerald eyes seemed to darken. *'Perhaps this will help to brighten your day.'*

He clicked his fingers and a burst of leaves appeared out of nowhere, twisting around his outstretched palms.

Violetta gasped. As the flurry of leaves cleared her vision, she saw what Xyboni had cupped in his hands. Stark against his olive skin was a single red rose, the signature flower of the Flame Realm. Violetta was at a loss for words, but graciously accepted it.

'T-thank you, ' she stammered.

The tendrils of sorrow that strangled her heart began to unravel the slightest amount. Xyboni's half smile made a reappearance.

'May this rose brighten your darkest days.'



Violetta dragged herself out of her daze. Her vision cleared, leaving the image of the crimson rose Xyboni had made her, entwined with a protective spell that would see it forever preserved.

There came a sudden knock on her chamber door. Violetta bolted upright.

'Violetta?'

Her father's voice cut through the wood of the door. Failing to answer him, she heard the click of the door's lock, undone by her father's magic. There was a brief

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pause, before his unruly beard appeared round the corner.

'Awaken daughter, for I have a grand surprise for you.' Her father's voice echoed round her tired mind. He threw open her curtains, the harsh light streaming into her face. 'There. That's much better.' He strode over to his daughter's bed, seating himself upon its edge. 'Violetta, are you all right?

His daughter's face was tear-streaked as usual. Violetta scabbled to hide her face in her hands, but her father gently pulled them back.

'It would be a shame to hide such a beautiful face.'

He traced slow semi-circles under her eyes, where the last vestiges of her tears clung to life. While his face didn't appear much better, he had accepted that some things could not be changed.

'Come now, as I said, I've a surprise for you.'

Violetta groaned. She squinted through the blinding light to where her father now stood by her dresser. She hated it when the curtains were opened. It always felt as though the light would burn her. Some days she wished it would, or that her powers would finally seek to consume her in their fiery rage. She revelled in the idea of being allowed to simply melt away, therefore escaping this miserable life.

Eagan returned to his daughter's bedside. His eyes were puffy and devoid of what little emotion he had to spare. 'Come now, Violetta.'

Violetta resisted her father's attempt to haul her out of her bed, thankful to have chosen a modest night-dress.

She eventually managed to kick him away, dropping to the floor like a frightened pup.

'Perhaps I'll just wait outside,' he suggested.

With the door closed behind him, Violetta was left to her own devices. In her own time, she got to her feet, covering her body as she made for the door. She may only have been twelve years of age, but she would go without a fight.

A thought struck Violetta as she reached for her chamber door. What sort of surprise could her father have planned? Suddenly, the idea of leaving her chambers made her blanch.

A knock upon her chamber door. *Again?* Violetta prepared to usher her father out, should he have returned when a young maid appeared in the open doorway. She approached the princess with due caution, her frail arms burdened with the weight of a beautiful dress, which Violetta was no doubt expected to wear.

Once the surprise of her unexpected guest had worn off, Violetta couldn't help but admire the garment that the maid held out for her to inspect, it was old-fashioned and far darker in colour than she had expected. Nevertheless, something about it resonated with her. She reached out to stroke the soft folds of fabric that would soon adorn her meagre frame.

Violetta sucked in a deep breath as the last burgundy layer was thrust over her head, It was stifling beneath so many layers, or *stages* as her mother had called them, yet the temperature appeared to calm her. Violetta shot a weak smile at the lurking maid, before stealing a look at

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herself in the dresser mirror. For once in her life, she felt beautiful. Flared sleeves tapered off at her wrists, with a gold tie hugging her slender waist. She made for the door, glancing back at that damned ball on her dresser. What it made her feel now was too shameful to contemplate.

Violetta tiptoed into the grand throne room. Its gold furnishings glared at her approach. She was fiddling with the waves of golden hair at her neck when she halted beside a towering figure. The face of a stranger stared back at her. A more beautiful woman surely didn't exist, for the stranger looked to be carved from the smoothest of marble. Violetta memorised her form from head to toe. She was the epitome of grace, her lips full, with eyes of a glistening green that beamed at the onlooker. She held herself like a true lady, forming a friendly smile as she gazed at the princess.

Silence stretched out between the pair, the air crackling with the tension of the moment. Violetta let out a grateful sigh when her father came into view. He wore a dazzling smile, which would have wanned her heart had he not have been so miserable a moment prior.

King Eagan took three long strides until he reached them. He gazed at his daughter in all of her finery, appearing to glow with pride.

'Father.'

Violetta bowed, prompting an unexpected chuckle from the king.

'There's no need to bow to me, my child.'

He brought his daughter's fingers up to his lips, where he pressed a tender kiss upon them. Violetta savoured the sweet moment.

'Do you approve father?'

She avoided looking up at the stranger.

'I do.'

Eagan's smile was warm and genuine. It was the steel which entered his eyes that caused Violetta to worry. She risked another glance at the stranger. Both tall and slender, they were certainly not what Violetta had been expecting. As they closed the distance, she felt herself shrink back. She looked to her father, seeking his guidance.

Noticing his daughter's worried expression, Eagan gently squeezed her hand.

'Worry not, child. All will be well.'

He guided Violetta along, stopping the customary three feet from their mysterious guest. Violetta was reluctant to move, but at her father's urging, she stepped forward.

The young woman stared down at Violetta with the same full smile. The princess took note of the ferocious waves of red hair tumbling down the stranger's form. They reminded her of curved snakes, with the colour of fire set into their skin, stark against the stranger's milky flesh. 'Violetta, may I introduce Jennise.'

King Eagan gestured to the lovely maiden, who looked all too embarrassed to be in his presence. She dipped into a graceful bow, her fiery locks spilling across her face.

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'Your Highnesses.'

Violetta watched as she drew herself back up. The maiden's bright eyes moved in her direction, making her pale before the porcelain beauty. She couldn't help but wonder why her father had summoned such a maiden here. 'Jermise, thank you for coming so promptly.'

King Eagan stepped forward, guiding the maiden's soft hand to his lips.

Violetta's mind burst aflame. For her father to kiss any maiden, even by the hand, showed great disrespect to his departed wife. She glared at him, her eyes like daggers as he began to circle young Jermise. *How dare you?* she thought. Violetta could feel her powers boiling within. They lay just beneath the surface of her skin, her mind begging with her to release them.

'Jermise will be taking over for Clarisse from now on. Be sure to treat her well.'

Violetta gulped. So this had been his plan all along. Replace the help with someone new; younger, prettier. Violetta could feel her sorrow returning when a light flashed on in her mind.

'Father, will you please show me the fire lion?'

Her eyes couldn't help but light up at the prospect of him disappointing this guest. Surprisingly, her father smiled. 'I'm not sure.'

'Please?'

Violetta batted her lashes at him. Her father sighed, his eyes briefly zipping to the newcomer.

'Oh, alright.'

King Eagan closed his eyes to the outside world and began to slow his breathing until it was little more than a low hum.

'Fierce beast, I call upon thee!'

He blew out a steady breath and forced his eyes open. A burst of flame shot out from his palms, coiling itself into translucent shapes, before transforming into a mighty beast.

Standing before them was a majestic lion, a genuine work of art that burned brightly in mid-air.

'Enough!'

Eagan withdrew his power, leaving the lion to disappear in a brilliant flash. Violetta smiled. For a moment her father's eyes had appeared hopeful, like they had always been before his family's passing.

The king's eyes soon returned to their cool steel; the look of a storm when it first starts to brew.

'Jermise shall not act as nurse maid. You're too old for one now. She will be your confidant. Tell her anything you wish and she will do her best to advise you.'

Violetta was startled to find her father's thick arms closing round her shoulders. The inexplicable feeling of home soothed her.

'Some day,' he whispered, 'You may come to learn why people do certain things. Often, it is with the best of intentions. Until then, I thought it about time you had a friend.'

CHAPTER FIVE

YEAR C-7 Month 5/10

Violetta

Violetta hauled an ancient tome between her arms while reciting passages of Peradonian history. Three years had brought the pair closer and Violetta no longer saw Jermise as her mother's replacement, but as a role model to be admired.

They strolled through the Royal Gardens at their leisure, sampling rose flavoured Dal berries from the pockets of their crimson robes. It was no secret that Violetta had blossomed into a dazzling beauty. She knew, having recently turned Fifteen, that she would soon be expected to take a husband, yet the princess' desires lay elsewhere.

Violetta lowered the book from her gaze. When the light hit the plants just right, a scintillating explosion of colours burst forth. She shot a quick glance around the gardens, drinking in the sight before the dust-riddled tome rose back to her face.

'Highness?'

Violetta teetered over with the weight of the book, almost knocking Jermise from her feet.

'S-sorry,' she whined, and righted herself.

Jermise simply rolled her eyes, a playful smile beginning to form.

'Tell me princess, how did Peradon come to be separated?'

Jermise had been quick to fire questions her way all morning. A pair of hazelnut eyes peered up from the tome. 'When hatred emerged between those with different Gods, the four Arch Mages decided it would be best to split up Peradon's people.'

'Correct.'

Jermise led them to a peaceful enclosure, where a shaded bench provided them a brief respite from the sun. Here, they were free to gaze at the plants, every colour of the rainbow reflecting the sunlight.

Violetta settled her skirts about her knees, resting the book there with it's pages propped open. Her eyes remained fixed on the yellowing parchment of Peradon's history.

Thoughts of her coming responsibilities raced around Violetta's brain. She took a deep breath, preparing to go on with her lesson when a hand caught her arm.

'Princess, what's wrong?'

Violetta turned her back to her new-found friend, opting for a view of some lilies nearby.

Jermise peered out from beneath the protection of the shade.

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'It's a beautiful day. It would be a shame not to walk a little more, don't you think?'

Violetta stared into the distance. A single tear traced her cheek.

'Perhaps I should give you some time alone.'

Jermise seemed about to stretch her legs when Violetta snatched up her hands.

'Wait!'

She stole her gaze away from the flowers. Her eyes now fixed onto Jermise, pleading with her to remain seated.

Jermise settled herself back onto the bench. Violetta wondered if she should tell her confidant about her deepest desire. She saw no way to obtain freedom from her approaching duties. Nonetheless, she regarded Jermise once more, her lips trembling. Eyes like dazzling emeralds stared back.

When Violetta's words failed her, Jermise squeezed her hands in hers.

'Vi, what is it that causes you such pain?' she asked.

The princess shuddered at the pet-name, having been given it soon after they'd met. It was a friendly, yet patronizing reminder of her youth.

'I don't—' Violetta bit back tears. Her tongue ran across her ruby lips as she forced deep breaths into her lungs. 'I don't think I can be a princess.'

A weight seemed to lift off her shoulders, floating up into the warm summer breeze. Jermise blinked, her face blank.

'And why not?'

Violetta could feel the roots of her sorrow taking hold once more. She gazed across at Jermise, her eyes ringed by crimson circles.

'I just want to be free.'

Breath blasted out from Jermise's lips. Violetta noted a look of hurt cross her face, which was quick to be replaced by another blank mask.

'You wish to be free? How more so? To glide on the air like the birds do, to swim in the lakes like the fish?'

Jermise held her arms out to the sky, as though beseeching some all-powerful creator to strike some sense into the young princess.

'Jermise, please!'

Violetta's lips were beginning to tremble. She wondered if she had said too much. It wouldn't be long before her father heard of this and then he too would voice his objections.

'I just want to live my own life, to not be bound by duties I did not choose. You know what my father shall expect of me now.'

'Expect?' cried Jermise. 'Like every princess of your age come before you? Like your mother?'

Violetta cradled her head to her chest. Her eyes closed as she gave a weak nod.

'Yes.'

Violetta could see that this conversation was leading nowhere and so returned her attention to the indigenous plant-life, hoping to be spared the daggers in her confidant's eyes. A moment of silence existed between

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them. Just one moment, but it was that moment alone that saw Violetta's mood transform.

'Jermise?'

'My lady?'

Jermise's voice still held some tension, but on glancing round, her face became a blank sheet once more. Violetta's eyes were focused on something in the distance.

'Who is that man over there?' she asked.

Jermise spun round to where the princess was pointing. Her slim finger was raised towards the Northern gate, where a familiar figure could be seen approaching.

A young man with copper hair and an aura of confidence was striding past the king's guards. His tall frame exceeded them both, his muscles having grown some of late, making him almost unrecognisable.

'That's Xyhoni, my lady. Your father says you used to be rather close.'

Violetta felt her face light up. *Of course. Xyhoni.* She thought back to her grim appearance in the Earth realm, where he had gifted her with a preserved red rose. She envisioned the sweet young man he had been back then. Because of him she'd felt her sorrows lessen, something akin to affection replacing the loss that had shadowed her heart.

Without thinking, Violetta raced for the garden gates, toward the boy who'd made her feel alive.

'Princess?'

Jermise bent down to retrieve the ancient book, setting it back on the bench when she noticed the direction of the path she was taking.

'Princess!'

Violetta daren't stop. She had often thought of Xyhoni and his kind words. Now, fate had brought them together. Her mind raced with the excitement of her thoughts as she halted before him, panting for breath.

'X-Xyhoni?'

The young man turned. His emerald eyes locked onto hers, confusion soon replaced with joy. Xyhoni grinned back, noticing the slight flush to her cheeks.

'Do you always run when there are guests?'

His smile turned playful as Jermise caught up, her breathing heavy from exertion.

Xyhoni immediately averted his gaze from her charge. 'Jermise, a pleasure.'

'Y-your Grace.'

Jermise bowed low to acknowledge the boy, her breaths coming in ragged bursts. Xyhoni was polite enough to incline his head before bowing down to the young princess, 'It is wonderful to see you, but if you'll excuse me ladies, I'm actually here to relay a message to the king.'

Xyhoni reached a hand down to a dark satchel which swung from his hip, producing a rather battered-looking scroll.

'This matter is of some urgency so I must be leaving you.' His eyes paused to linger on Violetta. 'Regrettably so.'

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He inclined his head once more, before striding off to tend to business.

'Well, that was—' Jermise paused. 'Violetta?'

The princess gazed down, her lips trembling. *An urgent matter?* That's what Xyhoni had said. The dark thoughts that had plagued her every day since the death of her kin had come crashing back against the shore of her mind. Without realizing, she'd grasped Jermise's arm, pulling her into their first ever hug.

It took a moment for Jermise to register what was happening. Violetta was drawn into her confidant's arms where she began to sob, clutching the young woman's robes. 'My lady, what's wrong?'

Jermise rested a hand against the princess' head, stroking the golden waves of her hair.

'You really don't wish to be queen, do you?'

Violetta's reply came amongst fitful sobs.

'No.'

As Jermise cradled her sobbing form, Violetta thought back to her mother and everything she had been to her. More than anything, she thought about the pressure she had faced as a queen; the endless tasks which sapped her strength, the sacrifices she had to make in order to achieve peace.

'There, there,' cooed Jermise. 'You know, freedom is not all it seems.'

Violetta's sobs died down a little. She leant back, blinking away tears that still longed to be freed.

'How can you say that? Would you revel at being a prisoner, to have only duty as your constant companion?'

Violetta thought of the day she had turned fifteen; how her father had begun to instruct her on the matter of suitors. Jermise gripped the princess' chin between her thumb and forefinger.

'Violetta, pay heed to what I'm about to tell you.' She lifted the girl's face, gazing into her eyes with a wistful expression. 'You are only a prisoner if you believe you are.'



Her father's throne room had always felt like it had its own agenda. It was inviting and yet overwhelming. Everywhere you looked, gold. Blinding. Jermise had brought Violetta straight in from the gardens, intent to find out what urgent matter had arisen.

King Eagan rested within his throne, his dark eyes once again turned to steel. Violetta followed her confidant down the narrow room. She felt a squeeze of reassurance offered by Jermise's hand and inhaled until her lungs were full.

It wasn't long before King Eagan noted his daughter's presence and afforded Jermise a quick glance, to which she gestured for him to continue his business. Violetta glanced up at him. He looked so large and imposing as he sat there; a true leader of men, strong and wise. His gaze returned to regard Xyhoni, who stood but three paces from the throne.

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The king's well-travelled face held a look of concern, which spoke volumes of some hidden trouble; trouble Violetta would likely uncover soon.

'Your Majesty, this message was delivered to Lord Jork. He sent for me personally, to bring it to you.'

The king arched an eyebrow at the boy.

'The source?'

'Unknown, Sire. The parchment is generic, with no royal seal of any kind.'

King Eagan reached up a hand to begin stroking his beard. 'Are you saying this message was not meant for Jork?' Xyhoni gulped.

'I am, Highness. It was most definitely meant for you.'

All eyes were on the flustered king. Violetta watched as dark images pooled within her father's eyes, making his handsome features age decades in a glance.

'Why send a message meant for another, to a different realm? And why request that you deliver it? Has Jork a shortage of staff?'

Violetta saw Xyhoni glance at his feet.

'Who knows Sire. Perhaps our mystery informant has a flare for the dramatic.'

His eyes passed across Violetta's face, sending a feeling of warmth rushing through her.

'Perhaps.'

Xyhoni raised an olive hand, signalling that there was still more to be said.

'Highness, as decreed by Lord Jork of the Air Realm, you are to depart for his Castle at your earliest

convenience.' Eagan considered the young man before him.

'Very well. Next week, when the High Council meets.'

CHAPTER SIX

Ryore

In the cool reaches of his tower room, Emperor Ryore lay sleeping. Dreaming. Since his ascension to the Frost Realm's throne, he'd had visions of such illustrious beauty; visions of *her*. At scarcely nineteen years of age, Ryore had inherited many responsibilities, most of which he considered unfavourable.

Tonight's dreams proved more troublesome than most. Ryore tossed and turned, pestered by dark images and crude phantoms. It was always she who managed to save him. Princess Violetta of the Flame Realm. Ryore remembered how beautiful she'd been, even at first sight.

He envisaged hair like fine-spun gold, falling down past the nape of her neck. Her eyes, like miniature suns within chocolate pools, stared into the deepest reaches of his soul. He felt such a powerful longing for her; an intense savagery that could not be quenched. If only he could have her. They would produce the perfect heir, from her supple young body and his brilliant mind.

Ryore's eyes flashed open. Beads of sweat licked his lean frame, his hands shaking as he adjusted to the

darkness. He felt the usual layer of frost roll over his limbs, familiar and cool, and raised a finger to trace the crooked scar on his cheek. *If she saw me, what would she think of me now?* His father's dying words called out to him through the lonely night. *Arlas will lead you to your destiny.* Ryore had never known what those words meant.

He shot up, turning to glance out of the small arch that served as the tower's window. The early hours of dawn greeted Ryore like an old friend. As usual, the Frost estate's grounds were draped in a glistening blanket of snow. There was a time when Ryore thought it looked like a dream world; the sort of place that children long to frequent, playing for hours until finally forced to retire. There had been few such occasions for him and his brother. Sadly, no longer. Since their childhood, Fadius had grown to be deceptively cunning, finding any way he could to spite Ryore's plans.

Presented with such a magnificent view, Ryore found himself reminded of Violetta's beauty. She had recently turned fifteen, a mere four years his junior. He had awaited this year with relish, for now the young lady could be properly courted. If only he could learn of her desires. He was certain that he could make her love him.

Ryore's eyes lit up. There was a way he could learn of the princess' plans; a way to uncover her heart's desires. He recalled, from his younger years, the day he'd obtained his greatest treasure; an artefact which could locate whatever a person sought. He had named it *The All Seeing Lense*.



Five Years Prior

The cave smelt something ghastly. Ryore lurked outside in the bitter cold with nothing but an old sword he'd swiped from a guard. His father had sent him on an important quest, to slay the ancient beast within. He had commanded Ryore not to use magic, for this was an ancient creature immune to such power. It was one to be killed by blade alone. Ryore had named it *Laure*, for it was thought to have been a thing of myth, until it developed the nasty habit of luring lost citizens to their grizzly deaths.

Ryore peered into an entrance as dark as pitch. He did his best to remember the quest's importance. His father had entrusted this task to him and he alone had to see it through.

The first step into his future had been one of pained surprise. Ryore felt his ankle smart as what was likely a jutting outcrop of rock scraped along his tender flesh. Wishing to avoid a repeat of this mishap, Ryore ran his free hand along the cave walls. All around him, sand fell in clusters, no small amusement in a darkness that threatened to consume his soul.

Ryore had barely taken five steps when a low growl sounded from the depths of the cave. His muscles tightened, sweat forming along his palms and running rivulets down his back. His fingers tightened on the hilt

of his sword as the sound grew into a shriek worse than any he'd ever heard.

Ryore's mind reeled with the pain of it. He breathed in the scent of the darkness, summoning his strength.

'Aeos liptus luminos,' he whispered.

A cold blue flame sparked into life across Ryore's right palm. He was lucky to have learned to conjure Frost-Fire. It was rare for anyone but Seers to be able to call on the *gift of the gods*.

Ryore held his palm up at chest height, illuminating a small sphere of the cave before him. Seeing only darkness, Ryore formed the light into an orb, motioning for it to hover just above his head when a low grunt sounded behind him. Ryore stilled himself. He strained his ears against the dying echoes, waiting for the same guttural growl to come again.

A rush of cool air sped towards him as something huge struck out from the darkness. Ryore dove to one side, all too aware of bits of cave ceiling beginning to shake themselves free. He struggled forward, gaining a few measly inches when three sharp prongs caught hold of his leg. Ryore felt the air wheeze out of his lungs. His sword lay just out of reach. He grasped for it, nails scraping in a pitiful attempt to reach the hilt. The sound of ragged breathing accompanied his own as something hot and fluid seeped onto his thighs.

Ryore knew his adversary would be fast. He just needed to be faster. Swallowing all fear, Ryore turned, his mid-section bent at an awkward angle and felt the searing sting of something slicing up through his cheek. His head

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swung back, sweat dripping down the centre of his garb. Ryore reached a finger up to glide along the point of his tattered flesh, only for it to come away with the stench of blood. He glanced up, determined to get a good look at the beast that had dealt such damage.

A monstrous creature howled before him, towering just below the expansive ceiling. He cringed as its muscles began to tense, knowing the beast could easily out-pace him. This was it. It had already sliced his cheek apart and now it would crush him. The feeling of his eyes watering ashamed Ryore. A man was supposed to accept his death with dignity.

Ryore summoned what little strength he had left when a sudden thought struck him as odd. Why hadn't the beast attacked yet? His eyes roamed across its rippling form. He knew better than to make any sudden movements, but couldn't resist another attempt at reaching his sword.

Blood mingled with the sweat and dirt that now coated Ryore's arms as he stretched toward the one thing that could bring his salvation. He heard the guttural growl just as his fingers brushed cold metal. He inched forward, fighting for a grip on the ornate weapon when three familiar claws ripped a hole in his tunic. With ease, the creature began to drag him away. *Weakling*, came a voice in his head. Ryore's hands began to clench. Delving deep into his reserves of energy, he threw his arm out, into the darkness before him.

A dull clang signalled Ryore's fingers having caught steel. He gripped the hilt of his sword in one hand, noting that the pressure on his leg was suddenly less than before.

It was at the last moment that Ryore heard the beast swing. With all of his strength he rolled to the side, stabbing the sword point into the beast's leg. A deafening howl told him that it had done its job. Feeling the creature release hold of his legs, Ryore leaped up and increased the distance between them. The beast roared.

Ryore was forced to dip down as the creature slashed at the air where his head had been only moments before. The blade swung up to meet its attack. The clash of metal against claw rang through his head. Ryore arced his blade up once more, just as the beast attempted another lunge. The swing failed and the creature, roaring, knocked him back into a bed of rock. Pointed spines bit into Ryore's delicate flesh. He could smell blood; his blood, dripping down his face and spewing from the gash in his arm.

Wiping a trickle of it away from his sleeve, Ryore tightened his hold on the forged steel. He felt frost glide up the hilt of the blade, but remembered his father's warning that only mortal weapons could vanquish this creature. With his gaze fixed on the beast, Ryore counted numbers down in his head and waited for the ice to withdraw from his blade.

As the creature lunged toward him, Ryore thrust his blade out once more, squinting his eyes closed and praying that he was shown mercy this day. An almighty squelch signalled the blade meeting its target. Ryore's eyes blinked open. The blade had plunged deep into the

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creature's head, prompting a high-pitched squeal as it pierced its brain. The ground vibrated below his feet as the beast's enormous form began to shudder. Ryore could already feel it falling and was lucky enough to dodge its corpse.

Ryore took a moment to catch his breath. His limbs ached from exertion, making it a struggle to keep himself upright. Feeling strength flow back into his being, he turned. A gargantuan body greeted him, its tusked snout facing forward. Using the walls as his crutch, Ryore edged forward. The flickering blue orb floated above him, illuminating the motionless beast.

It didn't look at all of this world. Ryore knelt beside it, yanking his weapon from the depths of its forehead. He'd gotten lucky. The blade had passed into the creature's brain stem. Its head, similar to that of a boar's, had been left with a death snarl, a wicked tusk jutting out from each side. Its body didn't match at all, resembling a large feline, with claws springing out from four fur-lined paws. Ryore thought for a moment that it must have been stitched together, two exotic creatures bound to one miserable existence. He prepared to stand, when a second source of light caught his eye.

A green glow lit up the beast's vast maw. Ryore couldn't recall noticing it before and shuffled closer to part the beast's lips. A foul odour expelled from the orifice, causing Ryore to gag. Feeling brave, he plunged in both hands. The beast's gelatinous insides curled round his palms as he dug into the creature's throat.

Ryore refrained from breathing in the stench, feeling for anything sharp amongst the foulness of the thing's dying flesh. He was starting to consider retracting his arms when his hand closed around a solid lump. With a vicious tug, he heaved it out, bits of skin tearing away from their host.

Ryore gasped. Between his palms rested a glass sphere, the source of the green glow. His hands shook as he held it close, examining its surface, which was still partially covered by a crimson film. Ryore gazed at his treasure in adoration. Countless thoughts overrode his recent terror. What was this strange artefact and what did it do? A small smile spread onto his lips, faltering when another thought jolted to the front of his mind. His father would be expecting him back.

Ryore took one last look at the monstrous beast and stored the orb safely in the crook of one arm. With the other he gripped the coarse rock of the wall, using it as an anchor to find his way out. He'd won. He'd travelled into the depths of this cave and prevailed. His new-found treasure was but a delightful bonus.

Ryore paused as he reached the moonlit entrance of the cave. There was only one reason his father could have sent him to slay such a beast. Jugan wanted his son dead.



Present Day

Ryore banished the memories of his ordeal as he scoured the dungeon from top to toe, impatient to meet his love once more. She was the one thing that drove him on. He needed to know of her upcoming plans and whether he could form a part of them. His hand went to the scar embedded into the core of his cheek. *Perhaps she could find the inner beauty in me.*

Having stumbled into a shabby excuse for a room, Ryore immediately spotted a black chest. It lay forgotten in a far corner, covered with a layer of dust so thick that he almost mistook it for a grime-ridden cloth.

He rushed forward, noting a faded skull and crossbones which were etched deep into the metal lid. Ryore bit his lip and flung it open. Relief glowed upon his face. There in the chest was the familiar green light, winking back.

'Ah, Sire, there you are!'

Ryore shuddered at the sudden infiltration into his privacy. 'What is it?' he snarled.

'They're requesting your presence in the throne room.'

Ryore stepped into the icy throne room. He grit his teeth, allowing his breathing to level out before his anger got the best of him. If that happened, his powers would surely spike, raging out of his control. He sensed the fear of the counsellors before him and grinned as they cringed away from his throne. Ryore had seen that look many times before. It was a look he'd encountered a lot in his

youth whilst his father had reigned on the great Frost throne. It was a fear like no other; fear that even a few words of courage may have you locked up or worse hanged, buzzards given the privilege to pick you clean just hours later.

Every pair of eyes in the room turned on him. Ryore felt their collective glare, condemning him as usual for his so-called frittering of the royal coin. He stared them down, one by one as he seated himself in his rightful place.

'State your concerns,' he commanded.

His voice possessed a bored tone, a sort of cold drawl that made skin slither. He sat studying every man, woman and creature between, delighting in the way their eyes flitted about or their lips creased into thin lines.

It wasn't long before an elderly man sought courage and took a few tentative steps in Ryore's direction.

'Sire, we are somewhat worried about your priorities as far as the realm's wealth is concerned.'

Ryore sneered.

'My priorities are the realm's priorities,' he offered in a most modest tone. 'I am sorry if certain areas of my expenditure offend you, but what do you then suggest?'

Nobody had the courage to speak. Ryore sighed. *No suggestions of their own, yet they complain all day and night to me.* He paused for thought before standing from his glittering throne.

'First, I declare that we are to stop our yearly pilgrimage around the four Realms and are to raise taxes by fifteen percent!'

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Many of the counsellors flushed crimson. Ryore watched as the same white-haired gentleman took a deep breath, raising his voice to be sure he was heard.

'Raise taxes for whom, Sire?'

He shied away from the emperor's shadow, worried that maybe he'd spoken too soon.

'Everyone!'

Ryore took to his throne once more, stroking the fine stubble that lined his chin.

The old man let out a gasp. The counsellors behind him halted to stare, sweat lining their furrowed brows.

'Sire!' he pleaded, 'The poor can't pay as is!'

Ryore felt his eyes roll. He longed for this meeting to come to an end. He grew tired of their nonsense and this wretched room.

'S-Sire?'

'Ah, Albius!'

Ryore Spied the high-priest lurking in the shadows. He shot him a broad grin, signalling his readiness for departure. These people had asked for his guidance and now they had it. If they refused to accept his compromises, then the blame would simply fall to them. Now they would listen to his top advisor.

Ryore strode away from the throng of people, whipping his dark robe about himself. He met with Albius half way down the shimmering room and motioned him close at the risk of being overheard.

'Albius, take over for me. I have business elsewhere that I need to attend to.'

'Sire.'

Albius swept his robes away to perform a bow, his master giving the scene one final glance before he swept out through the throne room doors.

Ryore knew that today was a day for business, but already it had dragged him down. The room's harsh choice of lamps had blinded him to the counsellor's pleas. He'd been ready to accept reasonable demands, but he was a far cry from understanding business. Ryore knew well enough that what they truly sought was the guidance they'd received from his late father. Emperor Jugan had been an avid businessman; highly educated, well-travelled, and with a good mind for monetary gain. Emperor Ryore was none of these things.

The young flame princess still hung on his mind, haunting his thoughts like a mocking spectre. Ryore needed to see her again and no manner of duties would preoccupy him. He wanted to get back to the lense.

The tower remained dusty and derelict, hardly a room Ryore's father would have approved of. He strode over to where a stone pedestal waited with the lense. His usual seat was warm to the touch. Strange, he thought. He sat down and let his eyes drift shut, searching the surrounding passages for his brother's presence. When Ryore was certain that he was alone, he began tuning into his more private thoughts.

Ryore knew that it would take time and good concentration to find his love. He breathed in the stale air and re-imagined her gorgeous smile. All other thoughts became obsolete, slipping away as he touched his forehead to the lense's cool glass.

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'Hmm?'

A sudden whirring enveloped Ryore. His cold eyes snapped open to glimpse a blue light twinkling back from the lense. It spread out from its centre, an elusive form of mental energy. Ryore listened as the faintest tinkling strained through the chaos. It grew sharp, morphing into the beginnings of a quiet conversation. He pressed his ear against the lense, able to pick out the voices of King Eagan and his sublime daughter.

'You summoned me, father?'

'Yes, my dearest. As you are aware, you are my soul heir, but as a woman you will not be allowed to succeed me unless you find yourself a suitor first.'

So it was true. Violetta had finally come of age. A short silence hung between the voices before Ryore heard King Eagan sigh.

'You are fifteen now. Tradition urges you to find a suitor.'
'But father-'

'There are many fine choices available to you, but our citizens would benefit much more if it were someone of power and integrity. Do you understand?'

Another bout of silence. Ryore licked his lips, eager to hear the rest in case there were some part he could play. *'You could use someone who can help you to rule after I have come to...rest,'*

Ryore noted that the last word had been added rather delicately.

'Father, I don't want to take the throne!'

Ryore's breathing hastened. No. This couldn't be right.

'Excuse me? Just what do you mean by this?'

'Father, I want to live my life free from these duties. I was never meant to be heir, and I—'

'No! No, you weren't, but sadly this is the situation we're in. As much as it pains me, you're my only choice.'

His only choice? A low blow if ever there was one, thought Ryore.

'Then I refuse. When I turn Sixteen, I shall renounce my title. I don't want to end up like Mother!'

Violetta's footsteps echoed through the lense.

'Stop right there, young lady! You will be queen whether you like it or not! You will find a suitor and that will be that!'

Ryore thought he heard a faint sob, before the sound of flames sprang into life.

'You would do well to respect your Elders, daughter. Who knows, you may change your mind about this freedom nonsense.'

'Yes father.'

She was defeated far easier than Ryore would have liked. *Now, what of your first Season Council meeting? I trust that you shall be in attendance?'*

Ryore's ears pricked up. The council meeting? How could he have been so stupid as to forget. This could be his big chance.

'It is in two days, my lady.'

Ryore's eyebrows arched as a third voice chimed out through the lense. It was higher. Sweeter. Of course. Violetta's confidant. Ryore had heard rumours about Jermise. She was said to be surprisingly beautiful, with hair the colour of roaring flames. Still, no matter how stunning, none could hold a candle to Ryore's love.

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'Who knows highness, perhaps a potential suitor shall reveal themselves there.'

Ryore's heart pounded like a steel drum.

'Then it is settled. Violetta, in two days you shall attend your first Season Council meeting and I expect you to be well-behaved by then. You are dismissed.'

Ryore parted from the shimmering orb, having been satisfied with what he'd learnt. He rubbed at his aching temples, an irritating side effect of using the lense. The next council meeting was but two days away, to be held within the haunting Air realm.

Though Ryore knew he needed to ready himself, he could not shake the uneasy feeling that he always got from thoughts of that Realm. *Arlas will lead you to your destiny*, cooed the voice in his head.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Violetta

The council meeting was approaching fast. Violetta sat in her private chambers, staring at her reflection in the pristine glass of an ancient dresser. Her stomach had become a ball of nerves. She tried to focus on something comforting, but even the imagined images of her mother and brother did little to ease the worry gnawing inside her. Her father's harsh words replayed through her mind.

'This is the situation we're in. As much as it pains me, you're my only choice.'

His only choice? Violetta felt tears spring to her eyes. She could already feel the crushing weight of her father's kingdom beginning to rest upon her shoulders. Everyone was expecting great things from her, yet she still felt so fragile, with hopes and desires that were yet to be explored, the greatest of which was to live a free life. Alone. Violetta almost laughed. She hardly knew the meaning of such a word. Privacy was rare in her world, her duties closing in on her youth and what little freedom she'd ever had.

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Violetta wished that her father could see through her eyes. Even if she managed to marry for love, death and despair would lurk round every bend. They could catch you off guard at any moment and make you mourn your entire existence. She cupped her face in her hands. She never wanted to experience the same depth of loss as her father had.

Violetta forced back further tears, ignoring the knock upon her chamber door.

'Princess, I'm coming in.' The chamber door creaked open, revealing Jermise's solemn face. 'I've been instructed to get you ready for the council meeting.'

Violetta watched her in the reflection of the mirror. She padded forward, her eyes ringed by crimson circles.

'I know that you feel like your world is a prison.' Jermise reached out to grasp Violetta's shoulder; an action that was met with a gentle shrug. 'I assure you, this world isn't as bad as you think.'

With reluctance, Violetta accepted Jermise's offer of help. Her first council meeting was but two hours away and she needed all the help she could get.

'Shall we continue our study of Peradonian history?'

Jermise ran a crystal comb through the princess' hair, holding her gaze through the dresser mirror.

'Okay.'

Violetta couldn't help but smile at how gentle Jermise was. There was no harsh scraping of her scalp as there had been in her childhood and Jermise always complimented her on her growing beauty.

'How did the four Arch Mages decide to separate their people?'

Violetta thought back to the book they'd been studying, with its musty sheets of yellowed parchment. 'They built a tower and gave their lives to create four unique seals; one for each elemental ability. It is said that they bound each seal to a sacred centre-site and that each new Realm would have only one season; the one which could be associated with its core element.'

Violetta was stunned by her growing knowledge. Jermise set down the crystal comb and admired her work in the reflection of the glass.

'Very good, princess.' Jermise made a vague gesture to Violetta's appearance. 'Well, what do you think?'

Violetta's mouth fell open. Jermise had given her golden hair a silken quality, yet below the fine locks was reflected a pale and somewhat distant girl, whose chocolate brown eyes had begun to dull. Violetta hung her head. She had always been told that she was quite beautiful, but now she considered such compliments as cruel. They were just empty words that slithered out from a passing tongue.

'Vi!' Jermise pulled her hair back from her face. 'Are you thinking about the council meeting?'

Violetta shuddered at the pet-name.

'Yes,' she lied.

She could scarcely bring her head up, for fear that Jermise would discover her deception.

'I understand that you're feeling your father's burden, but would it be so awful to meet a gentleman

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there? Who knows, perhaps he would let you have sway over council matters once you were wed.'

Jermise's words came as a shock to Violetta. She had never considered such a thought and found her mind reeling at the possibilities. Freedom, even if she married? The usual glow seemed to return to her eyes. *What is the chance of me meeting such a generous man?*

Violetta glanced back to her reflection and this time she saw what Jermise envisioned; a beautiful young woman with a courageous spirit.



Violetta stared in awe of the Air realm. The last two hours had seen her nerves eat away at her every thought, but upon dis-embarking the carriage, they seemed to simply melt away.

There was no doubt that the Air realm existed in an everlasting Autumn. It was dreary, but in a way that spoke of rainy days where one could warm oneself by a roaring fire. With the winds standing their hair on end, King Eagan encased Violetta in his arm. She followed him along an ancient bridge. *Death's Bridge*, he'd called it. The Aum River could be heard trickling below.

'Come on, we best get inside.'

King Eagan led his daughter by the hand, leaving his fatherly demeanour at the edge of the bridge. Violetta gazed open-mouthed at the shifting beauty of the Air Realm sky where varying shades of cloud emerged. They

were half-way up the path to Lord Jork's Castle when a faint glow drew their gaze. Several colossal spires had lit up from within, guiding them alongside twin moons.

'Wait!'

King Eagan gripped hold of his daughter's arm, positioning her strategically behind him. Violetta was about to ask what had prompted such behaviour when she spied a lone figure creeping towards them.

'Who goes there?' asked Eagan. The shadowy figure drew close, raising both arms as if to strike. 'Stay back! I'm warning you.'

Violetta heard the familiar whoosh of flames as her father conjured a simple orb in his palms.

'Peace Eagan, it's just me.'

'My lord?'

Violetta peered round her father's side as their host stepped into a patch of moonlight. She shot her father a queer look. To the young princess, it seemed an unusual custom for a ruler to come all this way to escort his guests. Royal or not, it was simply not done.

Lord Jork paused a few feet away. Violetta, feeling that all threat had passed, stepped out from behind her father and gazed upon Jork's moonlit features. Appearance-wise, there was no other, save for the boy at her kin's funeral, that Violetta had ever seen quite like Jork. His hair was a shaggy silver mane, with two crimson eyes which stood alert in their sockets. Violetta couldn't help but lose herself in them. There was something about his intense gaze. It drew her in. Almost like magic.

'Eagan, princess. I apologise for startling you.'

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Lord Jork smiled. Violetta almost fainted. Dagger-like fangs protruded from his gums, lending him the appearance of a folk-lore vampire. The dark robes which shrouded his skeletal form served to emphasise his gaunt flesh.

'My Lord Jork, it is good to see you.'

Eagan's greeting was most sincere, his lips curled into an infectious smile.

Eagan approached their host, his hand outstretched. Jork's face was blank as he considered the hand before him. 'Sorry, Eagan.'

He raised his palm up, signalling for Eagan to make a hasty withdrawal.

'Of course, my apologies.'

Eagan had taught his daughter about Air Mages avoiding physical contact at all costs. The reason had always baffled her. It had something to do with a particular sensitivity of the flesh and coming into contact with opposing magic.

Violetta couldn't take her eyes off their host. She knew that Jork and her father had been friends since childhood and that he'd been entrusted to create her childhood gift; the same ball she had played with on that dark day.

'I apologise for my daughter. It appears she forgot about your...teeth.'

At this, Lord Jork let out a throaty chuckle, though how the concept was laughable, Violetta wasn't sure.

'That's quite all right, Eagan. Come. Best for us to go inside.' Eagan ushered Violetta along at his side, where they followed Jork toward the forbidding castle.

Lord Jork spoke in little more than a whisper. The study walls listened to his every word, now faded to a dull copper. Violetta had taken to wanning herself by a grand fireplace; the only light that appeared to be allowed here. 'Please Jork, the meaning of that message? It has haunted my every waking thought.'

Eagan sat across from Lord Jork, each settled in a leather chair of deep burgundy. Jork considered his friend's words, replying in a voice that was laced with sorrow.

'My apologies for what I'm about to tell you dear friend.'

Violetta watched as Jork set a cup of hot cocoa down beside her. She smiled, to which Jork gave another of his needle-sharp grins. *Please don't ask about the gift*, she thought. Her guilt still knotted her young insides at the pain that it had caused her family.

Her father blew out a long breath as she drew her cup of cocoa to her lips, taking care to blow the rising steam away from the rim.

'The message instructed me to speak with you Jork. The council convenes soon. Let us not waste time with trivial apologies.'

'Yes, quite right, Eagan. You see—'

Jork appeared to be biting back his words. Sensing the tension, Violetta turned to regard him, studying the lines that stood out on his face.

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'Eagan, there is a traitor in our world and we believe they caused your family's deaths.'

Her father had not been expecting such a harsh blow. The fire-light shifted across his face, forming a mask of the most exquisite pain. His hands became restless, gripping the arm of the chair in frustration.

'You lie.'

Both Violetta and her father had considered the deaths as accidental, a freak disturbance in the usual weather of their realm. Violetta knew that her father would have given anything to hear his wife's voice again, or to see Darius' charming smile. In his shoes, she was sure that she'd be just as willing to deny Jork's claims.

'Eagan, you've known me since I was but a boy. You know I've no talent when it comes to falsehoods.'

The king bowed his head and allowed his sombre mood to take him. It was not often that Eagan shed a tear, not even for his beloved wife, yet as he stared at the study floor, a single droplet could be seen on his cheek.

'It cannot be true, Jork. Are you most certain?'

'See for yourself.'

Jork drew back, one hand disappearing into his shadowy robes, to produce a yellowed sheet of parchment. Violetta watched her father accept it.

'Wherever did you get this?'

'Read my friend. All will become clear.'

Eagan held the parchment close. His eyes followed the delicate curves of each letter in turn.

To Lord Jork,

Please relay this message to King Eagan.

*I fear that I am being watched.
I have knowledge that Emperor Jugan,
Of the Frost Realm,
Was involved with a traitor.
They are to blame for Eagan's shortcomings.
Signed Anonymous Year C-4.*

C-4. The year Violetta's life had changed forever. Her father's eyes rose to meet their host, half of his face covered by the now trembling parchment.

'Jork, this message is several years old.' The king's voice seemed steady enough, but there was no mistaking that rage-induced wobble. 'Why?'

'I've no idea. It is possible that our mysterious sender was being watched like they say and that they were simply unable to send the message until recently.'

A look of understanding passed over Eagan.

'Of course. The letter could never be sent while Emperor Jugan still lived. He was a nightmare. If the sender was being watched, then should we expect it to be someone close to him? Perhaps one of his sons?'

Jork nodded.

'That was an initial thought of mine, however, I must say that I do not recognise the hand it was written in.'

Violetta watched with interest as Jork began to massage his shoulders.

'Eagan, I must disclose to you some rumours I have heard.'

Jork's gaze returned to the open fire, where Violetta was doing her best to smile. She knew Lord Jork to be a

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powerful ally but the pale rubies gazing back at her were still enough to make her shiver.

'Rumours?'

'Yes. I fear that somebody may be trying to cause you harm. The deaths of your family are testament enough.'

The king stood, his face streaked with silent tears. 'Their deaths were a tragic accident!'

'No, they weren't. Eagan, you cannot live like this, in denial.'

Eagan stared at his old friend. His eyes reflected disbelief.

'You expect me to sit here and just accept all this, at the whim of some anonymous figure?'

Jork rose to his full height, shooting a glance at the young princess.

Tears spilled from Violetta's eyes.

'What does he mean?'

Her heart raced with the implications of Jork's words. Did this man mean to say that her beloved mother and brother were murdered?

'No, no.'

She whispered beneath her breath, unwilling to believe such obvious lies. Her mother was beloved by all who met her and Darius had never wronged even the smallest of creatures. For them to be taken in the suggested manner would be evidence of an unjust world.

'Father? Please say something.'

Eagan ran his tongue across his lips, searching for the right words. He strode toward his child, pulling her into a firm embrace.

'Thank you for your hospitality, my lord, but I'm afraid we have taken up enough of your time.'

Violetta resisted the urge to wail. She could feel her heart breaking once more, just as it had the night of the mysterious ice storm.

'Come along, sweetheart.'

Her father motioned for her to follow and she did so without hesitation. The council was about to convene. It was best for them to leave their host to prepare.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Month 5/10

Ryore

A colossal shadow towered above Ryore. He glared up at the mighty keep, its size pitiful compared to his fortress back East. Still, Jork's Castle was known as a force to be reckoned with.

Ryore did a quick scan of his surroundings. The light from the twin moons bathed Death's Bridge in a pale glow. Although dark, it seemed sufficient for him to make his way forward, where the grand Castle stood waiting for him.

The past two days had stretched Ryore's patience thin. He tried to suppress a broad grin, knowing that he was about to come face to face with the woman of his dreams.

'Ryore?'

An eerie voice drifted on the wind. Ryore twisted round to find its source. The Darkness housed no other figures. 'Ryore?'

Again the voice came, unmistakable, even above the gurgle of the Aum River below.

The young emperor caught sight of a shadow in his peripheral vision. It was blurred at the edges. Unrecognisable.

'Don't turn? warned the voice.' We wouldn't want you to have an accident now, would we?'

Ryore could feel the speaker's breath on his neck. His body stiffened, ready to strike out.

'What do you want?' he asked.

The unknown figure reached out, clapping him hard on the left shoulder. Its touch was freezing, like a slab of ice had grazed his skin.

'I was hoping you'd be more like your father.' The thing withdrew its icy touch. 'Pity.'

Ryore could stand the torment no longer. At the last word he swung round, sending frost-barbed punches in every direction. To his surprise, his fists met thin air. He stared about the dimly-lit path, frustrated that he'd not caught flesh. There was only him. And the mysterious figure by the castle entrance.

Ryore pounced.

'All right, who sent you?'

He flung his arms around the figure, producing a muffled cry and the scent of burning below.

'Speak, damn you!'

'Let me go you imbecile!'

Ryore relaxed his grip. He stared down at the dark figure, startled to find Lord Jork beneath him. His host's flesh was scarred with fresh burn marks.

'Your Grace!' Ryore shrank back, eyes unmoving. 'I'm terribly sorry. I heard this voice. I thought...!'

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His lips froze, for fear he'd already said too much.

'You thought what?'

Lord Jork straightened to his full height and began brushing off his robes. Ryore watched in awe as the mounds of charred flesh began to heal.

'Nothing, my lord.'

'No lasting harm done, I suppose.' There was an iciness to the lord's tone. 'Touching an Air Mage's skin, the nerve,' he muttered. Now, tell me Master Ryore. This voice, was it deep?'

Ryore's face blanched.

'Yes, it was. How—'

'May I suggest that you avoid any further confrontation.'

At a loss for words, Ryore nodded. He focused on his host's eyes as they glinted, ruby red in the moonlight. There was something within them that held his attention.

Without warning, Ryore felt a rush of air curl tight round his legs, pulling him in the direction of the castle. He watched, frozen as Jork guided him up a winding path before depositing him in front of his abode.

'Let us forget this, Sire. This voice shall do you no more harm.'

Jork's words rang out, as though purposefully raised to inform the shadows which lurked in the night.

Ryore followed his host inside, where he scrutinized every glinting tapestry. He was shown into a plain room with a sconce lit on every wall, where he was told to make himself comfortable.

Ryore had never been the first to arrive. He glanced about the bare council room, its simple design only serving to enhance its nakedness. He sighed. His burning desire to make Violetta's acquaintance had him inextricably flustered.

He stared about, still stung by the way they'd replicated the original council room from his own Estate. Even the tiniest of details remained the same. It was practical. Spacious. Ryore counted eight chairs arranged around the same octagonal table, one side for each of the eight council members that were permitted to sit in on a meeting.

Frustrated by the sheer magnitude of his nerves, Ryore slumped into one of the chairs. He spied a bottle on the table's edge and reached out, persuading the cork to abandon ship. He poured himself a small measure of the fragrant wine, glad to have happened by the glasses behind him. The fruity tang of the beverage hung on his lips. Ryore pushed back his glass, careful not to overdo it.

It wasn't long before the room filled with counsellors, each welcoming the other with their palms pressed together in a sign of good faith. Understandably, none reached out to their host. Of this, Jork appeared to be thankful, for he didn't relish the bums he'd received from Ryore.

Ryore watched with growing disinterest as the other members found their seats and measured out a colourful array of drinks. Lord Jork's younger brother, Arlas, took the seat beside the emperor, his slick silver hair sloping

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down past broad shoulders. He was clad in full battle armour, his sword and shield kept close at hand. Nobody batted an eyelid at this. It was considered normal in the Air Realm for siblings to act as the ruler's personal guard. Ryore doubted his own brother would serve him like that.

The council talked amongst themselves for a time, everything from the weather to Realm politics. Ryore made it his mission to study them ah. He liked to determine the character of others; the strong-willed, the flighty, and the downright mad. He was just beginning to feel comfortable in his game when their host set a barrier of air to block the exit, signalling that the meeting was about to commence. Ryore cast a half-hearted glance his way, until he realized who was standing beside him. It was her. All grown up.

The Flame Realm Princess was ushered to a chair by her father, Eagan, who shadowed her every step. He gave a low bow to their host, rising with mild contempt in his eyes. Ryore scarcely noted his expression. He was unable to steal his eyes from the princess. Her golden hair had only grown more vibrant with time, her chocolate brown eyes ever bright with excitement. She sat against the blank canvas of the wall, a vision of loveliness that no reproduction could do justice.

'Welcome all!' Jork's voice was hoarse, but cut through the room nonetheless, demanding silence. 'As we are all aware, the new magical training schools have yet to be built.' Several council members began to nod.

'It is my intention to have each school built to completion within the following year. Our young people need to learn to defend themselves, lest *accidents* occur.'

Ryore tried to focus on his host's words, but anxiety had a firm grip on his mind. He wanted to speak to his beloved princess. With no interruptions, their host continued.

'I have prepared a proposition for you all to examine. I would like you to read it and if you have no objections, to please sign away your name.'

Jork snapped his fingers. Eight quills floated across from his side of the room, complete with the same number of miniature ink wells. Ryore drained the last of his wine, just as the papers were passed round the table. He skim read his own copy, making sure to sign the bottom line. He had no worries regarding the schools that were to be built. He knew that magic in his home Realm had already died out, but why not give his citizens a little false hope.

Violetta and her father could be seen signing their own copies, each handing them back without a second thought. Jork stood up, arms raised.

'Counsellors! It is my honour to announce that the proposal passes by a majority vote.'

The small gathering broke out in a cheer. They rose as one, their hearty cries filling the room.

'Alas friends, I now bring more troubling news.'

Jork's words gave way to silence. He siphoned the oxygen from the sconces, leaving flickering shadows to dance on the walls.

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'My fellow council members, I have recently learned of some foul play.' Several counsellors craned their necks, attempting to sniff out the would-be perpetrator. 'A letter was addressed to myself and King Eagan, suggesting that the deaths of his loved ones were no mere accident.'

Jork's last word was punctuated by the flare of the sconces as they returned to their usual warm glow. Ryore glanced to his left and gasped. Arlas' seat was empty.

The counsellors fell into hushed whispers, eyeing their fellows with daggers in their eyes. None seemed to notice their missing member. Perhaps they simply didn't care. 'Silence!' The last remarks cleared the air before Lord Jork sought to continue. 'Counsellors, we do not yet know the identity of such a person, but if anyone has any further information, they should speak now.'

Jork's ruby eyes skimmed over the faces that were cast in shadow, where they settled briefly upon Ryore. The emperor shifted within his seat, avoiding eye contact as best as he could.

'If not, then you are permitted to leave the council table and to discuss matters of interest at your leisure.'

Ryore watched Jork as he poured himself a fresh glass of crimson liquid, noting the little bubbles that ringed the side. Their host had already withdrawn from his seat and was currently approaching King Eagan and his daughter.

Ryore was about to get up and join them when a gaggle of servants entered the room. Jork must have temporarily removed the block on the door. His staff weaved through the cramped room, carrying trays of

blood red liquor, which they hurried to set down. Then, just as suddenly as they had appeared, the little group vanished from sight. The block on the door re-activated with a low whoosh.

The counsellors helped themselves to drinks, grabbing various flasks and bottles from the new trays. Ryore was the last to choose. He examined each flask for the tiniest of details, his nose hovering over the un-stoppered rims. He settled on a liquid from a small round flask, measuring it out to inspect its rust like colour.

Ryore took a first tentative sip. The liquid hit his tongue in a cool burst, it was sudden, refreshing, with an after-taste which seemed strangely familiar. He turned to regard the other guests, who were now all deep in conversation. King Eagan and his daughter had since moved on, leaving their host alone to collect his thoughts.

When talk turned to the growing poverty of the colder Realms, Ryore found himself in a spot of trouble. Citizens were suffering, particularly those that inhabited the poorer areas of the Frost Realm. The counsellors had taken to refilling their glasses, surrounding Ryore in a loose circle where they refused to let him evade their concerns.

Questions were fired from all sides on how they could better the quality of life for those that were affected, or why the emperor had not yet seen fit to repair the housing of his own people. Ryore threw off all unwanted enquiries. He never liked to be cornered in

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these sorts of matters and much preferred to be the quiet observer that brooded over his own ideas.

Growing tense from his comrade's constant probing, Ryore forced his way through the closing circle. He stepped out towards the room's edge where their distinguished host had been watching the feud. A wry smile pulled at the sides of Jork's face.

'Emperor Ryore.'

Having acknowledged his fellow ruler, Jork gestured at the space beside him, suggesting that Ryore occupy it while given the chance.

Ryore waited for his breath to return. He hadn't a head for parties. Even as a child he'd detested large gatherings. There were always those who could not hold their drink, or the mysterious tricksters who longed to spin tales from yards of lies.

Ryore swirled the crimson fluid around his glass, his eyes fixed on his distinguished host.

'My lord, when should we expect the first of the new schools to be built?'

Lord Jork flashed him a cold stare.

'Why so interested, Ryore? Your citizens have less magic to speak of than ours.'

Ryore felt himself retreat, but Jork refused to stand down.

'If you must know, the first are to be built in the Earth and Flame Realms. I feel that they will benefit most. As for when we build, I hope to start proceedings within the next few months.'

Jork's tone held an undercurrent of resentment. While the Air Realm's previous rulers had merely tried to breed magic out of their citizens, the Frost Realm had succeeded, keeping power strictly within the royal lineage.

Eager to avoid the topic of his ancestors, Ryore glanced in the direction of the Flame Princess, who had taken to properly introducing herself to the counsellors.

'She appears to be rather fond of Politics.' Ryore gestured in Violetta's direction. 'There's a good intellect there.'

Lord Jork's stare continued to darken, his hands trembling with unseen rage.

'I wouldn't get any ideas if I were you.'

Ryore stared back. His big blue eyes glistened like those of a month-old pup.

'I don't know what you're referring to. I'd merely like to discuss some matters of importance.'

With that Ryore strode away from his host, toward the woman he saw in his dreams.

Ryore felt himself breaking out in a sweat. Violetta captivated him. In all ways, she was his perfect mate. Beautiful, charming, intelligent. She had everything a man could want in a wife. *Have some nerve boy!* For once, the voice was right. Ryore needed his courage to speak with such a fine woman, but his mind was running in all directions at once. He was almost upon them and wondered what he could say to such a glorious creature? He was already coated in sweat, a look which wouldn't help in any event.

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Ryore paused and did all he could to refrain from the idea of touching her. If he truly wanted Violetta, then he would have to learn to bide his time.

'Emperor Ryore?'

King Eagan stepped into Ryore's path.

'Highness.'

The king's steely gaze bore into him.

'May I present my beloved daughter, the Princess Violetta.' Eagan stepped aside, revealing his daughter. The young girl's beauty had Ryore entranced. He stared, in awe of the gentle smile which worked to gradually lift his sorrows. Her hair hung down in silken waves, framing brown eyes which sparkled with pure intellect.

'Highness.'

The miniature suns in her eyes glistened. For a moment Violetta's mouth fell as she stared at him, before she closed it to smile with those plump lips.

Ryore resisted touching the familiar scar that ran along his cheek. He wondered if it frightened her with the way she subconsciously brushed at her arm.

'A pleasure, Sire.'

He extended his hand to her, doing his best not to tremble as her velvet-soft palm graced his hardened flesh.

Feeling brave, Ryore darted a look below the princess' neck-line, where a gold dress hugged her every sumptuous curve. He sought to calm his mind, for this was his moment to dazzle her, just as she dazzled the room with her presence. With a wavering breath, Ryore bowed.

'The pleasure is all mine, princess.'

Ryore realized his face risked brushing her skirt and righted himself just in time to see the king's thin smile. There was pain there. Ryore could sense it.

He diverted his attention back to the princess, who had been glancing back and forth between the pair.

'How are you finding your first council meeting?' he asked. Violetta brightened at his question.

'Actually, I'm—'

'I'm sorry, Emperor. Jork!' Eagan grasped Violetta's arm, darting a quick glance in their host's direction. 'But we must be off. Business to attend to.'

Jork gazed into the king's eyes, nodding that he understood. His hand flicked out in a dismissive gesture. With a sudden pop, the block on the door vanished, allowing Eagan (and Ryore's only love) to leave without another word.

He had come so close and had watched her leave. Like a young boy who loses a favourite toy, curses flew round Ryore's brain. He had worked hard to remain visibly pleasant, yet he could feel anger tearing through him, his powers raging just below the surface of his control.

He glanced about the council room, where the odd face stared, only to turn away again. Ryore let his eyes drift shut. He sought to get a hold of his power, remembering how urgently he needed to keep them in check.

This was not the time for Ryore to lose his head. He thought of the princess, reflecting on the character of the young woman she'd grown to be. Ryore had half-

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expected a spoilt china doll with countless pearls strung tight round her neck. He'd been pleasantly surprised to find that she wasn't.

Nothing looked able to taint a pure soul such as the one he glimpsed behind her eyes. Violetta had indeed become a fine woman; one of beauty, intelligence and grace combined. Her coyness only drew him to her. It was a trait that Ryore intended to use.

CHAPTER NINE

Month 6/10

Violetta

Violetta blinked open her eyes, noting how her hands gripped the sides of her pillow as her lungs expanded with the first delicious breath of morning. Her nightmares were back. Her latest escapade had seen Lord Jork's childhood gift to her transform into a glass vial, which began to drain away her life. Violetta's spine tingled at the mere thought of it. She paused to think about her childhood treasure, stowed away in the depths of her room. For months now she had thought of fetching it, yet no matter how much time passed, Violetta couldn't banish her feelings of guilt.

Violetta thought back a week to her first council meeting. She'd found it rather illuminating and replayed the details through her mind.

She had been acquainted with many interesting new people; various dignitaries and the like. Then there was the Emperor Ryore. She recalled the man's marine eyes and how they appeared to hide a secret within. He seemed a strange character, with that jagged scar that

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both intrigued and terrified her. Violetta remained curious as to how he'd acquired it, but had refrained from asking at the risk of appearing rude.

She tried to put Ryore from her mind for now and made to wash the night from her skin. After an effort of vigorous scrubbing, Violetta returned to her bed chambers, glad to be feeling vaguely human once more. She dressed for the day, her mind filling with promising thoughts; of dreams and a life beyond the control of others.

A loud knock pulled her out of her reverie.

'Violetta, are you up?'

Her blood ran cold. She ran to bolt the chamber door. She hadn't expected company and was desperate to spend a few more minutes alone. She sped past the antique dresser, stifling a curse as she stubbed her toe.

'You are late, princess!'

The door opened before she could reach it, revealing the lean figure of Jermise. Violetta blinked.

'I do not remember receiving a summons.'

Her confidant fixed her hands on her hips, looking none too impressed with the princess' tone.

'Your father urgently requests your presence in the throne room and he wants you looking smart. We have a guest.'

Violetta glanced down at the dress she had chosen, it was a silken over-dress in cream, with tiny pearl beads that lined the chest, making its calm colour glisten like crystal. 'But I look fine,' she pleaded.

Jermise shook her head and made for the dresser. She grasped the crystal-handle of a hairbrush, beckoning her charge to sit. 'Shall we?'



Violetta halted at the throne room's entrance. Her father's purpose began to trouble her. It was unlike him to spring a meeting upon her. And a visitor? She took a deep breath, swallowing her fear.

'Highness?' Violetta tiptoed into the room, gazing at her father in his golden throne 'May I approach?'

King Eagan looked pleased that she had come well-groomed and immediately waved his daughter up.

The long strides up the room made Violetta wince. She could see that her father appeared restless, his chin cupped within one of his over-sized palms. There was a look in his eyes that she couldn't place. Whatever it was, it made her skin crawl.

She halted before the throne and did her best to withstand the room's harsh glow. Lord Jork was stood beside her father, smiling in a patient manner. Jork is the guest? *Why is he here?* Violetta drew close, noting the way her father's mood lightened, a broad smile lifting his lips. 'Father. Lord Jork.'

Violetta bowed before the throne. As she rose, she nodded her head to Lord Jork in greeting.

'Welcome, daughter. I trust you slept well?'

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King Eagan's tone was warm and loving, suggesting nothing untoward. Violetta nodded. She didn't wish to worry him with details of her recent dreams. She felt her eyes drifting back over to Jork when she noticed him staring directly at her. A hint of worry crept into his crimson eyes.

'Lord Jork wishes to know your impressions of your first council meeting.'

There it was, their desire to pick her brains. Violetta urged herself to avoid Jork's gaze and chose instead to glance down at her feet.

'Well...'

'Well?'

'It was interesting.'

Violetta felt her fingers itching against the skin of her arm. She prayed that her father would take the bait and would not continue to press the matter. To her surprise, he let out a throaty chuckle.

'Ha! So it was, and what of the Emperor Ryore, my dear?' 'What of him?'

Violetta opted to appear indifferent, but she could already tell that her cheeks had betrayed her. Her nails scratched more fervently against her arm.

'Is he important to you, father?'

Eagan turned to regard Jork. His lips were bent in a half-frown.

'How do you feel about him as a man?'

Violetta's cheeks flared anew. Her father's question was blunt, leaving her at a loss for words. She envisioned the young man; pale as ice, with sea-blue eyes that hid a

dark secret. She studied the image within her mind and had to admit that she found him curious.

'I'm waiting.'

Violetta's lips began to part.

'He seemed nice enough.'

That wasn't the answer the king had expected. His eyes glared out from beneath deep furrows. Before Violetta could ease the tension, he spoke up, his voice raised to a shout.

'It would be wise for you to forget the man! He would make a powerful ally, sure, but it would cost you centuries of our ancestor's honour.'

Violetta stumbled back as her father pounded his fist on the arm of the throne.

'If you chose to pursue such a man, it would be an enormous disgrace! His father is thought to have been a traitor and as always has been, his kind are our sworn enemies! I needn't remind you of what that means!'

His voice cut through Violetta's resolve, nearly reducing her to tears.

Lord Jork cast a solemn glance in her direction. He was a good man, deep down in his heart and Violetta took comfort in the fact that he sympathized with her. It was her father that was acting a fool.

'Honestly, I don't really know what to make of Ryore, father! He seems odd and so I am curious, yes. That by no means suggests that I have some baser desire to pursue him! I would rather be free to live my own life than to rule, be it alone or with someone beside me!'

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Violetta's lips trembled with each word. Lord Jork stepped forward, placing his hands upon his dear friend's shoulders.

'Eagan, there is no need for us to jump to conclusions.'

But the king's eyes had grown steely.

'You shall not forsake your birthright!' he cried. 'You are to succeed me and that is all there is to it! Now, do away with such foolish notions.'

Eagan's words cut through his daughter like blunt knives. He rose from his throne with a frightful scowl.

'You used to like Xyhoni well enough. Why not consider him as a suitor?'

With these words, his voice softened.

Violetta felt herself flush. While it was true that she had feelings for Xyhoni, there wasn't anything that could possibly come of them. He had been like a brother to her ever since Darius had fled from their world. And Ryore? He intrigued her in ways she didn't fully understand, in ways that made her body quiver.

'Shouldn't I be allowed to make my own decisions?' she cried. 'You don't even allow me to practice magic anymore! Why?'

The king shook his head from side to side. Violetta could see his powers beginning to show, the odd flame darting out from his palms.

'You know why,' he seethed. His face was puckered in concentration as he struggled to keep a hold on his magic. 'Now go, before I lose my temper with you.'

Violetta had been happy to oblige her father's wish. She strode back through the brisk corridors, feeling proud for having been honest with him, yet disappointed with his curt response. As she neared her chambers, her thoughts returned to the man her father despised. It had never been her intention to marry. Marriage only led to heartbreak.

Violetta reached her private chambers to find the door already ajar. She crept up to the slight gap that had formed between the frame and pressed her ear as close as she dared. Hearing no voices, she made the decision to enter, unaided.

Violetta closed the door behind her, ignorant of the shadow that trailed her steps. The chamber window beckoned her over. It offered a sublime view of the sunlit gardens below. Extraordinary specimens were in full bloom, squirting their signature scents into the air. It was a sensory safe haven. A place of true peace.

Violetta thought back on her father's words. They jabbed at her insides, piercing her with the hatred they held. *Why can't he try to see things from my point of view?* Ryore had seemed a nice enough man. They should put aside their ancestor's differences and embrace a new era filled with love and compassion.

She sighed, 'Some life.'

'Violetta?'

The princess darted a glance behind her, certain she had seen a dark shape. There was no one. Just a passing shadow of her own making. She turned back to the window and then she saw it, reflected in the clear glass.

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It materialised beside her, stretching a shadowed arm through the air.

Violetta hid her face in her hands, too terrified to break away from the safety of her temporary blindness. She had seen a face, the most terrible face she could have imagined, leering at her from a dark corner. She half expected the thing to creep up behind her. When nothing happened, she withdrew her hands.

No trace of the apparition remained.

'Violetta.' A voice hung as a faint whisper in the air, causing sweat to trickle down between her shoulders.

'Yes?' she answered.

'Violetta?'

The princess turned, alarmed to find Jermise within the open doorway.

'Jermise, you called?' she asked, uncertain.

'I feel that we should discuss your options.'

Violetta felt her eyebrows raise. She backed away, for want of space since seeing the mysterious shadow. 'Options?' she asked.

'Yes. Emperor Ryore has decided to throw a ball in your honour, much to your father's distaste.'

Violetta took a moment to process this. She supposed her confidant had heard of the disagreement between herself and the king.

'A ball, in my honour?'

'Indeed.' Jermise held up a scroll for her to see. It was ice blue, with a frosted detail embossed on the outer parchment. 'An invitation, Highness.'

Violetta's face was a blank mask. Such an announcement had thrown her. She had no idea what Ryore was expecting of her, but there was one way to find out. She closed the distance to Jermise and snatched the invite from her grasp. Without thinking, she hurled her weight against the older woman, heaving her out of her private chambers.

She'd have to be swift for her plan to work. Violetta deployed the door's emergency lock, something her father had installed when she and Darius had been young. Although she breathed a sigh of relief that it worked, old memories had begun to pull at her thoughts and she hadn't the time to dwell on the past.

Wiping away a stray tear, Violetta began searching the
room.

'Princess! What do you think you are doing?'

Jermise rapped hard on the wood of the door. She may have been slender, but she was strong. The knocking crashed against the varnished wood, sending the walls of the princess' chambers shuddering.

In a panic Violetta unfurled the scroll when drops of blood began to appear. She noted a wound on one of her fingers and brought it to her lips, pressing her tongue to the rip in the flesh. The blue scroll drew her attention once more. Violetta let the delicate hand-written lines pass her by, studying the parchment's crumpled edges.

Jermise's knocking was unrelenting. *How can one woman make such an awful racket?* Violetta needed to speed things up. If Jermise's efforts continued, then there was

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no doubt that her father would be called upon. She needed a retreat, a place where no-one would disturb her.

From beyond the door came Jermise's cries.

'You need to accept your responsibilities!'

Violetta clasped her hands over her ears. She could feel guilt stabbing into her core, again and again in excruciating jolts.

She slipped the scroll down the front of her dress, noting with confusion that her cut had vanished. Violetta let the thought fly over her head. She approached one of the chamber's panelled walls, searching for something she'd long forgotten; something she and Darius had discovered as kids.

She ran her fingers along the aged wood, where they came to brush over a shallow dent. A smile tickled the curve of her lips. Balling her hands into fists, she knocked twice, prompting the panel to fly open.

A dark crevice stared back at her. Violetta stood for a moment, staring into the heart of the tunnel.

'Violetta!'

Jermise's cries were louder than ever. Violetta paid them no heed and began scrambling into the dark hole, making sure to pull the secret door back into its place.

Violetta's entire body began to shiver. It was draughty here and her heavy breathing only served to cause further panic.

'Fear not,' soothed a small voice in her mind. *'For I will guide you through the darkness.'*

Violetta felt her shoulders relax. She thought of her mother; of how wise and brave she had been in life. Now it was her turn.

She edged forward, blind to her immediate surroundings. There was little space here to manoeuvre. Her hands crept along the damp walls, feeling for anything solid she could use for grip. Years of clumped mould greeted her unsuspecting flesh, causing her to stumble on more than a few occasions.

Violetta took great gulps of stale air and continued through the cramped space. Her father would be upset to find her missing and she hated to cause him further grief, but she needed time; time to explore other possibilities before she was forced to sacrifice her dreams.

It felt like the tunnel was beginning to narrow. Violetta prayed that she was nearing its end when a beam of light cut through the darkness. Clean air slipped into her lungs as the tunnel's exit came into view.

Violetta clambered out of the dank hovel. Her heart dropped as she began blinking the blinding light from her vision. A set of boulders brought her to a halt, no doubt having fallen from the hills since her last venture.

She took a deep breath and pressed herself against the farthest one, where she managed to slide between the gap. As soon as she was clear she fell to her knees, gasping for breath. She inhaled a scent that spoke of childhood memories, relishing a change from the stale tunnel air. The way the breeze rushed past her sweat-streaked skin; it made her feel human.

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Violetta brought herself to her feet. She stared about the familiar landmarks of her youth, a sad smile slipping onto her lips. Her father had forbade her visits to the Moat Islands ever since her mother and brother had passed and until now, she'd never had the courage to rebel against him. Forcing her guilt aside, she pushed on toward a familiar tree. It swayed in the breeze, almost as though it were beckoning to her.

Blessed relief flared within the princess as her palm met with the familiar bark. Images of the ice storm's impact began to skewer her thoughts, but no matter. She held positive memories of her kin in her mind, knowing that she would one day be free from this place. Free from her duties to the throne.

Violetta wriggled into a gap in the tree's roots. She closed her eyes and dreamt of a world where her brother was still alive and well; of another life where, just maybe, someone would let her alone.

Time no longer existed here, for Violetta had shut her mind from the world. For a moment, she was free. Free from the world and its unrelenting cruelty. Her hand brushed against the side of her dress and in that moment something triggered in her. Her eyes popped open as she subconsciously felt around in her pocket. Remembering the crumpled invite, Violetta drew it out of her gown, glancing at the cursive text;

To Princess Violetta Flame,

You are cordially invited to a ball in your honour, held by his Royal Highness, Frost Emperor Ryore. It is to be held on the third

*day of the seventh month, at his Royal Estate in the Frost Realm.
The master would be delighted were you to attend.*

*Yours with respect,
The Royal Scroll Bearer.*

The wax seal of a snowflake footed the page. Violetta's mind felt like it was filling with fog. She stared at the yellowed parchment a while, still unable to fathom why the emperor would hold such an elaborate event. Could it be that he'd developed feelings for her? She shivered at the thought. *No. That couldn't be it. Or could it?*

Violetta thought a moment. What did she truly feel for Ryore? There was a sense of mystery which surrounded the man. There was no doubt about that. He was a pleasant enough conversationalist, with a rugged beauty she couldn't deny.

No. It just couldn't be. There was nothing she'd be able to do, even if they shared the same feelings. Then there was the matter of Xi. Violetta longed to see Xyhoni again. He was the only boy since her brother's passing that had been able to calm her thoughts of guilt. He was kind and sincere, with feelings that were easy to read. But, he had his own future to think of and Violetta was sure that he would have a fair choice of maidens, many likely more beautiful than she.

Violetta hunched over so that she formed a ball and allowed the tears to come. She wished that her brother was still alive to succeed the throne. She knew it was a selfish thought, but she couldn't bear her father's disappointment and felt isolated without Darius.

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The pressures of the Kingdom were already drowning the princess' soul. Violetta knelt upon the damp earth and felt her powers begin to surface. Her breathing hastened as she felt the familiar rage of those crimson flames, shooting stray sparks into the air. The next moment, she felt them retreating inside of her, her breathing evening out once more.

Violetta resisted the urge to pull her power back. She watched as the final shades of dusk left the sky, still puzzling over Ryore's invite. *What would mother do?* She asked herself. *Would she attend Ryore's ball?* This, Violetta didn't know.

Perhaps it would do me good, she thought. As a social invitation, her father would be unwise to refuse and it would provide her with some much needed time for personal reflection. *It seems I have decided.* Violetta sucked in a breath. Magic may have taken her family from her, but it would never take away her freedom.

CHAPTER TEN

Month 7/10

Ryore

Ryore returned his gaze to the great hall. The walls were smothered in millions of crystals, the brilliance of the chandeliers above causing the entire room to glow. Even he had to admit that it was beautiful. He sipped from a tall glass of champagne, brushing down his newest dress-robos. His High priest, Albius, stood in the shadows. With Ryore's guests set to arrive any minute, he needed to be sure that the ball ran smoothly.

Ryore gulped down the remnants of his champagne, praying the alcohol would settle his nerves. His father's voice echoed through his mind, *No boy ever had such weak nerves.*

'Go away,' Ryore growled. He glanced across the spacious room where the first arrivals appeared as angels, bathed within the golden light. With no time to waste, Ryore willed his father's voice to fly from his mind.

Most of his guests had already begun to engage in small-talk. Some had taken to the ballroom floor, their partners flushing as they were pulled close. Ryore circled

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the room. He had never danced, having never found someone to partner with and besides, nerves always seemed to set into his muscles. As he selected another glass from a silver tray, Ryore had a sudden realization. His love was late.

The emperor's patience was wearing thin. He couldn't help but stare at the grand hall doors, willing the princess to enter at any moment. *Please, hurry!* He sucked air between his teeth, gathering his wits as he continued to traipse around the crowded hall.

Feigning such a calm exterior had become a breeze for Ryore. Having spent his adolescence at war with his father, he had grown used to having his opinions shunned and his rights stripped. Ryore glanced back to the empty doorway. *What's wrong, is she not coming?* sneered the voice in his head. Ryore had to force himself to take steady breaths. Despite the tolerance he'd developed against emotion, he found himself beginning to struggle.

Ryore's guests were busy marvelling at the room's decor, some lifting their glasses in his direction. The emperor forced himself to smile. *Only a little longer,* he assured himself. *She'll be here soon. I know it.* It didn't help that Ryore's social gatherings were made worse by the women present. Since childhood, he'd been admired by countless women for his looks as well as his charm. Even after that damned beast had marred his beauty.

Many of those available tonight were attempting to catch his eye, cooling themselves with paper fans and shooting Ryore the odd sly glance. Ryore avoided them at all costs. He had to admit that many were indeed

pretty, but he knew they only sought one thing. Besides, none of them compared to his love.

He'd just made the final round of the hall when his smile fell away. Xyhoni had appeared in the grand entrance. Ryore glared. He had been obliged to invite him so King Aemon would attend; an agreement made solely on the grounds of an alliance. As it happened, Aemon was nowhere to be seen.

Ryore had been about to dismiss the boy when he spied the princess on his rival's arm. His breath caught in his throat. Her gown was reminiscent of sparkling rubies and fitted so well to her curves that Ryore struggled to mask his desire. He watched her dart affectionate glances at the sprite, appearing to be in the middle of a deep conversation. Ryore grinned, thinking it about time he intervened.

Ryore strode toward the laughing pair, his eyes fixed on Violetta's unmatched beauty.

'Good evening, princess. Xyhoni.'

A voice within scolded Ryore not to reach for his scar. 'Sire!' Violetta turned to face their distinguished host. 'I'm sorry, we only just arrived.'

'That's quite all right.'

Ryore bent at the waist, in order to plant a kiss upon her hand, much to Xyhoni's apparent annoyance. To the emperor's delight, he noticed a subtle blush developing along the princess' cheeks. She raised her hand part way to her lips, as though trying to keep her sudden colour at bay, then spread her fingers apart and reached her palm

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to press against his own. The feel of her flesh delighted Ryore. Warm and smooth, it sent his mind reeling.

The sound of a throat clearing broke Ryore out of the moment.

'As her Highness said, we have only just arrived Sire.' That olive-skinned fool had squared his shoulders. 'As such, I'm sure you wouldn't mind letting us alone to finish our conversation.'

Ryore saw Violetta's hand drop from the boy's arm. She traced the skin around her wrist, her cheeks still a vibrant pink.

'Why don't we let Violetta decide.' Ryore stared Xyhoni down. 'After all, this ball is in her honour.'

The boy glared. The muscles in his arms had begun to bulge, threatening to burst out of his skin.

'Very well.'

Ryore grinned as Violetta's attention fixed back on him.

'Sire, I would like to thank you for arranging such a splendid affair.' Her hand paused in its repetitive movement, coming to rest upon his shoulder. 'It was most generous of you.'

Ryore was about to inquire after Violetta's health when a dark voice swept through the crowd.

'Arlas! Get back here! I need to know!'

The emperor's guests had begun to stare as Lord Jork stormed after his younger brother, his dark robes whipping about like a second shadow.

Arlas failed to acknowledge his gaping host and swept past before Ryore could interject. Jork was

attempting to match his brother's pace, his face as forlorn as the swirling grey skies that he called home. *What is going on?* Ryore stared after Arlas, feeling a hint of magic trailing after him. He had always found himself deeply unsettled by Arlas. He watched him blend into the crowds, like a ghost amongst the living.

Ryore's attention snapped back to the waiting princess.

'My sincere apologies for that little spectacle, Highness.'

He turned to face the waiting guests, making a gesture that signalled all was well. He turned back and found Xyhoni drooling over his love.

'Princess. That's quite the exquisite gown you have there.'

A smile creased Violetta's lips. 'It must take particular care to get you into such a thing, not to mention out of it.'

Violetta began to blush once more, but Xyhoni was having none of it. The boy's muscles tensed beneath his attire.

'I do believe your tongue will lead you into trouble one day, Sire.'

Ryore shot him a charming smile.

Violetta paid no heed to their exchange. She had taken to glancing down the length of her dress, hiding her rosy cheeks within her golden curls.

'I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Xyhoni.'

Ryore was enjoying himself in provoking the boy when a shrill voice cut into his soul.

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'Excuse me, Sire?'

Lurking behind an irate Xyhoni was the much rumoured Jermise. She shadowed the princess, her narrow gaze fixed on Ryore.

The emperor stared back, unblinking. He had not expected to find Jermise in attendance. Having not made an appearance at the council meeting, he hadn't thought there a reason for her to be here. He began to extend his hand toward her, half hoping she wouldn't accept.

'Ryore!'

Further disruption came with the arrival of King Eagan, who looked to have seen better days.

'Eagan! Welcome.'

Ryore did his best to hide his gritted teeth.

'It's good to see you, Master Ryore. I see that you're doing well.'

The king met Ryore's palm with his own and a stray spark ignited between them.

Ryore's body shimmered, masking his flesh with a layer of ice; a defensive measure against the opposing magic. It was a few moments before King Eagan eventually extinguished his flames, roaring with laughter at his little prank.

'Well met,' whispered Ryore.

His teeth were gritted in an attempt to smile. Inside, he was livid. Opposing magics were deadly. Everyone knew that. Ryore was still in mild shock when Eagan clapped him hard on the back, bowing once more before (still chuckling) he immersed himself within the sea of dancers.

The layer of frost, which had served to protect Ryore's form, began to thaw of its own accord, leaving him chilled but no worse for wear. Now all he had to do was pick up the stalled conversation.

'I was sorry to have heard about your kin, princess. It was a tragic day that saw them pass.'

Violetta inclined her head, tears threatening to trickle down her porcelain skin.

'Your kind words are most appreciated.'

'Yes, charming,' Xyhoni muttered.

Ryore had started to form a cutting retort when Lord Jork came crashing back through the crowd. The emperor did his best to ignore the man, fixing his eyes instead on the beauty before him.

'My lady, what say your chaperone to letting me introduce you to our guests?'

Jermise pushed ahead of her charge, one hand held out, representative of Violetta's personal space.

'Not a chance!'

Xyhoni's voice rose up to join hers. Ryore would have protested, had a dark figure not suddenly emerged at his side.

'May *I* be of any assistance? I've just been chatting with Arlas.'

Prince Fadius smiled at his elder brother. As he moved into their huddle, Ryore shot him a suspicious look. Why would his brother be speaking with the Air Prince? *Never mind*, thought Ryore. *Time to make the introductions.* 'Princess Violetta, Jermise.'

He paused to stare at the fuming Earth Sprite.

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'Xyhoni.'

The boy looked ready to fly into a rage, but Ryore knew he wouldn't dare. Not in front of his beloved princess. 'May I introduce my younger brother, Prince Fadius Frost.'

A charming young man, with dark hair and rugged features stared back. Fadius had always been their father's favourite. Ryore had often wondered if it had been purely down to his brother's looks.

Fadius' gaze slid to Violetta.

'How do you do, Princess...?'

He offered out his hand, waiting patiently for her to accept.

'Violetta.' Her palm rose to meet his. 'It's nice to meet you.' 'Charmed to make your acquaintance, *Violetta*.'

Fadius released her palm, rounding this time on the stubborn Jermise, whose green eyes shimmered with a silent fury. 'Highness, do you think your lovely companion would allow me a dance?'

Ryore glanced at Violetta, noting how her eyes darted between Jermise and the prince.

'I'm sure she would love to.'

At this, Jermise's face turned a surprising shade of red. Nevertheless, when Fadius approached her hand seemed to offer itself, allowing her to be led away through the gathering crowd.

With Jermise gone, Xyhoni (noting Violetta's desire to remain with their host) had rather grudgingly left to pursue King Eagan. Ryore finally stood alone with the girl of his dreams.

'You look lovely this evening.'

He sensed the hesitation in his voice and prayed that Violetta had failed to notice.

'Thank you, Sir.'

In that moment, her eyes sparkled. Ryore gazed into their troubled depths. *What could you be hiding*, asked the voice in his head. Something was clearly upsetting her. He had thrown this magnificent ball in her honour, yet the opulent room with its many dancers appeared to provide little comfort.

Ryore had been about to grasp for another topic of conversation when the silence was broken by a tray being waved in their faces.

'Champagne, Miss?'

Violetta jerked at the unexpected voice. A handsome waiter in navy appeared, brandishing a tray of sharp crystal flutes. Ryore would have loved to slice their sharp edges across the man's throat. He wanted to yell for him to leave, to explain that they were busy and didn't require his attention. However, he digressed.

Violetta grasped the closest glass before turning her attention to the bustling ballroom. She took a tentative sip of the clear liquid. Ryore sipped from his own glass when an idea came to him. He set it down on a passing tray. Violetta's too.

'Forgive me Miss Flame, but would you accompany me onto the ballroom floor?'

Ryore bowed his head and waited to see if she moved into him. To his surprise she batted her lashes, taking several paces in his direction.

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Ryore inhaled as her body met his. She smelled divine, so delicate, like a garden rose. She gazed up at him, her soft hands slipping seamlessly into his. They urged him out onto the ballroom floor, where Ryore began to lead her to the party's rhythm.

Every step they took drove Ryore's soul into more of a frenzy. He had never wanted to dance before, yet as he held this enchanting creature close, he could finally understand what he'd been missing; the feel of another's heart beating beside his own, their bodies swaying in tune with each other. These were acts which made him feel alive.

'You dance beautifully.'

Violetta's smile dazzled him. It should have been impossible for one to be as beautiful as she.

'Thank you, as do you.' Ryore dipped down with her as the dance commanded, before twirling her below his arm. 'Do forgive my brother for his earlier disturbance. He has a way of appearing at will. He's a bit of a scoundrel that way.'

Violetta lit up. A laugh burred up in her throat; a high, sweet sound that wanned the air.

'Since he's been engaged, his behaviour has only grown stranger.' Violetta nodded her understanding. 'I'm also afraid that I had an ulterior motive for hosting this ball.'

Ryore bit his lip. He needed to get this off of his chest. He took advantage of the polished floor, gliding beside the countless other dancers that were already in full swing. 'There is a suspected traitor in our midst.'

He watched the princess' smile fade.

The couple twirled among myriad colours. It was as though each dancer had burst from a box of confetti. When the pace of the dance slowed, Ryore drew Violetta close. 'This traitor is known to us.' He leant into her, resisting the overpowering urge to run his lips along her neck. 'I cannot tell you their name, for a curse my father set on them will not allow me to divulge such information.'

Violetta pulled back..

'You mean to say that this traitor is the one who harmed my mother and brother?'

Ryore nodded.

'How can you know this?'

Ryore exhaled, with more force than was probably necessary.

'My father was an unpleasant man, with many dark secrets. Some of his allies were dangerous creatures and this traitor is no exception.'

Violetta stared into him, as if assessing every inch of his face for the trace of a lie.

'Sire, what is it?'

Fear gripped the emperor's heart. Fie was sure that she could see it in his eyes. Fie spun them round so that Violetta could see for herself.

The princess paled. Jermise could be seen trudging back over to their position, three glasses of wine balanced precariously in her arms. Ryore's lips parted, about to speak when a deep voice split the air.

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'How dare you!' The pair turned at the sudden bark. 'I swear Arlas, you have got to be the most infuriating person alive!'

'Oh really, brother? Please, do regale me with your horrific tales of sibling woe.'

Lord Jork trudged through the crowd of spectators. He was hot on the heels of his younger sibling, but Arlas wasn't about to slow.

'You will tell me what you are up to, or so help me!' Jork cried.

Arlas simply slunk out of reach and continued to mock a disgruntled Jork.

The startled guests looked on as anger flowed from the great Mage's veins, sending several bursts of air rippling through the hall. Ryore drew himself out of the scene as several guests began to stumble. Much to his surprise, it was Violetta who spoke first.

'Now is our chance.'

He glanced back to find his love standing upon her tiptoes, almost making him gasp as she breathed in his ear. 'Spin me. Please? I need to know more.'

The desperation in her tone made Ryore's body quiver. *If only she knew what that does to me.* With her pleading eyes fixed on his, Ryore found himself without a choice. He tensed his body and spun them far from her confidant's reach. The heavy doors to the ballroom could be heard clanging shut as the two Air Mages fled the scene.

Ryore held Violetta close. By the time the other guests had returned to their gossip, Jermise was nowhere to be seen. 'I think we're safe,' he whispered.

His feet circled Violetta's, kicking and gliding across the ballroom floor. Ryore had to admit he was enjoying himself. Violetta seemed to bring out something in him, something he'd never thought existed. Perhaps this was what his father had tried to suppress. Life. Laughter. Love. Whatever this feeling was, he didn't want it to end.

Ryore dipped in and out of the other guests, admiring the way in which their colourful gowns fluttered on the breeze. His eyes flicked across the room and a pang of jealousy worked its way through his veins. Xyhoni had appeared amongst the dancers and was no doubt searching for his earlier companion. Ryore saw the flicker of recognition in his eyes as he spied the pair on the ballroom floor. *Look all you want boy*, thought Ryore.

He watched Xyhoni's eyes grow cold, nursing a silent fury.

'Ryore?' It was his love's voice. 'The traitor?'

Ryore turned to meet her gaze.

'Yes, of course.' He dipped Violetta to the dances rhythm before peeling a strand of hair away from her ear. 'You must be wary, for this traitor means you great harm.'

Ryore could see the cogs in her mind turning. He spun her again, watching her glide around the ballroom floor with her hair whipping round with the folds of her dress.

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'I don't understand,' she whispered as he pulled her close. 'Why would they want to harm me? I don't know who they are, so what threat could I be?'

Violetta made a good point, one that Ryore had also begun to consider. He reasoned the answer out in his mind, unable to take his eyes from her.

The answer came to Ryore in a heartbeat.

'They are responsible for-'

A flurry of air breezed between them. Ryore stared over Violetta's shoulder and did his best to maintain their steady rhythm.

'Violetta?' He felt his face blanch. 'You're in danger.'

A colossal shadow loomed over the crowd. Ryore watched with dread as it materialized behind the princess. For a moment he thought he saw Arlas' face, a sneer forming on his lips. He would have shaken his head had he dared to move.

The monstrous shadow drifted closer. Ryore felt himself begin to dizzy and held tight to Violetta. When his head cleared, he found himself face to face with his brother's fiancée.

'Reiza?'

A willowy young woman shadowed the crowd, her form dark around the edges like some mysterious spectre. She held a finger up to her lips and blew a kiss at the startled host.

Reiza's white blonde hair, like captured starlight, ran the length of her modest breasts, causing members of the crowd to stop and stare. Ryore hadn't seen her for many years. He recalled her having lurked around this very

Estate as a child, hoping to one day be his wife. The day that she defied tradition by giving her body freely to another was the day her chances to wed him were dashed. His brother Fadius had soon indulged the same sin and so the two were paired as one.

Ryore couldn't turn away from the jealous grimace on Reiza's lips. He saw her arm raise to point at his love as she began to call on the core of her power. Ryore clutched Violetta to him. He could sense the Seer's cruel magic in the air and would not risk her being subjected to it.

'Sire!'

Misunderstanding his intent, Violetta began to struggle. Her eyes turned to daggers as she prized herself away, finally catching sight of the Seer.

'Oh, gods.'

Her eyes widened. Ryore wanted to warn her of the Seer's powers, but all that escaped him was a feeble cry.

A glistening orb of Frost formed within the Seer's palms. They took aim. Some guests muttered under their breath, while others gasped in abject horror at the scene that was unfolding before them.

Ryore's limbs strained through the thickening air in an attempt to reach Violetta and shield her from the blast. He watched the glow of the Seer's palms brighten to blinding and in that moment Ryore knew he had failed her.

The curse's energy let loose, a ball of dense frost hurtling toward the princess. Ryore watched her shrink back from the ominous glow. She had begun to call on

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her own magic, sending sparks of fire shooting from her fingertips. The ball of frost picked up speed, spreading a chill throughout the room. It plunged into Violetta's chest, leaving her feet to collapse from beneath her.

Ryore felt his blood boil. His legs propelled him toward the fallen princess.

'Violetta, can you hear me?' he cried.

He knelt beside her, running his hands along her skin as he searched for the entry point of the Seer's curse.

He had decided that Reiza had gone mad. Everyone would know who was to blame for this and she'd never again be a free woman. Ryore's hands slid down to the princess' chest, where he spied a deep gash in the bodice of her dress. The curse had already taken hold, threatening to snuff out her life like the wick of a candle.

'Violetta, come on!'

He bent down to listen to the beat of her heart. Its faint patter gave him hope.

Ryore could feel the eyes of his guests upon him. All was silent, save for his own ragged breathing. He knew that if he didn't act now, then his love would be dead and all hopes for siring an heir with her gone. He closed his eyes and forced as much air as he could into his lungs.

'Guards!' he cried. 'There is a rogue Seer on the loose! Find her. Now!'

Never ones to disappoint, Ryore's guards charged out of the ballroom in hot pursuit of the fleeing culprit. The emperor returned his gaze to the still princess. He cupped his hands behind her head and whispered to her.

'Violetta, please hear me. I can help you.'

The princess lay on the ballroom floor, her head lulled across to one side. Ryore concentrated on the gash in her chest. He drew into himself, calling upon his own power. It answered like a well-trained beast and leapt into action at the command of its master. Ryore needed to siphon the curse from her blood, but this was ancient magic and studied by a rare few. He searched within himself for the relevant knowledge, certain that he'd touched upon the forbidden topic while still within the throes of his youth. If he remembered correctly, then he needed to drain a precise amount of magic from her, leaving her own power intact, but with no trace of the curse.

Ryore held Violetta close and whispered to her still form.

'Try and create a flame in your mind. Picture it, please?'

The soft edge to his voice betrayed his weakness, but Ryore no longer cared. He couldn't allow her to die. Not here, in the shelter of his arms.

'Come on Violetta. Think fire. Think rage!'

Having located what he assumed was the curse's centre, Ryore began the complex extraction process.

As Ryore drew the fine ice particles from Violetta's chest, he noticed a gradual change in her breathing. It became less rapid, the slash in her chest beginning to glow. It started as a gentle golden flicker, taking it's time to manifest.

'That's it, you're doing just fine.'

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Ryore could feel the curse relinquishing its hold. The frost in Violetta's heart and lungs began to thaw, just as the fire inside her began to ignite. A mild flicker became a sudden combustion, which flew through the air toward Ryore. The emperor ducked just in time. He gazed up at the ball of fire as it arced through the room, coming to fizzle out against one of the glittering walls. Such a spectacle had his guests shaken, but Ryore hadn't the time to deal with them. He could feel fatigue overtaking him, his brow lined with cold sweat.

With Violetta's flames burning bright, the excess fluid began to evaporate, the colour returning to her cheeks. King Eagan darted forward in the wake of Xyhoni. Ryore motioned for them to stay back as the princess was yet to recover herself. Eagan would have none of it. He forced Ryore aside so he could kneel before his daughter.

Ryore scowled. He leant forward, having noticed movement in Violetta's eyes.

'What happened?'

With her slurred words, the flames surrounding her suddenly vanished. Ryore quivered from the exertion of his task as King Eagan stroked his daughter's brow.

'You're safe now,' he whispered.

Within moments he'd managed to help her rise, steadying her enough to walk.

'Ryore.' Violetta's eyes were fixed on the panting ruler, her voice still weak from the curse's impact. 'Thank you.'

Ryore wanted more than anything to meet Violetta's eyes, but was unable to break his gaze from her wound. It may have closed itself back up, but the flesh remained swollen where the curse had hit.

'Master Ryore?'

His attention shifted to the waiting king, whose face was lined with fatherly concern.

'Highness?'

'It seems that I owe you my thanks for saving my daughter's life.'

Eagan bowed his head as Ryore locked eyes with the trembling Princess. He longed to run his fingers through her sunshine hair, to press his lips against hers and to fall into a passionate embrace. He wondered if Violetta would ever share such thoughts.

There was a look of uncertainty in her eyes, as if she were deciding something. What, Ryore could only guess. Beside her lurked Xyhoni, his eyes focused on Ryore. *Yes, you should be worried*, thought the emperor. He dismissed thoughts of the boy for now. He cared only for the sweet-lipped young maiden who was being carried away to rest by her father.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Fadius

Fadius still hadn't caught his breath. He and Reiza were lucky to have shed Ryore's guards. Had they followed them, then they would not have been able to execute their plan.

The past few months of their duty had not looked favourably upon them. Arlas had brought Jugan's curse crashing down upon them.

Reiza cursed nearby as she attempted to infuse a ritual circle with ancient magic.

Each attempt so far had left her drained and no closer to achieving her goal. Fadius had stuck beside her while she hunted down the information she would need to make her spell a success. *For luck*, she had said. Having searched through numerous codexes and grimoires, she believed she had finally uncovered the reason for her failure.

Fadius leant against the cave wall, fascinated by the way his fiancée worked. Reiza was unlike any other woman he'd ever met. She was wise beyond her years, with an ethereal beauty that pulled at his heartstrings. Everything about her radiated power. Fadius sometimes

wondered if his mother had been at all similar. Sadly, he couldn't remember her.

Reiza had let her eyes drift shut, drawing magic up from her core. Fadius saw the soft glow of frost appear around her. It lit up the cave before arcing away toward the ritual circle.

He admitted that her magic intrigued him, but he had yet to understand how it would aid them.

'Darling?' He shuffled a few steps from the cave wall. 'I know we have little over a year left to complete our task, but do you think you could explain this plan to me?'

Reiza whipped her head round, her ocean blue eyes turning to daggers. Fadius found himself halting in place. 'There is still more we can do to free your father's throne from your brother's grasp.'

She returned her attention to her work, appearing to focus on drawing more power into her veins.

'There's more we can do?' asked Fadius.

He doubted this, but thought it best to oblige his mate. He saw Reiza's head bob from behind as she ran tendrils of frost around her work.

'Indeed. We must halt your brother's progress with the girl.' She summoned an orb of frost fire, sending it flying through the air, where it came to rest at the centre of the ritual symbols.

'Halt his progress? Darling, you are aware of what we have to do, aren't you?'

Fadius felt the temperature in the cave drop. Reiza's hand began to collect dense frost. He backed away, forced to dodge an oncoming barrage of her power. He

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collided with the dusty floor, wincing from the contact with the jagged rock. The sound of loose scree tumbling from the wall met his ears.

'I'm well aware of our obligations!' scolded Reiza, 'Even if I don't agree with them!'

CHAPTER TWELVE

Violetta

Violetta stirred in her sleep. The nightmares were never far away. Like monsters with sharp talons, they crept into the space between thoughts and clawed through her subconscious mind. They were coming for her; coming for all she had left to give. *The traitor.*

Sunlight burst into the room, waking the young princess from her oppressive dreams. Violetta groped for the curtain cord. When her fingers slipped round it, the sun granted her peace.

'That's better.'

She blinked a few times, clearing her vision when a figure to her left made her bolt upright.

Violetta scrambled to the back of her bed. She stared back across her chambers and found herself at the mercy of laughter. The figure stared back from her dresser mirror and continued with its fit of giggles. She observed her mirrored twin from afar, where it appeared as a bedraggled and blood-shot mess, with hair sticking out at all sorts of odd angles. Violetta was reminded of those awful dreams and could already feel herself being pulled back into their dark abyss.

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Remains littered the surface below her. Violetta could smell the blood that smeared the high stone walls of an ancient cell and the melted wax which welded her to a chair. She'd struggled at first, making several attempts to break free, yet when her bonds broke, more appeared. Vicious chains sprang up around her and bit into her tender flesh.

Violetta had to stifle her tears as footsteps approached. Several figures circled round her before ripping a musty sheet off of an ornate mirror. The golden lense glared back, its clawed feet digging into the stonework.

'Look!' snarled a cruel voice. 'Look at what you've done to yourself!'

Violetta refused her captor's orders, only for an unsightly creature to stalk forward, its breath like the rottenest of eggs.

'Go on,' the figures chanted

The demonic creature seized her hair, tilting her head for a better view.

'Look at what you've become.'

Violetta longed to resist them. She felt her eyes moving in the mirror's direction and was unable to do a thing about it. A scream of anguish split her lips. Her reflection showed the true extent of her captor's brutality. Hair had been ripped from her now bleeding scalp, her face cut and bruised beyond recognition.

The creature behind held her still while the circle of figures began to swarm, beating her with their sizeable fists.

Violetta howled in pain. She was a princess no longer. Now she was but another bloodied creature, her gentle spirit broken by a room full of traitors.

Her life was drained from her once more, stored all too conveniently in that damned gift of Lord Jork's.

Sbrill laughter gave way to darkness. It leaked into the last of Violetta's thoughts as all feeling dissipated from her limbs. And there in the darkness came a familiar whisper,

'Violetta.'

Violetta left the memory in a daze. Her startled eyes reflected back at her, peering through a mess of hair.

'It was only a dream,' she assured herself. 'Dreams can't hurt you.'

Yet Violetta wished she knew what they meant. She had heard that mirrors related to truth, but she had yet to connect Jork's ball to the sensation of life being drained from her body. Perhaps Ryore's mention of a traitor at the ball had played some mysterious part in this. One day she would figure it out.

Violetta brushed a hand through her unkempt mane, wincing as sunlight stung her eyes. She didn't understand. She remembered pulling the cord and the sun filtering back out of the room. She turned to find the curtains closed, with the faintest strip of light peering through. *That's odd.* Violetta followed the bothersome glare, all the way down to her own left hand. *Oh my.*

A scintillating rock stood out on her finger, bound in claws of the finest ivory. Violetta glowed with happiness. This was not the reaction she would have expected from herself. Something stirred within her, some basic need to feel loved and cared for. She felt it pull at her heartstrings as snippets of the previous evening flooded her mind.

Colourful gowns fluttered all around her, lending the impression of living art. Hands hugged her slender waist, moving

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her to the most romantic of slow dances. Violetta gave in and rested her head against Ryore's shoulder. It had felt special. Beyond that. Any thoughts of Xyboni seemed to fade away, replaced by those of the suave Ryore.

Violetta still couldn't believe how brave this man dancing with her was. He had saved her life. While he had a first appeared to be a mystery, Violetta now knew one thing for certain. She could trust this man with anything. 'Ryore, I owe you a great debt, for saving my life.'

The pair swayed to and fro with Violetta's arms stretched round her saviour. She'd noticed Xyboni glaring from afar. No, not glaring, surely? But glare he did. Her worries faded when Ryore twirled her around, making her feel all giddy inside.

In that moment, bathed as they were in the light of the ballroom, Violetta realized why she'd been so set against marriage. The idea was not a problem in itself. Violetta had once imagined such a life where she were wed. The distress came with the thought of losing someone; of the exhausting grief that she and her father had both endured. Since then her heart had chained itself shut and she had sworn never to remove those bonds, for what could be worse than losing a part of your soul?

Now, wrapped up in the arms of this brave man, Violetta began to reconsider. She wondered how Ryore might fare as a husband, or even as a father. If her only choice was to wed, then maybe it wouldn't be such a loss if it was to him. There was merely the issue of him as another Realm's ruler, as well as the dim view her father took of his heritage.

That night had become a surreal blur. Violetta remembered having taken a seat away from the dancers, attempting to calm her heart's infernal racing when Ryore made his way through the

bustling crowd. He padded over, a coy smile lost on his lips. Of all the eligible ladies, Violetta wondered why Ryore only showed interest in her. 'How are you feeling?' he asked.

When Violetta gazed off in thought, he sat down, pulling her hands toward his own. Ryore's gaze was intense, a bold ocean blue, his body pressed so close to hers that a shiver ran the length of her spine. He leaned into her just as he took a breath, as though trying to immortalize her scent.

All this and more made Violetta lean forward, expecting to be kissed when Ryore stood.

'Ladies, gentleman, and all others present.' His tone was firm, yet still possessed a sense of warmth. 'I have here our honoured guest of the evening. Both beautiful and highly intelligent, I give you Princess Violetta Flame!'

Violetta was helped to her feet, where she was met by the applause of the entire ballroom, Ryore had surprised her a lot that night, but it was his kneeling down which shocked her the most,

'Tonight, honoured guests, I ask Princess Violetta to be my wife.'

Shock spiralled through Violetta's mind. A knock sounded on her chamber door. It sounded distant as though she was hearing it from under water. Violetta drifted over to it, still picturing Ryore's handsome face, his skin gleaming like the finest porcelain.

She hardly noticed that she had already unlatched the chamber door when her father burst in with a grave expression.

'I've heard rumours.' He stepped over the threshold, his lips curled inward. 'I must admit that I was so merry with drink that I hardly remember the night's events, but

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here we are.' He glanced down, his eyes popping wide. 'Darling, your robe?'

Violetta followed her father's gaze and blushed, pulling her robe tight around her curves.

'My apologies, father.'

King Eagan paced the room at his own leisure, his hands restless. He didn't appear to know what to do with them. Sensing trouble, Violetta began creeping toward the window, giving her father more distance to cross should he start to become upset. To Violetta's confusion, his eyes brimmed with tears.

She wondered if she should tell him about Ryore's news; of the traitor that sought her out, though she began to wonder if it was that Seer from the ball. Reiza, wasn't it? Perhaps she would keep such details to herself for now. Her father was clearly upset.

'So, it really did happen then? My daughter.'

Violetta followed his open-mouthed gaze to her hand where the resplendent gem curled round her finger.

'Yes, I suppose it did.'

Her father took a step toward her.

'I can't believe it, though I suppose I don't want to.'

Violetta could hear the disappointment in her father's tone. The fact that he didn't want to believe left her in doubt of her own actions. She thought back to the attack at Ryore's ball, hoping to change the subject.

'Have they found her, the Seer that attacked me?'

Her father drew close, his eyes lingering on the engagement ring.

'No, my child, they have not.'

'Father, 1—'

'Shh, I am glad that you're safe.' He held his palm up to halt his child from trying to speak. 'But Emperor Ryore, despite his brave actions, is still an enemy to our people. What's more, he has expressed his concern about Prince Arlas.' 'Arlas?'

Violetta stared into her father's eyes. Something in his expression made her numb. Was Arlas the traitor Ryore spoke of?

Eagan trailed his fingers along his daughter's cheek. 'Although Arlas was escorted out by his elder brother, Ryore swears to have seen his face in the crowd shortly before that Seer attacked.'

'I don't understand. I want her caught, Father. I want to know that I'm safe, please!'

Violetta was shocked to find tears streaming down her cheeks.

'Calm yourself, daughter.' Eagan drew her to him, stroking her fall of golden hair. 'The guards will find her, I assure you. In the meantime I've called Lord Jork here to discuss the events of the emperor's ball.'

He held Violetta close, not as tenderly as her mother used to, but firmer, as though hoping to protect her from her deepest fears. While her father's hugs were a great cure, it was a mother's touch she needed most.

'I must go.'

Eagan stepped back, tearing the comfort of his warmth away. 'Oh, and Violetta. Despite Ryore's daring actions to save you, know that I shall not give my blessing to an enemy.'

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Violetta hadn't been at all surprised by her father's words. To him there was no greater shame than in marrying one whom he viewed as the enemy. Yet, neither had he forbade the marriage. Since their last talk, a bargain had been struck. Due to her current engagement to Ryore, Violetta would honour her father's wishes and leave the palace that had been her home since birth.

Upon the day of her marriage, she was to join onto the Winter throne. With this in mind, her father had but one other condition if she wanted his involvement. Violetta would be held personally responsible for appointing another successor once her father passed.

'They need to be caring, brave, and wise beyond their years. Someone who will earn their title through their courage and their selfless actions.'

Violetta had thought this over a great deal. She could see no unfairness in this. With Ryore already a Realm ruler, she would gladly take her place beside him as empress. 'Violetta?'

The princess jolted back into the moment. Her father was sat at the head of the throne room with Lord Jork standing to her left.

'Forgive me my lord, I must have drifted off into my thoughts.'

Violetta was shocked to not have noticed her mind's own wanderings and bowed toward their dear friend.

Jork gave her a rare smile, one which understood the mind's occasional wanderings.

'It's perfectly all right. Please rise. After all, it happens to the best of us.'

King Eagan did his best not to smile.

'Now, to the matter at hand. Jork, I summoned you here today because Emperor Ryore believes your brother to be involved with that devious Frost Seer.'

'Arlas?' Jork's face conveyed surprise. He showed all the signs of a man who was oblivious to such preposterous claims. 'Is he certain?'

An old habit of massaging his own shoulders showed the extent of Jork's unease. Violetta knew how much her father disliked upsetting his friend. Sadly, there was no alternative than to ask him such questions.

'Ryore claims to have seen Arlas a split second before that Seer attacked Violetta.' Jork's face pinched in at the sides. 'But, both my daughter and I, indeed the whole ballroom, saw you escort your brother out just prior. Tell me, were you with him the entire night?'

'Yes, your grace. I was.'

The restraint this man showed gave Violetta hope. Lord Jork had always seemed to be a decent man. Her father had known him ever since they were boys and although he possessed a mysterious edge to his character, he remained positive in all of her thoughts.

'In that case, may I make a suggestion, my lord?'

Jork nodded, his expression a mixture of frustration and worry.

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'Step forward, dear friend.' Eagan motioned for him to approach the throne. 'Lord Jork of the Air Realm, I request that as of today, you are to keep Arlas under strict watch at all times. He must never leave your castle unless he is to be accompanied by yourself. Do you agree to be bound by these terms?'

Violetta felt a lump form in her throat. Jork lowered his head as though defeated, the strict undertone of his friend's words echoing around him.

'I shall do my best, Highness, but I'm afraid my brother has a bit of a sneaky habit.'

Eagan tensed.

'Go on?'

'Highness, he has an odd habit of disappearing on me.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Month 7/10 Violetta

Violetta

Violetta had spent the next few days at war with herself, having hastily accepted Ryore's proposal. Lord Jork's words had not inspired much hope in regards to her safety. Keeping Arlas and the Seer at bay would be troublesome to say the least.

Violetta thought of her struggles as she slipped out of the tunnels to the deserted Moat Islands. She exited the damp hovel, the smell of fresh water lingering on the air as she ambled over to the protective bosom of her favourite tree.

Violetta settled herself against the great tree's trunk. Since her birth, she had always found its presence comforting. Like a grandmother of sorts, it was always there to calm her when needed. She rested there a while, letting her thoughts pass through her, a moment of peace in a world of chaos.

Marriage is such an odd concept, she thought. Two people bound together for the rest of their days, right up until their time comes and they are parted. Violetta wondered if her father

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still thought of her mother. Would he consider themselves to be bound, always, no matter how long she had been gone from their lives? Part of her hoped so.

Violetta stroked the tree's tendril-like roots, feeling its energy flowing within. She hadn't expected to find herself engaged so soon, if at all. She found herself gazing at the diamond that weighed down her finger. It was truly a sight to behold, but with it came certain responsibilities. Expectations. She would be bound as wife to a great ruler and committed to the act of producing a strong heir for his Realm. Everything she'd been set against.

Ryore had a strange effect on her. He made her want to throw away all caution, to leap into strange new situations. Violetta thought of what their marriage could mean. She would no longer bear the brunt of duty, as she would one day be expected to in this Realm. She would be free to explore the possibilities that this man could give her.

Violetta found herself wondering if this ring; this promise, would cost her the very freedom that she longed to obtain, or if it would deliver her to it.

'It's times like this that I miss you,' she whispered. She rested her palms against the trunk of the tree. 'Sometimes I wonder if I'm ready to take such a large step. Without you and Darius here-'

Violetta inhaled, hoping to choke off her sobs before they began.

'Sure, Ryore is handsome, even with that jagged scar.'

She began to picture the mysterious cut that marred his otherwise flawless image.

'I admit he is quite a mystery, Mama.'

Violetta lent her thoughts to her would be fiance. She longed to learn about his dreams, feelings, and perhaps (if she could bring herself to think such bold thoughts) to explore the world hidden beyond the young emperor's robes. *The ultimate betrayal*, her father would think. If she sired a babe from that man, would her father want a part in her life? *Of course he would*, she assured herself, though doubt continued to cloud her mind.

'Good day!'

Violetta shot forward, a scream bursting from her lips. Her hands tore at what little grass there was as her body splayed itself on the ground. With shallow breaths, she twisted round to find Xyhoni perched upon a nearby branch.

'What are you doing?' she cried. 'Get down, now!'

'As you wish.'

Xyhoni leapt down, landing with extraordinary grace. 'Was it your intent to terrify me?'

His lips formed a trembling smile as he held out his palm toward her.

'No.'

Violetta, still frowning, placed her palm against his own. At the touch of his flesh, something inside her sparked into life. Electricity jolted her synapses, bringing forth a whirlwind of emotions.

She glanced up, all anger washing away from her mind.

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'I came to see you.' Xyhoni's lips had begun to falter. He reached out to brush a strand of hair from her cheek, but froze mid-way, deciding against it. 'I came to ask you if it's true.'

'If what's true?'

'Don't pretend, please?'

Violetta watched as a tear trickled down his cheek, leaving a mark on his beautiful skin.

'Yes, its true.'

She bowed her head, determined not to lay eyes on him in such a state.

'And, you intend to go through with it?'

Violetta felt a knot form within her chest. *I suppose I want to, don't I? I will have my freedom. Surely, its the only logical way to escape my duties here. But, what if Xyhoni thinks-* '

Princess?'

Violetta glanced up to find Xyhoni standing right beside her, his emerald eyes glistening with tears. She couldn't understand why, but she felt that she owed him an apology.

'Xi, I'm sorry if I've upset you. Please believe that it was not my intention.'

Xyhoni's beautiful eyes began to darken.

'Do you love him?'

Violetta's mouth opened. She was certain she would find the words to tell him, to explain whatever it was she was feeling.

Silence, as Violetta ran his words through her mind. *Do I love Ryore? I'm certainly fond of him.* She forced herself

to meet Xyhoni's gaze. A sudden longing to embrace him swept through her as tears began to fill her own eyes.

He seemed rather upset at the idea of her impending marriage and this made her wonder if there could ever have been more between them; the odd embrace or shy, pubescent kiss. Still, no words came forth from her lips.

'Very well.' Xyhoni nodded before turning off toward the Palace. 'You have chosen your path. I will not mislead you.'

He doesn't understand. I want to do this. *Marrying Ryore will be my path to freedom.* Violetta started after him. 'Xi, wait!' The boy continued his steady pace. 'Wait!' Violetta blinked her tears away. When she looked up, Xyhoni had vanished.



The following week saw Violetta journey with Ryore to his home Realm. The air was crisp and enveloped Violetta in its cool embrace as she listened to Ryore addressing his people.

She thought of the attack at the ball. She knew Ryore was adamant that he'd seen Arlas just before, but Lord Jork had observed his brother. Despite her fiance's claims, Violetta was inclined to believe the latter.

Here in the frigid cold of a Realm she would come to know, Ryore's words did little to inspire anyone. The pair stood before his people, with Violetta wrapped in his

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loving arms. It was hoped that their union would inspire peace and unite the two Realms forever more.

Gazing out at the small crowd, the citizens seemed to want nothing more than to be released from this pointless spectacle. Their noses were rosy and chalked with ice, an endless supply of fresh snow falling, only to blanket their shivering forms. Some moments, the Realm seemed to Violetta a beautiful dream, an extraordinary land where the sky appeared to mimic the heavens. Like a blank canvas, she was intent to paint their new life upon it. Then the reality of the situation hit her.

The snow was a constant hazard for these people, gaining with every word her fiance spoke. The citizens stood there, forced to listen to repeated concerns and false promises, which they knew in their hearts would not be fulfilled. In those moments, Violetta wished she could give them hope. More needed to be done to ensure that their health and their livelihood remained intact. She felt proud of her choice to wed Ryore. He had shown true courage when Reiza attacked. Without him, she would not have survived.

Something niggled at the back of her mind. When Ryore's speech finally drew to a close, the relief of his citizens was evident on their faces. They no doubt wanted to return some place warm, to ease the chill from their hands and calm the trickle of screaming children in their wake.

Violetta didn't envy them their living accommodations. An army of dilapidated huts stretched as far as the eye could see. She wondered how long these

people would be expected to live in such squalid conditions with no hope for future improvement.

It was then that Violetta turned upon Ryore, drawing back from the protection of his cloak.

'Do you really intend to help your people?' she asked.

Ryore gave her a stem look, his arms tensed upon his hips.

'I do.'

Violetta stared into his eyes. They appeared focused and determined; two qualities she could rely upon.

She studied those ice blue pools a while longer before determining that Ryore meant what he'd said. She leant back into his chest, remaining silent as she allowed him to cover her once more with his cloak. She saw her fiance's attitude towards his people as worrying. A ruler had a duty toward their people and it was their job to help in any way they could. She shook her head in an attempt to banish the woe from her mind, but she could not banish the citizen's grim expressions. Their eyes had been dull, devoid of the admiration one should feel for their ruler.

Ryore's words echoed throughout her mind. He'd made no comment in his speech regarding the struggles of his people, showing a limited understanding of their plight. Violetta's teeth dug into her bottom lip, her eyes coming to rest on the sparkling ring that bound her finger. Was she to take Ryore's promise to aid them on blind faith? Since his ascension to the throne, the Frost

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Realm had seen little improvement. Perhaps he was too good to be true.



Violetta sat basking in the glow of the Royal Flame Gardens, Ryore at her side. It had been a few days since her trip to the Frost Realm and her thoughts still lingered on the way he'd treated his citizens. Flow any man could let his people go cold and hungry, she could not understand.

She drew her arms around herself, eyes fixed on a dozen red rose bushes nearby when she became all too aware of her fiance's creeping hands.

'Please, Ryore. Patience.'

She felt the emperor's hands go slack, before he chose to reach an arm around her shoulders.

'Sorry,' he breathed.

The next few minutes passed in silence as Ryore held Violetta close. She felt a chill race up her spine at the thought of his Realm; of its dazzling beauty, but also of its woeful people. Violetta didn't know if she could bring herself to leave her childhood home for a place where its inhabitants went without. She gazed out at exotic plants in bloom and rare birds the colours of the rainbow bathing. The Flame Realm spoke of a time where all things flourished.

A knock sounded in Violetta's mind. Her longing for freedom was calling to her, asking if marrying Ryore was what she truly desired.

'Just, think,' one voice could have said. 'As an emperor's wife, you 'd be exempt from doing most duties and be lavished with expensive gifts. '

'On the other hand,' came the voice of her would-be freedom, 'You will be giving up any chance at a private life, foregoing the promise you made to yourself.'

Violetta wasn't sure she liked the sound of being pampered so. Her father had always been generous yet fair when it came to luxuries. It was fine to have them, he had said, but only if your people had all that they needed. Besides, she was grateful for Ryore's company and had no need for material goods.

The simple presence of another brought her much needed comfort. It was a feeling that transcended the loneliness of her former years, leaving her to feel whole and wanted. Perhaps that would be enough for her and Ryore could prove to be her path to freedom after all.

'Is something the matter?'

Ryore's face was pale and drawn, his blue eyes glistening above his signature scar.

'No. I'm fine,' but Violetta knew Ryore's instincts would see through her.

Thoughts flew round her mind, pushing Xyhoni's face to the surface. She wished he could have been glad for her before? She was engaged to a handsome ruler who had already saved her life on one occasion. She herself should be happy, yet Xyhoni's features lingered in her mind. His smile. His perfect green eyes, like vibrant emeralds. Violetta hated to admit it, but perhaps things were moving too fast with Ryore.

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'I'm all right,' she repeated.

Ryore didn't appear convinced. He moved into her, stroking the soft skin of her cheek before lifting her chin so she could face him. His cool eyes stared into her. They seemed to plead with her, wanting her to be honest with him. She couldn't. Violetta didn't have the heart to tell him about the lingering feelings she had for Xyhoni.

Violetta began to consider seeking out Jermise for guidance on the matter when Ryore's arm brushed against her. Sudden feelings, different from any she'd felt for Xyhoni, flashed through her. This wasn't a warm, tingling sensation. It was hot and urgent, compelling her to seek release. *Give in*, her spirit urged. *Go to him. Touch him.*

Violetta could scarcely breathe. Her hand wrapped round Ryore's wrist as she drew him to her, the urgency spreading.

'Love me.' She pulled more insistently, his arms circling round her waist. 'Take me, please?'

A faint flush came to Ryore's face. Violetta could sense a pulsing deep down within herself as she waited, impatient for him to bend over her, to straddle her and graze her neck. 'No. Not like this.'

Ryore drew back. He allowed Violetta to lean on his chest where she bowed her head, struggling with her surge of emotion.

'I'm sorry.'

A strange warmth spread over Violetta's cheeks. She glanced up to find a hand cupping the side of her face.

'My dear, it will be all right. Marriage.'

Her chest tightened. His smile came so easily when he gazed at her, but it did little to ease her doubts.

A sharp bark of a cough alerted the couple to Jemise's presence.

'It would appear that it is time for me to leave.'

Ryore's lips closed around Violetta's own, lending warmth to her soft flesh. Another grumble from her confidant saw them part.

Violetta let herself fall into the crook of Ryore's arms, hoping for one final embrace.

'I shall be with you soon, my love.'

Ryore retracted his arms and began striding out of the garden gates, toward the awaiting royal carriage.

Violetta hung back, the warmth of her fiance fading away. A shadow appeared alongside her, alerting her once more to Jemise's presence.

'Highness, your father wished for me to speak with you.'

Violetta met her confidant's gaze and was startled to find tears in the young woman's eyes. Before she could ask what the matter was, Jemise held up her hand, gathering her courage.

'Your father wishes to know if you'll reconsider.'
'Reconsider?'

Jemise nodded.

'Yes, reconsider your marriage to Ryore.'

Jemise drifted toward her, arms outstretched, but Violetta backed away.

'Why should I reconsider? Don't you see, if I marry Ryore I shall be free of my duty to the throne. My

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husband will rule and I will be free to exist on the sidelines. He is an odd man, yes, but he is kind to me and will provide me with a good life.'

Jermise's tears overspilled her eyes.

'Violetta, how well do you really know Ryore?'

Violetta blanched. She thought about her debt to the man; how she owed him her life, her very existence. She wanted to repay him and would do anything she could to return the favour for such a brave act.

She thought of the council meeting Ryore said he'd be holding in the coming few days; something about a proposed treaty of alliance between their two Realms. It wanned her heart to know that he wanted an alliance to prosper for their citizens.

Violetta may not have known his history, but she knew his heart and what it desired.

'I know him,' she remarked, but she couldn't meet her confidant's gaze.

Jermise stared into the princess' vacant eyes and conceded the discussion with a weak nod.

'Be careful then, my lady.'

She turned back the way she'd come, glancing over her shoulder at the young princess. Violetta thought she detected a hint of pity in her confidant's eyes.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Month 8/10

Ryore

Ryore stood in his draughty tower-room, overlooking the lay of the land. It remained a bitter place, full of dark memories which led on from his boyhood. Ryore's father had left a hole in his heart, denying him the one thing he'd truly needed. Love. Now, no matter how many silver linings came his way, misery would surely follow.

It had been weeks since Ryore and his betrothed had stood before his people. None had seemed particularly interested in what he had to say, not even with the announcement of their upcoming nuptials.

Ryore considered their marriage to be of crucial importance. He desired nothing more than to have Violetta at his side, but was also aware that his brother may have a few tricks up his sleeve, in order to usurp the throne if he could. As such, Ryore would need to act fast.

He rifled through his father's desk, extracting a large leather tome from the bottom drawer. He flicked it open

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to a virginal page and took his time appreciating the aged parchment. It seemed such a shame to spoil such purity with the shadows of ink. Nevertheless, he plucked a quill from the desk's surface.

A strong presence entered the room. Ryore plunged the nib of the quill into a nearby ink well and did his best to scribble down a few notes before the presence could make itself known.

Ryore slammed the cover of the tome shut, thinking over his needs for an ally treaty. He would need to gain more outside protection, in order to secure his throne against potential threats.

'Well, this sea of events is certainly intriguing.'

'So it would appear.' A frown curved Ryore's lips. He knew he hadn't imagined the presence. 'And how can I help you, Albius?'

Ryore turned to find his head priest edging toward him. He appeared to be shaking, the ties of his robes loose and mangled.

'Having some trouble, are we?'

'Just with that rotten brother of yours.'

Albius prepared to launch a projectile of spittle onto the floor when Ryore shot him a look of contempt. He sought power from his core and waved his hand in the priest's direction. A chair appeared, erected from a sturdy construction of ice. He urged Albius to take a seat and began pouring two equal measures of strong liquor.

Albius flinched as he lowered himself down, no doubt expecting the sharp chill of ice to greet his buttocks.

'Just sit,' commanded Ryore.

His priest's face still showed a gnawing reluctance. His legs began to fold in until his posterior slotted into the frame.

'It's-warm.'

Ryore turned and handed the priest a drink.

'Magic.' He winked. 'Now, about this trouble with my brother?'

'There's really nothing to tell.'

Ryore studied his priest's eyes. He was no fool. He had fretted about this day for years; the day Fadius would begin to observe him, unnoticed. Well, Ryore would not be lied to. Albius knew more than he was letting on.

Without warning, Ryore found himself lunging for his priest. Albius fell back and Ryore flung him, hard, against the far wall.

'Start talking! Who hurt you and why?'

'What?'

'You can't fool me Albius, your robes are tom and there are crusts of blood along the collar! Now, who was it?' A ball of frost formed in his free palm. 'Tell me now, for I've a favour to ask and I don't want to have to cool you off.'

Albius drew his hands up for protection. His entire body had begun to shake.

'He did, Sire. Fadius.'

He should have known. Ryore had long suspected his brother of treachery, but he hadn't known it had reached this stage. Fadius had never appeared to be a

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violent man. It just showed what you really knew about people.

Ryore would need as much help as he could get, in order to align the Flame and Frost Realms and protect his position. He glared in the direction of his priest when a gentle creaking sounded outside of the room.

'Albius, why did he hurt you?'

'Sire, I—'

'Were you followed?'

Ryore could feel himself growing paler by the minute. The floorboards by the door began to shift, prompting the emperor to lower his voice.

'Were you followed?' he repeated.

Reluctantly, Albius nodded. Ryore glanced over to the tower door, then back to the priest whose robes he held. His fury struggled to contain itself. Privacy had been a scarce commodity since Ryore's childhood. Since then, he had learned to hone his ability to sense his sibling.

Ryore listened for the creaking boards. He glared down at the struggling priest and released hold of the man's robes. Albius was left to slump unceremoniously to the floor while the emperor crept closer to the tower door. *Fadius knows that my death will see him placed on the throne.* That fact sliced through Ryore. He couldn't allow his younger brother to take what was rightfully his and he refused point blank to allow him to eavesdrop.

Ryore examined the chamber door, remembering to keep his breathing even. It was only now that he began to notice a small crack in the side of the frame, which

meant that their entire conversation had likely been exposed to outsiders.

'Blast,' he whispered. Ryore pressed his ear to the narrow gap. It may have been faint, but the shallow breathing beyond was unmistakable. You stupid boy. Even at this age, the smallest things gave Fadius away.

Ryore drew himself back from the door, regarding his priest with a malicious grin.

'As I said, a favour please, Albius.'

He raised his voice, ensuring that his words could be heard from afar. 'I've an idea in mind for the wedding ceremony.'

'As you wish, Sire.' Albius had taken Ryore's thinly veiled hint and raised his voice to meet his master's pitch. 'I ensure you that I will tell no one of our private talks.'

'And if someone were listening in on our conversation?'

A malevolent glint flashed into Ryore's eyes.

'You would be only too glad to have them killed?'

'How right you are.' He swept forward, embracing his priest. 'Albius, I need you to ensure that Fadius is kept away from all wedding proceedings. Understood? You are not to allow him into the Estate.' Then, in a softer tone, so as not to be heard, 'Especially not the balcony suite.'



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Ryore sat at the head of the table. He waited as the council elders began to file into their seats, for this was the day that he proposed his new treaty. The counsellors all had sunny faces, looking eager to learn of the emperor's plans.

It was the table that immediately drew their attention. Fresh sheets of parchment greeted each of them, providing the details for what Ryore had cooked up.

'Proposal documents,' he informed them.

Several of the counsellors inclined their heads as they sat down to take a look, while others were already immersed in the parchment.

Ryore left them to their own devices. Silence. That's all there was. It was bliss. He began to reach for a bottle of wine, observing the occasional mutterings of the council elders when one voice rose above the rest.

'Excuse me, Sire?'

A pale man rose before him, a crop of dark hair fringing his scalp. With eyes more youthful than his skin, not all of his features seemed to fit. Seeing no reason to deny the man, Ryore nodded for him to speak.

'Sire, why raise relations from a neutral status agreement that works? What would either of the Realms in question have to gain from this specific treaty of alliance?'

Many of the elders were nodding in relation to the man's point. Ryore sucked in a deep breath, withdrawing from the occupied table.

'This ought to explain a few things.' He raised his hands for complete silence. 'You see, counsellors—'

Ryore clicked his fingers to begin the planned demonstration. A large shard of ice appeared on the table, surrounded by a trio of smaller shards which materialized around it.

'Each shard represents one of the Realms of Peradon.' He indicated the fine display. 'With a neutral status, all Realms at first seem to prosper.'

The elders watched as thin green lines connected all four shards, lighting the room with their pleasant glow.

'But then.' Ryore clicked his fingers and one of the shards soared into the centre, splintering the counter that represented his own Realm. 'You eventually get disputes.'

He turned to where King Eagan sat, stunned into a dismal silence.

'Highness?'

Ryore motioned for him to stand. Eagan did so, giving the display a suspicious glance before reluctantly summoning his own power.

The council elders stared as bright orange flames sprang to life from Eagan's palms. They twisted away, making the air sizzle with heat.

'If you please.'

Ryore gestured to the still glowing display.

Eagan focused his power and sent it forth. Tongues of flame struck the display, seizing hold of each shard in turn, before each exploded in a shower of water.

'And there you have it. Destruction becomes inevitable,' cried Ryore. 'You see, a neutral status keeps

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us locked within a changeless society, but an allied status keeps us moving. Evolving.'

Ryore's words were well chosen. His audience's stunned silence was enough to tell him that he'd succeeded in his plan. He nodded to Eagan, whose flames disappeared in a shower of sparks.

'So, all those in favour of allying the Flame and Frost Realms through the enforcement of our new treaty?'

Silence hung in the cool air. It sought to strangle Ryore as he stood there, waiting, though it did not diminish his sense of pride in himself. Despite his father's disgust at his general character, he could never deny that Ryore was in fact a wonderful speaker.

The elders shared similar looks of awe. Their eyes were glued to where Ryore's display had previously stood. 'Aye!' cried one. 'Ally!'

'Agreed!'

Hands began shooting into the air, leaving not one elder against the request. Even Eagan seemed unable to deny that the treaty could be beneficial.

'Excellent. In that case preparations shall be arranged within a fortnight and the treaty approved on the day of my marriage.'

Ryore tried to suppress an unnaturally wide grin. He turned, clapping his hands to dim the lights.

'Elders, you are dismissed.'

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Fadius

Fadius knew they had to act. Time ran short and Ryore's marriage to the Flame Princess was but days away. Arlas stood in the distance with Reiza, conversing with a hand resting along her arm. Fadius grit his teeth and started toward them.

'We can't allow Ryore to sign that treaty!' cried Reiza.

Arlas' ruby eyes pierced the gloom.

'Agreed.' He turned to see Fadius approaching, lending him a sly smile before returning his gaze to the waiting Seer. 'We have to intercept the wedding.'

Fadius was in agreement, but so far their plans had continued to backfire.

'Well now, what do we have here?' came Arlas' low drawl.

Fadius followed his gaze to Reiza's ritual circle. Arlas knelt down, inspecting it with his fingers as much as his crimson eyes.

'This,' Reiza spat, 'Is our destiny, should we fail to complete our task. Behold.'

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Fadius could see tears form in her beautiful eyes. Reiza summoned a final burst of energy from her core and spoke an ancient phrase in the language of the Seers.

Coloured light flowed from Reiza's fingertips, infusing the symbolic drawing below with a surplus of magic. Fadius stared, in awe of the intertwining strands of light.

'Kneel,' commanded Reiza.

Fadius did as his Fiancee said. The smell of packed earth rose to meet him as he watched Reiza's magic continue to seep into the air.

'Now watch.'

Reiza pointed towards the perfect circle where dozens of ancient symbols began to glow. Fadius blinked. Staring back at them was every colour of the rainbow. Fie glanced to his left where a silent Arlas stared ahead. This alone sent goose pimples up his arms, for Fadius had never known the man to be silent.

Streaks of light darted out at every angle, drawing Fadius' attention back to the floor. The lights began to twist and turn when two figures suddenly emerged from the symbols. Fadius was struck by just how much they resembled himself and Reiza. He followed the movements of their colourful counterparts as they danced and twirled with the brilliant hues.

Trouble came when a third figure rose among them. Fadius glanced across to his fiancee. His face fell. Tears struggled to hold on to her lashes as she watched the events of the miniature light figures.

'Look,' she whispered.

She raised a slender arm to point to the centre of the symbols where the light had begun to glow a vivid red. Fadius turned to watch as all three of the figures began to slow, walking in a shambles for a time, before moving at a frantic speed.

The trio watched as their symbolic selves fell back amongst the other symbols, where each of their glows extinguished themselves. Fadius' lips drew down at the comers.

'Are they?'

Reiza turned to him, her face bearing numerous trails of tears.

'Yes. That is the fate that awaits us, should we not interrupt this union in time.'

Fadius gazed back at the circle. All light had fled from the fine display, leaving only darkness in its wake. He could understand his fiancee's sorrow for she had shown them the likelihood of their demise.

'So, what should we do?' Fadius asked.

Reiza's attention turned to Arlas. Fadius noticed the man's irises flash as he studied Reiza from head to toe. 'Arlas.' His voice held a warning tone that saw the Air Mage avert his gaze.

'I need to think,' was all Reiza said.

Fadius watched Reiza pace the length of the tunnel. Fear flooded him. What if they couldn't lift Jugan's curse? He didn't want his beloved to die. There was so much more he wanted to explore with her, so much ancient magic they had yet to discover. He saw her turn back in the direction of her masterpiece, her hand raised as she

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called upon her power. Her body shook, tears flowing down her pale cheeks as a bolt of power arced toward her creation, obliterating it.

Dust rose into the air, obscuring his fiancée from sight. Loose rock could be heard skittering across her magical efforts, the ancient symbols now little more than a memory within the dust.

Fadius needed to find a solution and fast. Or else, well, it didn't bear thinking about. He recalled his father's last words, as Arlas had conveyed them.

'Do not fail me.'

He rolled them through his mind, his frustration mounting. Powers surfacing.

'I've got it!'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Month 9/10

Ryore

Ryore lingered on the ancient balcony, taking brief glances to the adjoining room. Today was the day he married *her*, the beautifully exquisite Violetta Flame.

It was an effort to endure the morning chill. It blew in from the West, caressing Ryore. Teasing him. It was the nervous waiting which shook him. His eyes shifted to take in the details of the posh room behind. It was spacious yet not overly so, with just enough light to be considered romantic. Its burgundy walls closed in on him, the tear drop chandeliers bringing light to his growing anxiety.

Ryore attempted to calm his breathing. He tried focusing on minor details like the fine gold trimming which lined the walls. The same tone was mirrored by the glow of his ancestors as they stared, Judging from their gilt frames. It was difficult for him to focus his thoughts, for his mind was overwhelmed with visions of Violetta's beauty. He wondered how she would fare as a wife and mother, for Ryore had never known his own. Rumour

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had it that his father had hunted down the women who had bore his sons and slaughtered them in a gruesome fashion.

Ryore tried not to think about his father. Instead, he gazed at the picturesque gardens below. A further layer of snow had left a heavenly image in its wake, yet despite the undeniable beauty of the setting, Ryore's senses informed him that something was wrong. The air about him seemed to tingle, setting his teeth and hair on edge. Perhaps it was simply paranoia. Emperor's had been accused of worse.

Ryore opened his lungs to the air, the scent of fresh snow helping to calm his mind. He associated it with simpler times when he was but a boy and still care-free. *And now, I shall marry the woman of my dreams.* Ryore relished the feel of those thoughts. *Not a dream anymore, but reality. Mine.*

Ryore touched a hand to his scar as he watched his first guests file into the adjoining room. They paced about, accepting refreshments from servants and testing the nearby upholstery. Lord Jork was one of the first among them. He caught the emperor's eye, his face appearing to conceal great pain. *Could Arlas be causing trouble?* Ryore watched his fellow ruler take to the farthest row. There was no sign of his younger brother. *So it is true,* Ryore mused, *The great prince remains a captive.*

A jolt of electricity sparked through Ryore's body. His eyes strayed to the double doors at the edge of the room where two priests could be seen making their approach.

It was customary for two priests to conduct a marriage. A slender woman, with dark hair bundled at the back of her neck, trailed down the room wearing ceremonial robes the colour of fire. Beside her strode Albius, dressed in similar robes of ice blue. They marched down the aisle like soldiers on a mission, their faces blank, ready to do battle.

'Albius, Nida.'

Ryore shook the hand of each priest in turn, gesturing for them to approach the balcony.

The pair proved to be obedient and followed their host, where they began preparing the tools of their trade. Ryore stood, twiddling his thumbs. His nerves were wearing thin enough without a room of muttering spectators. He had chosen to invite only selected dignitaries. He had even swallowed his pride and invited Xyhoni. Ryore knew that the boy's presence would please his bride to be and for her, he'd do anything.

Ryore waited. *Where is she?* The cogs of his mind were wound tight. He envisioned his bride, revealed to him at last in their marriage bed, the image of her soft flesh stoking the flames of his desire. How badly he wanted to touch her, to plant his child within the extraordinary temple that was her body.

A procession bell tolled in the near distance, signalling that the bridal party were preparing to enter. Ryore froze. Something in the air still didn't feel right. The atmosphere held a wild energy, like the sky after a heavy storm.

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Ryore tried to ignore the feeling, keeping his eyes trained on the lush red carpet, laid especially for the woman of his dreams. *Grrr*. That tingling sensation; it was exactly how he felt when his brother was near. Ryore darted a glance at Albius.

'We've got trouble. I can sense Fadius.'

The colour drained from the priest's face. He too seemed distracted by the ominous feeling.

The procession bell tolled once more, signalling the entrance of the bridal party. Ryore's gaze jumped to the far end of the room. Any moment now Violetta would glide through, potentially putting herself in harm's way. It took a moment for Ryore to realize that his powers were manifesting. Frost began to creep down his arms in thick veins that glistened in the daylight.

His instinct warned him that danger waited up above, somewhere amongst the room's supporting beams. His eyes strained to search out some hidden flaw, but found nothing. Ryore exchanged puzzled looks with Albius. He barely registered the leering altar that the priests had erected, wondering if it was too late to detect the origin of the danger when a sudden cry filled the room.

'Behold! The bridal party!'

Ryore's gaze shot to the far doors as one by one, the party entered. All were dressed in vibrant yellows and golds, leading the way down the aisle for his beautiful bride. Ryore was struggling not to shake. His eyes followed each individual to where they took their seats in

the closest row. He faced the entrance and his jaw dropped.

Ryore almost had to mb his eyes in disbelief as an angel tip-toed down the red carpet. Her eyes swept the chamber floor, her golden hair shimmering like the noon-day sun. Ryore couldn't bare to turn away. A sudden spark of energy told him that trouble was near, but he couldn't resist such visible perfection. Violetta was closing in on him. Every step she took made his heart skip, for this was the moment she truly became his.

If not for her fleeting glances at Xyhoni, Ryore was certain he would have forgotten all danger. Urgent flames scorched his brain, licking his temples as he tried to resist the urge to have the boy removed. He studied Violetta's innocent smile. She was too good for a mere tree-sprite; of this Ryore assured himself. With him, she would have riches beyond compare. What more could the sprite have offered? His coronation wouldn't come for decades.

Ryore caught sight of swift movement within the pews. His hatred re-fuelled, for there stood Xyhoni, a frown fixed upon his face. *There's nothing wrong*, Ryore assured himself. He halted mid-thought. Had something jolted underfoot? Violetta was drawing closer still when the priests behind began to flail, hoisting whatever they could into their arms.

It was too late. Ryore's mind began to race as the floor shook and the entire balcony began to crumble. His eyes darted to Violetta, who had just stepped foot onto the unsafe structure. Ryore could feel his heart leap into his throat. He needed to get her away from here. Now.

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The high-pitched screams of onlookers cut through him as Violetta realized the immediate danger.

'No!' cried Ryore.

He leapt forward, adrenaline powering his stiff limbs and grabbed Violetta by the hand. Blood rushed through his brain, making it difficult to process the scene before him.

Ryore could feel the balcony giving way beneath them and scanned the room for the safest landing spot. With all the strength his body could muster, he flung his bride back into the room, away from the collapsing structure. Several of the guests moved forward to help when another tremor warned them off.

Ryore's body tilted with the balcony. He was certain that Violetta was safe and scoured the room for another safe spot on which to land. His adrenal glands began to capsize, his muscles giving a violent shudder as the balcony finally broke off from the room. Ryore took his chances and leaped toward the threshold.

He landed with a thud upon the blood-red velvet, shaken up, but completely unscathed. He let the breath burst from his lungs; a fleeting pain in the grand scheme of things. For a moment Ryore lay there, gasps and screams contorting the air. A face appeared above his own, wrinkled, with deep set eyes.

'Albius?'

The priest's body was half-turned, facing toward the elegant balcony, or rather, the void where it had once stood. The faint echo of its collapse could still be heard as pieces of the structure struck the grounds below.

'Sire, you must come.'

Albius helped to ease Ryore into a sitting position. He smiled at his efforts to save his bride. Twice now, he had saved her life. Ryore turned to face his bride to be, unable to wait another moment to hold her.

'Princess?'

Violetta wasn't lying next to him. Ryore did a double take.

'Sire, she fell. I-'

'Good God!'

Ryore leapt onto his feet, flinging Albius out of his way as he approached the crumbling edge of the room. The once grand balcony was now nothing but a memory. 'Violetta!'

His cry brought no response. Ryore thought that his heart would burst with sorrow when a thought took him and he knelt at the edge.

'Sire, its too dangerous,' someone cried from behind.

Ryore refused to listen to reason. All that mattered to him now was finding his love. He braced himself, taking hold of what remained of the ledge and peered over the sheer drop.

'Violetta!'

Her face appeared below the ridge. Lines of terror snaked across her skin as she hung there by her slender fingers.

'Ryore!'

The emperor's heart threatened to stop. Violetta's breathing was rapid, her wide eyes pleading for help. And her body enshrouded in glittering flames.

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'Pull me up!' she wailed.

For a moment Ryore was rendered still. The shock of seeing his bride dangling from the building's edge, consumed by her own power, made him want to rip the world apart. He would not lose her like this. He would not. But, how could he reach her with her powers so out of control?

Filled to the brim with both fear and fury, Ryore reached out a hand toward his love.

'Violetta, you have to calm down!'

Fler face registered annoyance, as though nothing could have appeared more obvious. Regardless, she let her eyes drift shut and did all she could to soften her breathing.

Ryore stretched down with all his might. Violetta's eyes blinked open once more, but the flames surrounding her had yet to die down.

'My love, its not working! We need to get you up.'

'Fetch my father!'

The miniature suns in her eyes were growing larger by the moment, laced with tears that pulled at his heart.

'Tie's not here. Remember, he did not wish to witness the marriage.'

Ryore could feel the balcony losing its hold at the same moment that Violetta's fingers began to slip. Ryore pulled power up from his core, loosing a thin layer of frost across his trembling fonn.

'Help!'

Violetta's screams cut through his soul, mimicked by those of the guests above. Her fingers receded from the

cracked stonework. There was no time. Ryore reached out and grasped his bride's burning wrist.

Agony seared through Ryore's veins. The fine layer of protective frost he had conjured would not withstand such heat for long. He steadied himself against the room's edge, gazing into the desperate face below.

'Hold on!' Ryore strained his vocal chords. Amidst the sea of pain swirling inside, he yelled, 'Albius! To my side, now!'

The subsequent footsteps pulsed through the emperor's veins. He heard his head priest curse somewhere behind and in seconds Albius was at his side.

'Good God! Hold on Sire!'

Ryore couldn't. The pain in his arms began to ignite, reaching a peak he could not endure. With a feeling he couldn't quite describe, Violetta's hands slipped out of his. 'No!'

In tenor, Ryore sent his magic out toward her. His arm glinted a silvery-white and a pointed icicle charged after her. He lurched forward, but saw no sign of his beloved bride.

Ryore's mind became numb as a veil of grief fell upon him. *You killed her*, came his father's familiar voice. *Perhaps you are more like me than I thought*. Ryore clenched his eyes shut. The remains of the balcony had begun to sway, ready to exact their revenge for his lucky escape.

Albius' face appeared at his side. He had dropped down beside Ryore, gripping each of his legs by the cuff of his ankle.

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'Sire, you're going to have to trust me. If you've got hold of the young lady, then I'm going to pull you both up.'

Ryore was about to protest that he'd be ascending alone when a distant flicker caught his eye. He couldn't believe it. Violetta was hanging onto the edge of the shard. Ryore felt something inside of him lift. His body was overcome with a state of drugged happiness as he watched her tentative climb along the frozen spear.

Before Ryore realized what was happening, his body began to drag backwards, his bride's face coming steadily into view. Her limbs were no longer aflame, which was quite lucky given that her salvation was formed entirely from ice. No, the flickering that had caught Ryore's eye had come from a pair of magnificent wings.

Ryore couldn't help but stare. They were beautiful, ethereal in all of their majesty, like the fabled phoenix, rising once more from the ashes of its own demise. The sight alone stole the breath from his lungs as they worked to aid Violetta's recovery.

After five minutes of strenuous work, the couple were pulled safely into the room. Ryore had refused to break eye contact with his bride. He had almost lost her. He felt Albius release his legs, his panting a testament to his act of heroism.

Beside them crouched another volunteer, who appeared to be in a similar state. Ryore glanced their way and saw Xyhoni. Unaware of the gawking guests, he felt himself begin to scowl.

'I am glad you are safe, Sire.' One of Albius' parchment like hands rested on Ryore's arm.

'Thank you.'

The emperor let his usual mask of calm wash over him.

Both Ryore and Albius turned, catching sight of the princess with the blood-red carpet folded about her. Her eyes were screwed shut, her body still tense from the whole ordeal. Ryore noticed that her wings had retracted, no longer visible in all of their incendiary glory. How her dress had survived was anyone's guess, though Ryore noticed the side had been tom open, one leg visible right up to her thigh.

Ryore studied her face, her hair having unravelled, falling past her features in glorious waves. And beside her, that damned boy.

'Albius, would you mind escorting Xyhoni back to his seat?' Ryore kept his voice to a whisper.

'Certainly, Sire.'

Albius wiped the stone dust from his robes and began the walk toward Xyhoni.

Once Xyhoni was escorted back to his place, Albius, with the help of Nida, commanded the attention of the room's occupants.

'Our apologies honoured guests, but someone appears to have sabotaged the room.' A series of frantic whispers rose amongst the sparse crowd. 'As far as we can tell, there should be no more surprises, so we shall now begin the ceremony.'

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Ryore hadn't expected anything on that sort of scale. He had imagined whisperings around the room, but sabotage? Sorrow wormed its way into his heart as he realized who must be to blame for such a deliberate attack on him and his bride.

Ryore reached out a hand to Violetta. She was his angel, a saviour to his fragmented heart. Whomever would see an angel dead was beyond his contempt.

'Are you hurt?' he asked.

Ryore ignored the worried strain on his voice and helped Violetta to her feet.

'I'm fine.'

There was an edge to her voice that was hard to ignore. Regardless, Ryore was glad that she was safe in his arms, though the image of those wings was hard to forget.

The couple exercised due caution as they made their way to where both priests now stood, their main supplies having luckily escaped the balcony's collapse. The altar, sadly, had been destroyed.

'Imperial Highness, Princess.' Albius greeted them, his hand outstretched in a gesture of welcome. 'Are you both ready?'

Ryore was about to nod when he realized he had yet to truly admire his bride. He turned to her, eyes skimming across her features and down the length of her supple form. Her gown was remarkable. Low at the bust and now a gash in one side, her every curve on display. Ryore struggled not to bite his lip.

'Sire!' Albius shot him a warning look. 'May we begin?' Ryore felt himself flush. He nodded.

The couple were instructed to face each other before the two priests began to speak.

'Welcome one and all.' Albius held his arms out once more, as though every guest were a close friend. 'Let all those gathered here today know that Emperor Ryore Frost and Princess Violetta Flame are hereby honouring their commitment to each other.'

It was then that Nida took over.

'We may have gotten off to a bumpy start, but rest assured that all will be fine. Today, this couple leave behind their childhood wishes and will now pledge their lives to one another in the ancient bond of the Forever Ceremony.'

Ryore wondered how priests developed the knack for making anything sound holy. They were able to put a person's mind at ease with the smallest of effort.

'Ryore.'

Albius stood before the emperor, both hands raised as he prepared to unite them as a wedded couple. Ryore gazed into the eyes of his bride. He took her fragile hands in his, a single glistening tear like a jewel on her cheek.

'The Forever Ceremony is a magical time, a tradition given to us by our great ancestors.'

The guests were all nodding in approval. Even Xyhoni. Ryore fixed his eyes on the boy, who had stood up from his own pew, staring ahead with empty eyes. Ryore felt his flushed skin draining of colour, leaving it

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an ashen-grey. *Please*, he prayed, *do not visit more trouble upon our day.*

Albius read on without fail.

'If any of those here present wish to express their discontent with this union, then let them please speak now.'

Xyhoni continued to stare into space. Thankfully no-one had noticed him yet, but they soon would.

Ryore glared at him from the corner of his eye. He could see that the boy was in deep thought, his expression grim. Defeated. Ryore was certain that Albius had spotted him when Xyhoni blinked and lowered himself back down to his pew. If hearts could sigh, then Ryore's would have.

There would be no more trouble today.

It was Nida who spoke next, raising her voice far above Albius.

'Let it be commanded that while both parties be present in this world, that neither is to use their magic on the other, except in the instance of healing their beloved spouse. Ryore, Violetta, please repeat after us.'

The vows were repeated and rings exchanged. A gold band overlooked Violetta's diamond treasure, while Ryore's wedding band remained subtle. The couple grinned and touched palms to signify the commitment they'd made to each-other. A sense of his bride's energy flowed into Ryore's soul, joining him with her, forever.

'Sire?'

Ryore's attention drifted back to his priest, who held a dark-feathered quill within his right hand.

'Are you ready to sign the marriage treaty?'

Ryore had been waiting for this moment. With this treaty, he ensured that the Frost Realm's ancient enemies were on his side and therefore he would succeed in keeping his father's throne. The more allies Ryore had, the better.

Ryore stepped forward to accept the quill, leaning against a small table that a servant had brought in. It may not have been a grand altar but the emperor was glad all the same. The marriage license rested beside the treaty, just as Ryore's fate rested upon its words. He leaned down, double-checking every detail before he signed away his name.

When the nib was re-filled, Ryore slid the quill over to his waiting bride. Violetta signed her agreement to the treaty, her hand wavering; understandable given today's ordeal. She was just signing the marriage licence when Ryore passed his hand discreetly across her lower back. He watched as Violetta bit her lip, willing herself not to respond to his touch.

When both parties had signed, Nida crossed over to the table, gathering the papers for Albius to see.

'Yes, that all seems to be in order.' He scanned the licence before turning back to face the emperor's guests. 'The two young royals standing before you are now legally bound as husband and wife. It is my great honour to say that Ryore, you may kiss your bride.'

Ryore pulled Violetta to him. His lips found hers, hot and fast. He could barely contain himself. Their first kiss as man and wife sent passion thrilling his every nerve.

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His bride's hands groped desperately for his as the ferocious want of her sizzled inside him. Ryore couldn't wait to chance exciting her. He could feel passion radiating through her form as his hands brushed against her hips.

Ryore pulled back, preparing to sneak another kiss when he noticed his bride gazing up at him. Her brown eyes sparkled with desire, her teeth grazing her bottom lip. Ryore smiled. There was more to this remarkable woman than met the eye.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Violetta

Violetta undid her robe with care. Her petite form trembled as she walked the length of her new bed-chambers to hand the garment to a lurking maid. She was a squat woman with a partially wrinkled face that never seemed to change expression. She accepted the robe and performed a haphazard bow, averting her gaze from the empress' virginal form, before backing out of the chamber door.

The clang of the door seemed to follow Violetta. Her wedding day had not been what she'd expected. Rumours were flying across the Realms, some of foul play being afoot and others questioning the Frost Estate's structural soundness.

Violetta still couldn't understand how she'd survived. One moment she had been hurtling down toward the ground and the next, she appeared to be hovering in mid-air. She had heard hushed whispers of *wings*, but had no idea of any such power.

At one point her thoughts returned to the white-haired Seer. Perhaps today's catastrophe was of her making, another attempt to blot out her life. Violetta

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would have none of it. She had finally attained some sense of freedom and wasn't prepared to lose it any time soon.

Violetta realized that she'd been staring at the grand bed opposite. It awaited her, drawing her in with its glossy covers. She couldn't help but feel a bit homesick. Few things had been moved to her new abode. Most of her personal possessions remained at her childhood home, including the preserved rose that Xyhoni had made for her.

She was sure that she'd become accustomed to her new settings in time. What worried her were tonight's plans. Violetta had always been curious about the human form as a girl, but never had she imagined exploring it in such graphic depth. Having Ryore's surprise touch at their wedding had stirred something within; a similar longing that his kiss had evoked. She eyed the bed that longed to embrace her. The furnishings looked so soft, so inviting. She crept close, mounting the edge of the frame and attempted to embrace her nude form.

Violetta trailed a hand along her inner thigh as she melted into the soft folds of the red satin sheets. The fabric hugged her slender form, caressing her skin with its delicious texture. Her body was pure ivory, stark against the colour of sin. It was then that she spied a striking portrait on the far wall.

A teenage Ryore was immortalized within. He leered out from his gilded prison, his pale blue eyes revealing an irreparable sadness.

Memories flitted across Violetta's mind of the boy she'd glimpsed at her kin's funeral.

A sudden crash caught her unawares as the chamber door burst open. Violetta jerked upright, pulling the sea of red covers above her chest. A slender figure lurked in the doorway. It was a servant girl, likely no more than twelve years of age.

Violetta stared, silent save for the sound of her own breathing. Although modest-looking, there was a confidence about this girl you could not deny. Violetta watched as she crossed the threshold, her features softened by the glow of the palace lamps.

'Mi lady.'

The young woman bowed, before parking herself at the edge of the bed.

Violetta was at a loss over what to do. There she sat, fully nude with only thin silk sheets to hide her shame, and some stranger had proceeded to sit beside her.

'Can I help you, miss?'

The young girl leant forward, stroking Violetta's hand. Surprisingly, she felt herself blush.

'That's enough, thank you.'

Violetta tried to ease herself out of the girl's reach, but to no avail. The girl's hands ran over Violetta's hidden curves, grasping at the edges of the bed-sheets with talon like nails.

'Enough!'

Before the maid could prize the covers away, to better attend to the empress' needs, Violetta reared up and struck her. Hard.

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The girl's high squeal stung Violetta's ears. She reeled back from the bed, frowning as she clutched her cheek. To Violetta, the room but was a blur.

'I'm sorry,' she cried, but the girl had already crept back to the door, her eyes watering as she shot the empress one last frightened glance.

Violetta could no longer embrace herself. Since the shock of the young maid's advances, her nakedness felt, in a way, shameful. The silken sheets circled round her, pulling her back to their enticing embrace.

Images of the serving girl's tears gave way to a knock at the chamber door. Violetta tensed. She heard the wood begin its slow creak and used her fingers to pinch one end of the covers. She held them down, just enough for her to peek over the edge.

'Violetta?'

Ryore peered around the frame, with eyes that all but resisted movement. Spying her, he slipped through the gap and locked the door.

Violetta's cheeks glowed. Ryore's robes had been pre-loosened, his flesh taut across his bones. All of her fear melted away. In its place was a heat that reached down to her loins. Her heart fluttered as he drew close, his skin pale and already dewed with sweat. There was an unnatural confidence about him now. It oozed out of his every pore, his eyes so deep and penetrating that it felt like he was admiring her soul.

Violetta felt her body tense as sparks of arousal knifed through her. She watched, breathless, as Ryore let his robe slip onto the chamber floor. Her eyes trailed up

his lithe form. She could feel her own excitement growing, a warmth like no other spreading through her loins. His body was the essence of masculinity, proud and strong. She beckoned him over, her long legs unclenching from their short-lived fear.

Violetta was forced to gasp as Ryore's hands gripped hold of the bed-spread. He eased himself upon the edge, every tensed muscle coming into view. Violetta gulped. She guided his hand along her inner thigh, letting it glide along of its own accord.

In that moment, her eyes met his in a gaze so intense that it made her shudder. There was something so profound about those ice blue windows to Ryore's soul. They looked to contain secrets which were buried so deep that they would never get the chance to surface. They stripped her away to the bare essentials of what she was, a vibrant young woman, trembling beneath the flesh of a man that made her pulse race. In a way, his piercing gaze made her feel more naked than a lack of clothes ever could.

'Ryore, what happened today?'

'Hmm?'

Her husband's lips pressed against her soft flesh and her need for him ignited. All thoughts of the ceremony were swept away by fresh waves of marital lust.

'Touch me?'

The words didn't sound like her own. There was a carelessness about them which seemed alien, yet all the same, Ryore obeyed.

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Ryore smoothed his fingers across the soft flesh of her middle before grazing them back down the length of her thighs. Violetta dampened beneath his touch. A low moan escaped her as he pinned her back against the sheets.

She could feel him swell amid the violent yearnings which throbbed within her. Her lips sought his in a hot embrace, their bodies writhing, one against the other as Ryore continued to stroke her tender flesh. *Violetta?* Xyhoni's image gripped the edges of her mind. *No, not now.* Her husband's loins pulsed against her, sending all other thoughts fading into her sub-conscious.

Now that Violetta had tasted this shade of lust, she simply could not deny herself. She rotated her hips beneath Ryore, watching as his body responded in kind.

'I love you,' he growled.

His teathed grazed her delicate neck, causing Violetta's back to arch.

'Please, release me!' she begged.

Ryore's lips pressed themselves to hers. In a rush, Violetta felt her legs shift and let out a soft gasp like no other as she bloomed for her husband.

A blunt pain surprised her innocent body. Ryore set a gentle rhythm and the pain transformed into waves of pleasure. Violetta gazed up at her new husband, his body streaked with a glistening sweat. For a moment only, she eyed him with suspicion.

It was not unheard of for rich men to ply their new wives with magic in order to advance their sexual prowess. Violetta considered the thought for the briefest

of moments. No, she assured herself, *Ryore would never use magic on me like that.*

She bucked her hips as her husband stirred, refusing to stop until they stiffened as one, a sudden warmth rushing from their shuddering forms.

Ryore pulled himself away, resting his brow upon his wife's amble bosom. There he panted, sweat clinging to his lithe frame.

'Wow.'

Violetta had never felt anything like this. She gazed across at Ryore's sublime form, now partially hidden by the sea of red sheets. No longer at the mercy of her primal urges, she wondered if she dare ask him about the events of the wedding.

'Ryore?'

Her husband reached up to brush a loose strand of hair from her face.

Violetta stared into his ice blue eyes. There was a chill to them that unnerved her. Something told her that it was best not to bring up the matter, yet Violetta dearly wanted to.



The sweet lilt of birdsong carried around the royal chambers. It echoed in Violetta's ears, the pleasure of the previous night gone. Slips of memories came to her as she woke. She recalled feelings of fondness and a strong appetite for the lusts of the flesh.

The Flame Queen

Violetta pried open her eyes, groping for the silken sheets.

'Mmm, Ryore?'

She reached across the bed, toward her husband. A pit opened in her stomach as her hand met thin air. Fear worked its way inside of her. She began to feel as though she'd been abandoned, useful only as a means to pleasure.

'Hello.'

A sharp knock roused her from her thoughts.

'Coming!'

Violetta's voice barely carried the distance. Her feet had just touched down on the carpet when the door gave a frightful squeak. She found it standing ajar, giving way to the same young maid from her wedding night.

Violetta studied the now timid girl. She stepped forward, backing Violetta into a corner.

'Mi lady?'

The empress stared, sinking behind one of the bed's four posts. The girl covered the distance in no time, a small frown engraved on her lips.

'Its all right, mi lady.'

She spoke with a somewhat clumsy accent, with a tone that was both firm and gentle. To her own surprise, Violetta began to calm.

Violetta watched the young maiden as she went about her chores, bringing various items in from the hallway. A small cart soon sat upon the chamber carpet with a roaring fire blazing beneath.

'Why are you here?' Violetta asked.

The young girl hazarded a smile.

'To comfort you, o' course. The Master demands it.'
'And he wasn't available himself?'

Violetta was still stung from having woken without her husband, given the intimate nature of their night together.

'Had to be elsewhere,' said the girl. She pointed to the little cart. 'Tea?'

Violetta smiled. Perhaps she could warm to this girl after all.

Having produced two elaborate bronze flagons and some herbs which smelt unusually strong, the young maid set about stoking the fire. She fetched water from the bathroom to heat above it and before long, the liquid began to bubble.

'Done!' She filled both flagons, setting one aside for the waiting empress. 'Try some.'

Violetta glanced down at the bronze flagon. She had never seen a drink like this before, It was a murky green and smelt strongly of mint. Her hand hovered over to the beverage, pausing just short of the flagon's curved handle. 'Here.' The girl blew on her own cup and took a long swig. 'See? Not bad.'

The girl's eyes smiled at Violetta, who picked up her own flagon with shaking hands. She watched the hot steam billow up from the rim.

'What is your name?' she asked.

'Kaitlyn.'

Although the young girl appeared to try her hardest, she could not pronounce the "T" sufficiently.

'What a beautiful name.'

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Violetta smiled. She held her flagon close, the sweet smell of the brew luring her in. It was strange, but it was a scent that made her think of the rare rainy days she had seen in her home realm, when the grass was topped with fresh dew. She watched the girl take another gulp and lifted her own flagon up to her lips, it wasn't bad. A fragrant mint lined the mixture, helping to spread her airways open.

'I'm sorry I scared you before.' Kaitlyn looked to be on the verge of tears. 'Master Ryore wanted you ready. He said it would help.'

Her voice possessed a gentle kindness that many seemed to lose as they reached their adult years. It made Violetta sad to see the girl's cheek still swollen from where she'd lashed out. She had been about to apologize when her flagon toppled to the ground.

Violetta doubled-over, her hands pressed tight against her stomach.

'What's wrong, mi lady?'

Kaitlyn ignored the spilt refreshment and rushed to her empress' aid. Violetta couldn't answer for fresh pain erupted within her. Lost amid the sea of agony was a single thought. *What of Jork's gift?*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Fadius

‘Foiled again!’

A shard of ice flew past Fadius' head. Fie ducked just in time for it to skim across the surface of his robes.

'How could it fail?'

Reiza's voice drifted out of the cave. Fadius took caution when he rose back up, brushing off the sleeves of his robes. While his fiancée's despair gave way to uncontrollable surges of magic, his merely rendered him numb.

Another month and still they bowed to his father's curse. Their failure filled Fadius with shame. Fie knew it was there, crawling beneath his pasty flesh, but his mind forbade him from feeling it. He had spent too long within its dark recesses, attempting to accomplish the task his father had set them.

'Fadius!'

Reiza's scream stirred fear within him. Fadius stole out of the cave's entrance, where he was accosted by moonlight streaming into his vision. A view of gnarled

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trees stood amidst a barren wasteland. Once his eyes began to adjust to the light, he finally caught sight of her.

Reiza hung suspended in the distance, a faint glow illuminating her slender form. She appeared to be in some sort of trance and made no attempt to move.

'Lead me on the path of accomplishment,' she whispered.

Her breathing was shallow, her speech directed into the night.

Fadius, skilled in the art of stealth, began to creep towards the Seer. When close enough, he reached out to the blinding light, grasping for what felt like Reiza's waist. The moment he made contact, a sharp pain zipped through his veins. The light surrounding Reiza extinguished. No longer within its protective womb, she crashed into her fiance below.

Fadius failed to leap out of the way. His fiancee's limp form forced him down, pressing him back against the earth, where he lay, panting.

'Fadius?'

'Reiza? Are you okay?'

Fadius struggled to catch his breath as he brought them both back to their feet. Reiza's eyes were cloudy, unfocused. 'That treaty has left us dead in the water!'

She screamed at the bewildered prince and shoved him through the cave's dark maw.

Fadius raised his aching head, squinting as they re-entered the gloom.

'What did you see?'

He looked into eyes that were not his fiancée's, but belonged to what she was, deep inside. A Seer. She was crouched over him, with a sickening smile that made his blood run cold. 'Tell me,' he cried.

Reiza shook her head. Whether from nerves or in refusal to his request, Fadius couldn't tell.

'Your brother has recruited new allies,' she whispered. Fadius blinked.

'He has?'

'Yes. No one is going to break their new pact, not unless they have to.'

Her sadistic smile faded, revealing the young woman beneath the magic. Fadius probed his mind for further ideas of how to de-throne his brother. He watched Reiza following her otherworldly senses. She paused at the cave entrance, staring back out into the moonlight.

'I need some air.'

Reiza stormed past the dead trees when Fadius' voice rang into the night.

'Wait! What do we do now?'

His voice was frantic, worry oozing from his every pore. Reiza turned to face him. She raised an arm to point in his direction and Fadius felt himself lift off the floor.

Reiza's magic heaved him across the clearing, delivering him into her open arms.

'There may be something else we can do.'

She leant close, her lips melting against his. Fadius watched in wonder as she pulled away, the taste of her left tingling upon his lips.

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'Tell me Fadius, how well does your brother deal with grief?'

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Month 10/10

Violetta

The Estate fared well with Violetta's presence. Many of the maids would now sing and dance, happy to have such a sweet companion to whom they could relate. Violetta was just as thankful for them. Usually, their uplifted spirits would have bothered her husband, but today his mind was otherwise occupied.

Since the mishap of their wedding, Ryore had ordered a guard to serve as protection to his wife. Violetta found the concept to be a violation of her personal freedom and had made a point of expressing this to her husband.

She headed in the direction of their bed-chambers, where the royal doctor was said to be waiting. She'd noticed no guards following her husband around, accompanying him for the most private of matters. His very words, *'I do not wish to have someone trailing my every move,'* rang in her ears until her mind ached.

Since living in her husband's Realm, there had been no further mishaps to date, though Violetta had found

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herself in an awful amount of pain. Ryore had refused to allow her childhood gift (a ball created by Lord Jork) into the estate, for risk of *any magical contamination* that might harm their chances of conceiving an heir.

Violetta took measured breaths as she rounded the bend that led to their chambers. She was still unnerved by Ryore's disappearance the morning following their wedding night. It felt odd to her that a new husband should abandon his bride so soon, but she supposed his royal duties should come first.

Violetta caught sight of their chamber door and inched toward it. She wondered how Ryore would respond if they hadn't conceived? *No, don't think like that*, she chided herself. All would be well. Violetta knew there was a purpose to her pain. There had to be.



Ryore

Ryore frowned. The doctor had shut the chamber door after instructing him to wait outside. The emperor resented being apart from his bride and the sudden chill of the passageway did little to help. Although Violetta had been prepared for her examination, Ryore feared for her. She had never bared the practice before and he'd heard that it was rather uncomfortable.

He waited outside, pacing out his frustration. Fear gorged itself upon his thoughts, then spat out new ones,

mostly grim scenarios where any attempt at consummation failed. *What is my future without an heir*, he mused, *who will my throne pass to once I'm gone?* Ryore felt his body shudder as his mind answered the question for him. *Fadius.*

The creak of the chamber door saw Ryore still. A solemn face greeted him. Ryore felt like his heart had stopped. The doctor's eyes were blood-shot, his skin once a healthy brown, now closer to a light cream.

The emperor bit into the side of his cheek, praying that the stinging pain would overcome whatever news this man had to offer.

'Sire. You are not at fault for what has happened.' The doctor could be seen shaking. 'Your wife bears the brunt of the problem.'

'Problem?' Ryore arched a single eyebrow, regarding the doctor with cool distaste. 'What problem would that be?' The physician was quick to bow his head.

'I'm afraid that you will not be having an heir any time soon. Your wife is barren.'

Fury shot through the emperor's veins. It ate away at his dreams of power, reducing them to little more than ash. As the reality of the situation dawned upon him, a scorching anger stole over his mind. Of all the gorgeous eligible women, why had he fallen for one of such surpassing beauty that had clearly been too perfect to begin with?

The doctor stood, silent, beside the chamber door. He allowed Ryore time to process the news before he considered it his time to continue.

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'The best thing you can do, Ryore, is to let Violetta know she is loved.'

The doctor's words sounded distant to Ryore, like he was hearing them from under water.

'I've also brought news from her Highness' Home Realm,' said the man. 'The Flame training school is nearing completion. I'm sure your wife can take a little joy in that, for her father's citizens are already rejoicing.'

Yes, thought Ryore, and my enemies will be getting stronger by the day.

When the emperor failed to respond, the doctor dug into his medical bag.

'Take this,' he urged.

Ryore felt the man thrust something heavy into his palm. He gave the doctor a curt stare before glancing down to discover a book with a cover that was teeming with dust.

'May it give you the answers you no doubt seek.'

Ryore's fist met porcelain in a surge of rage. His knuckles became slick with blood as he dashed the line of nearby antique vases into millions of busted chips. Seeing the way in which his fists had begun their frenzy, most nearby staff shrank into the shadows. One stout-looking maid merely tutted, proceeding to clean up her master's mess.

In Ryore's mind, the peace he'd sought for all his life had suddenly become unobtainable. He slumped against the cobbled wall, drawing a breath as he righted himself.

'Ten...nine.' He counted slowly back from ten as he had done so many times before. 'Easy,' he breathed.

Ryore turned back toward his chambers when his foot struck something lying nearby. At his feet lay the doctor's book.

'Hello? Violetta?'

Ryore knocked twice on the chamber door. He had formed a plan within his mind and felt it urgent to speak with his wife. When no answer came, he stepped inside.

The room looked dimmer than ever he'd seen it, as though someone had sucked the life from the very walls. 'Violetta?'

Silence. Ryore felt his way through the dying gloom. For a while he relied only on distant shadows when he eventually came upon one of the lamps. He reached out and turned a dial.

Faint light blossomed within the room. Ryore's cold eyes slid across the eerie chamber, where they alighted upon his quivering wife.

Ryore momentarily discarded the doctor's book, diving across the room to embrace her. Violetta's limbs were spread wide, the silken sheets draped loosely about her angelic form, like some deranged work of art.

'Violetta? Are you all right?'

Ryore propped her up against the lavish pillows where his eyes met with her empty expression. In a state of panic, he lay there beside her, unsure of what he was supposed to do.

'Here.' He put a protective arm round her; a half-hearted attempt to bring her comfort. 'I am told the Flame training school is nearing completion.'

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It was a long shot, but Ryore took the doctor's advice, if only to test his wife's reaction. He smiled when the subtle twinkle returned to her eyes.

'Darling?'

Ryore clasped her hand in his, brushing the soft skin in a calming motion. She smelled divine, like jasmine and lilies. Before he realized it, he was leaning in, his lips moving toward his wife's neck.

'No!'

Violetta's breathing grew increasingly laboured as she pulled away from her husband's clutches.

Ryore was livid. No sooner had he tried to calm his wife, had she reeled back with a glare in her eyes. She appeared colder towards him than she'd been before, a feature which had caught him off guard. He made to pull her into his arms, but she cringed away, wanting no part of his current affections.

As he glared back, Ryore felt guilt knifing into what remained of his heart. Violetta's eyes melted into fierce puddles, warm, salty droplets sliding down her delicate face. 'What have I done?' he asked. 'Please, tell me?'

Violetta refused to speak. Ryore tried once more to embrace her, but once again, she shied away.

'Forgive me.' He disengaged her, simultaneously hurt and afraid. 'I wish I could help you, but I don't know how.'

As he departed, Ryore thought he heard her mutter three heartbroken words. *I failed you.*

Ryore sat in the frigid wake of his tower room, flicking through the pages of the doctor's book. The chill

in his fingers was beginning to irritate. Nevertheless, Ryore believed he'd unearthed the root of their problems.

Unlike most of Violetta's ancestors, it appeared that she had failed to inherit a certain gene (a rare occurrence, said the book), which allowed Flame Realm women to carry a child to term. This specific gene was said to form a protective layer in the woman's womb, which would allow a child to develop safely. The cause of such a missing gene was said to be hard to identify.

Ryore turned the next few pages and halted at a large chart that listed core body temperatures in the Realm's females. It was said that those with an unnatural metabolic rate would have a higher core temperature and so tended to be less fertile, as the protective layer would burn away before having fully developed.

Ryore leaned in to get a closer look when he heard the creaking of floorboards from beyond the tower door. He angled his right ear towards the noise, certain that he'd heard footsteps. Faint, yet audible, they'd stopped short, right outside.

Ryore snapped the doctor's textbook shut. He dumped it into an old trunk before turning to the door, which he found ajar. Rage swarmed within him like a hornet's nest. He remembered locking the door the moment he'd entered, which meant someone-else had used magic to break in.

Ryore bounded across the room, grabbing the edge of the door and flinging it open. He didn't think it was possible for his rage to increase, but as he stood looking out on the corridor, it rocketed.

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Prince Fadius lurked within the shadows, his face a startling ashen grey.

'I wasn't expecting you, brother.'

Ryore scowled.

'Don't mumble, Fadius. Get inside.'

Ryore gripped his brother by the scruff of his cloak, choking him until he was a purplish-blue. Fadius struggled for breath.

'What sort of punishment would suit you brother, hmm? Just what do you think you're doing here? As far as I know, you sabotaged my wedding! Why, I could send for the guards right now and have you put inside a cell!'

Ryore hauled Fadius into the tower room, using his free hand to set a new lock on the door.

'By all means,' Fadius wheezed.

Ryore's blue eyes pierced through him.

'Tell me all you can offer, Fadius, or you die tonight!'

He released hold of his brother's cloak, dropping him to the floor with a muffled thud.

'I'm waiting.'

'I didn't sabotage anything. Perhaps it was someone else.'

Fadius nursed his bruised wind-pipe. Then, he did something Ryore hadn't expected. He let out a peel of laughter. Ryore strained against the sound.

'Do you find this amusing?' he snarled. 'You almost cost Violetta her life!'

Fadius wiped a stray tear from his eye.

'Oh no, brother. Not at all. And please, I had little to do with whatever sabotage you're referring to.'

Ryore paled.

'You are certain that you have no idea who might be behind it?'

'Well, you can never be too sure, can you? Every ally is just a potential foe that hasn't yet turned.'

Ryore was growing tired of his brother's games, but he seemed not to have any more information and so did his best to divert the subject.

'The truth, Fadius? Why are you here?'

'Fine. Have it your way.'

Fadius straightened.

'You do know of the secret passage that runs right the way through the royal chambers, do you not?'

Ryore's jaw clenched.

'Yes. What of it?'

Fadius grinned, circling his elder like a bird of prey.

'I was watching from the darkness while your wife was examined.'

Ryore hurtled towards him at breakneck speed. He was fully intent on strangling the life from Fadius when he side-stepped, prompting Ryore to fall in a heap at his side.

Ryore hissed as a blinding pain erupted within his skull. He could hear his brother's continued laughter and summoned the strength to regain his feet.

'You dare to defy me?' He gripped the edge of his father's desk, rising once more to his brother's height. 'You watch my wife in so private a situation? Why?'

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Ryore felt the hot need of his rage inundate him. He sought power from his core, summoning it to the surface in record time.

When Fadius failed to respond, Ryore lunged again, this time brandishing a sharp ice spear. Ryore made sure to hold back his full weight, but Fadius simply rolled his eyes. He grabbed Ryore's wrists, twisting him round with the least bit of effort.

'Unhand me!' Ryore scolded.

'I overheard the doctor and have some information for you that might help your predicament.'

Ryore began to struggle against his younger brother, the skin of his wrists burning with pain.

'Ever heard of a Fertility Ritual?'

Ryore ceased his struggling, eyes narrowed.

'Speak.' Fadius nodded, releasing his hold on his elder brother. 'The truth, mind.'

Ryore struggled to regain his composure. He forced himself to look at his brother, noting the glint of mischief that had settled in his eyes.

'Some Ancient magic is beyond compare,' explained Fadius, 'Even death can't escape such power.'

Ryore hung onto his every word. A storm was brewing in his eyes and there was nothing anyone could do to calm it.

'Has this anything to do with Father's betrayals?'

Ryore's eyebrows were raised to emphasize his point.

'No, brother.'

Ryore sensed this as a lie, but allowed Fadius to continue for the time being.

'About the only thing this magic can't do is grant offspring to the deceased, and that's all there is to it.'

Ryore wasn't sure about what he was hearing.

'Your meaning, brother?'

Fadius grinned, a terrible sight as far as Ryore was concerned.

'What I'm saying, brother, is that there is still a way for you to sire an heir through your wife.'

'You are quite certain?'

Fadius tapped a finger to the side of his nose.

'I am.'

Ryore thought for a moment. Although it was said to be a rarity, he had heard talk of such magic before. Only powerful Seers would have the knowledge he needed, but he would be damned if Fadius thought he'd ask Reiza.

'All right, little brother. Today you live.' Ryore drew close, one bony finger pointed at Fadius' chest. 'Now, get out, and don't let me catch you or that Seer anywhere near me or my wife!'



Sweat beaded on the emperor's forehead. He had re-entered his chambers, hoping to reconcile things with his wife, when he discovered the abandoned bed-sheets.

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Ryore leapt across the room, searching beneath the dark frame where he managed to turn up nothing of note. He paused, wondering where she might have gone.

'Ryore?'

His head snapped up at the sound of her voice.

Violetta stood by the door to their bathroom, eyes rimmed by circles of puffy red skin.

'Are you all right?' Ryore asked.

Violetta's mouth was pressed into a line. She appeared to have bathed, a navy towel covering her modesty and strands of golden hair hanging limp down her back.

'No. I'm not.'

She closed the distance between them, taking her time to climb onto the shimmering haze of sheets. He watched as she cocked her head to one side, letting her hair fan out across her chest.

'You abandoned me the morning after our wedding night.'

Ryore found it hard to resist the sight of her; her long legs and voluptuous breasts, all still dripping with condensation.

'It's okay my darling. I'm here now.'

Violetta leant back as Ryore approached. He climbed aboard her and hooked an arm around her shoulders.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered.

This time, Violetta allowed herself to be embraced. Ryore felt a smile grace his features as he breathed in the scent of her; wild jasmine and lilies.

'I've wanted to apologize all day, but I suppose I was scared.'

He shifted over to one side of the bed and allowed her to lay her head against his shoulder. Violetta said nothing. She didn't need to. Ryore felt her snuggling into the crook of his neck and worked himself up to mention his brother's proposal.

'Darling?'

'Hmm?'

'I think I can fix our little problem.'

Violetta stilled. She leant back, her intense gaze causing Ryore to squirm. He cupped her hands within his own and tried to calm his frantic mind.

'There is ancient magic that could restore your fertility.' Ryore's words had unknowingly shifted any blame onto her. 'Sweetheart?'

He gasped at the feel of tears rolling onto his flesh. His wife's entire body began to shake with the effort it took to control her emotions. This time, it was Ryore that shied away.

'My love, please don't cry. My priest will help us locate a Seer.' He stroked his wife's tear-stained cheek and tucked her into the safety of the silken sheets. 'I'll get a Fertility Ritual performed.'

Ryore refused to give up on this. He started back toward his tower room. *We'll have a child, even if it kills me.*

Ryore listened to the whispers that came to him. The tower was just as draughty as usual, but he wouldn't let that bring him down. *Use the lense*, his mind echoed. *Locate*

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a prime candidate to perform the ritual, someone who is unafraid of danger

Ryore strained against his brother's suggestion. What if this was some kind of trick and there was nothing to be gained, save for further pain. He rolled these waves of thought over in his head, picking them apart, one by one. *Come*, a voice seemed to whisper to him. *What is there to lose?*

Ryore considered these words. If he had the ritual performed and it worked, then he would have an heir, at last. If it turned out to be a waste of time, then nothing would have changed.

Ryore had decided. He summoned a fresh lock on the tower door and turned toward the glass orb that yearned for his touch. The lense tempted him into the cool shadows. *What if this doesn't work*, he thought, *this is Fadius, after all.*

Ryore took a seat beside his father's desk and stared into the heart of the Lense. *There's always a chance*, he told himself, always. He forced the orb into his trembling hands. With one last thought of his beloved wife, he pressed his forehead to the cool glass. *Who can help me?* His thought echoed through swirls of mist, imprinted upon the ancient tool. He was just becoming used to its strange sensations when a sudden knock jolted his senses.

Ryore's forehead snapped away from the lense.

'Who goes there?' he asked.

For the first time, the sound came from the chamber-side door. It was muffled, but all the same

Ryore stretched up, taking his chances and releasing the lock.

Violetta stood there, pale in the moonlight.

'May I come in?'

Ryore stared. Her negligee was translucent and housed her wann bosom. He felt his body swell at the sight.

'Umm.'

He was about to make the difficult decision to decline, when he noticed that her eyes were dewed with tears. *Why not let her join your search? After all, it's her problem.*

Ryore surrendered to the voice and motioned for her to enter the room.

'Come in.'

'Ryore, I—'

The emperor grabbed her by surprise and shifted, so she rested within his lap.

'Here, sit still and keep quiet,' he warned.

Ryore gave a brief explanation of his goal; how he hoped to locate an experienced Seer to cure his wife of her terrible sickness.

'A Seer, like Reiza?'

Violetta's skin had turned icy. Her body shook, throwing off Ryore's concentration.

'No, my dear. We will not seek out Reiza,' he assured her. 'There should be others out there somewhere.'

Ryore's troubled concentration didn't let up. Several times, he had to steer his eyes back onto the lense as his wife's clingy night-gown aroused his member. Guiding Violetta's hands proved easy enough. Ryore placed them

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at equal distance along the orb and commanded she rest her head on the glass.

'Now, lend your own thoughts to its power.'

The orb led Violetta's fingers to all the right spots, while Ryore explained how her energy would help boost the process, making it far more efficient.

The couple's eyes darted back and forth as bursts of swirling smoke began to appear. They billowed around the clear glass of the lense, creating unique coloured shapes and shadows.

'Think deeply, my love,' Ryore urged. 'About the condition and your feelings toward it.'

Ryore thought of his own emotions, of the rage and anguish he'd felt when receiving the dreaded news from the doctor. He focused on the call for an Ancient power, for any person or creature who could wield old magic. His palms slid to one side of the lense, while Violetta's instincts guided her in the opposing direction. Electric-blue smoke unfurled from the centre.

'Dear Gods.'

Ryore gazed into the darkness that had consumed the glass. Such a deathly shade was a terrible omen, yet he hadn't the heart to tell his wife.

Time was not apparent to them. If anyone had intruded on such private a moment, the lense-goers would have remained unawares and would have simply continued their search.

After the shock of seeing the black fog, the glass cleared, giving out a sudden surge of gold. Ryore grinned. That meant that there was still some hope.

For a brief moment it ignited the core of the lense, turning to the image of a human face. Ryore did a double take. He glanced from the orb, to his wife and back.

'Did you see it? The face?'

Violetta shot him a puzzled look. She shook her head, returning her attention back to the lense. Ryore frowned. The face had vanished, the colour with it.

Ryore could feel his heart sinking when a translucent mist filled the void. The couple froze as a haughty voice chimed out, filling their minds with what masqueraded as a riddle.

Come seek me out, I know no shame.

I wield a power, close to rain.

In an Eastern cove, I lie in wait.

If you're brave enough, come knock at my gate.

I'll wield my spells, tell me what you seek.

If you decipher my riddle, then we shall speak.

Ryore hadn't realized how tight he'd been gripping his wife. His hands slackened. Violetta crashed to the floor, gasping in the stale air of the tower. Ryore bent to help her up, but his surroundings became a blur of cobbles and books, melting into one dizzying mix. Pressure built within his mind and with it, a swell of blinding pain.

Ryore began to stifle a cry when he heard Violetta's agonizing scream. The pain in his own head exploded, white hot and unrelenting, forcing him onto the cold stone beneath. With a flare of green light, the lense signalled their release.

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The couple lay sprawled upon the ground, struggling for the smallest breath.

'That snake! They meant for that to happen.'

Ryore blinked and began to take in his surroundings. The tower was in its usual, cluttered state.

'Violetta? Are you all right?'

As the shock ebbed from Ryore's body, his eyes met with those of his wife. She lay beside him, shaking from the fleeting pain. This did nothing to deter her wide smile.

'The riddle,' she gasped. 'Can we solve it?'

'Possibly.' Ryore lifted himself to his feet, feeling the groan of his every muscle. 'The riddle referred to a place, perhaps their usual residence.'

He allowed the thought to linger in his mind as he helped to set his wife back onto her feet.

'I've got it! The only Eastern cove is right here, in this Realm.'

'It is?'

'Yes.' Ryore's eyes darted to the tower door. 'Wait here.'

Ryore was anxious to locate the nearest messenger, a plan already forming within his mind. Having strolled down several corridors, he paused and spied a young man backed into the shadows.

'You, boy!'

The messenger turned, fear shining in his eyes.

'Me, Sire?'

The boy pointed a quivering finger back at himself.

'Yes, you! Please inform the troops of a new Quest.'

'A quest?'

The boy's eyes gleamed at the thought of being able to please his master.

'Yes, they are to go to the Cave of Darkri at once. If they find anything that emits magic, then they are to report back here immediately, with that magic under wraps.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

Violetta

Violetta hated bugs and the sensation of crawling all over her skin did nothing to help alleviate her fears. She did her best to calm herself as she prepared for the ritual Ryore had arranged. It hadn't taken long for his soldiers to locate the one that had spoken the riddle. They had returned the previous night, securing the creature in the grime-ridden dungeons. Those who spoke of it referred to it as *Mythos*, a tribute to one of Peradon's long lost gods.

Violetta hadn't been told how much time she had to prepare, but she knew the ritual would be today. She hurried to the adjoining bathroom, where she turned the faucets of a great tin tub. She was fortunate to be able to bathe so freely. She had heard that a mechanism had been designed a few years before her birth that allowed pumps to take water from the River Aum, clean it, and send it up through pipes to reach the royal accommodations. She observed the trickling water as it ran down the basin.

Now for the part that filled her with dread. Violetta scanned the room for signs of metal. *Nothing by the bath.* She knew Ryore had left it for her, but where? *Ah, there it*

is. She padded over to the sink, where an engraved knife glistened like crystal. Her fingers faltered. This ritual was designed to help them, yet certain aspects of the preparation weren't adding up. Why the knife, the bathing in blood? No- one had thought to explain this to her and yet here she stood, with one hand poised above the blade.

Violetta grimaced as she curled her fingers round the handle. She took her time in bringing it over to the basin where water bubbled with a joy she longed to feel. Maybe there was another way? This seemed too drastic.

Violetta imagined the look of disappointment on Ryore's face were she not to prepare as he'd instructed. She glanced down at the blade. Its polished surface glared at her. *What are you waiting for*, it seemed to hint. *Do it. Now!* Violetta felt a single tear slip down her cheek. With a firm grip on the hilt of the knife, she plunged the blade into her hand.

A wild scream burst from her lips. Violetta thrust her hand over the edge of the bathtub and breathed deep before she drew out the blade. The metallic clatter of the weapon droned in her ears, her eyes scrunched tight against the gut- wrenching pain.

Violetta allowed one eye to drift open and saw that the water no longer bubbled. In its place was a roaring blood red river, overflowing the basin with its vile scent. Violetta was quick to turn off the faucets. She stared at the destruction of her palm, the mangled flesh making her stomach roil.

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Violetta could sense the core of her magical power within, pumping potential fire around her veins. She felt the familiar tingle of it surging up through her body as it burst into crimson flame. With a stifled breath, she transferred all of her power to her right hand. She knew it would hurt to seal the wound, but Ryore had told her that they both had to make sacrifices if they were ever to conceive a child. Forcing down the growing lump in her throat, she drew more power into the flames.

The pain had not compared to anything Violetta had ever felt. It shocked her body to its core, leaving her retching over the sink. She reached to pull back a sodden strand of her hair. Her palm may have been clear of blood, but seeing the knitted flesh made her gag. Now she too sported a hideous scar. It ran along the full length of her palm, stark against the remaining flesh. She knew that given time it would heal, but the sight and smell stirred sickness within her.

Violetta trembled as she approached the basin. In her other hand, she held a small bag of herbs; another item provided by her husband. She reached in and extracted a small handful, sprinkling them over the edge of the bath. Mint, some crushed tea-tree, a dozen rose petals. They all came together to create a sinfully sweet scent. Sadly, not sweet enough to combat her blood.

Violetta glanced into the depths of the crimson pool. Now was her time. Her husband was trusting her to prepare for the ritual and she couldn't disappoint him, not after all he'd done for her. Sitting on the edge of the bathtub, Violetta removed her nightdress and watched

the water churning below her. With sheer strength of will, she submerged herself.

Violetta came up gasping for air. Blood seeped in through her lips, its powerful stench sending shivers down her spine. What surprised her was how refreshing the blood actually felt on her skin. No doubt the herbs had worked some of their magic and made the sensation more tolerable. She lay there in the crimson water, trying not to breathe in the scent of blood.

With great haste Violetta drew herself up, noting the light tingling that came from the various herbal extracts. She padded over to the bathroom mirror, unsure of how to empty the tub. Ryore had left her some chamomile soap, which she worked up into a healthy lather before rinsing the cooling suds from her skin. She was relieved that at least this one part of her wouldn't smell like a bodily fluid.

Violetta snatched up her new robe for the ritual; red, to draw a parallel to the vital blood-tie between mother and child. She was just admiring the way it hugged her curves (and hid the noticeable blood stains) when a sharp rap came on the bathroom door. It opened of its own accord, revealing Kaitlyn's smiling face.

'Hello, mi lady. I was told to lead you to your carriage.' Violetta tightened her robe, but not before the girl had got a whiff of the blood that now coated her body.

'It is time already?'

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'Yes.' Kaitlyn attempted to disguise a cough and pulled a hand across her face. 'The Master has already left. Please, follow me.'

Kaitlyn led her through the Estate's grand gardens, where hundreds of rare species had begun to bloom. Violetta was thankful for such strong-smelling plants as they helped to mask her own metallic stench.

Violetta was instructed to halt at the garden's edge, while the young maid approached a footman nearby. From her position, Violetta spied the royal carriage, the spokes of its wheels a glistening gold. She had never seen a carriage like it.

'Highness?' She blinked to find Kaitlyn staring up at her, her hair rustling in the breeze. 'Your footman says he's ready for you now.'

Kaitlyn accompanied Violetta to the side of the carriage, where she left her in the gentle, yet capable hands of the footman.

'Mi lady. It's a pleasure to meet you.'

Violetta turned towards the new speaker, offering out her palm in greeting. A tall man in a navy tunic and cap placed his palm against her own, appearing not to notice the stench of blood on her flesh, nor the ghastly scar that she'd recently healed.

'The pleasure is mine. Thank you for escorting me.'

The footman's wisps of grey hair stuck out at odd angles. To Violetta, they were endearing.

'Right then Highness, would you care to depart?'

Violetta nodded. She accepted his hand to step into the carriage, still finding it strange that he did not react to the blood.

'Please, what do I call you?' she asked.

The elderly man released her hand and held his hat against his chest. 'Ezekiel, ma'am, though most call me Zeke.'

Violetta smiled.

'Very well. Zeke, it is.'

Fine wrinkles began to line the man's forehead. With a bright smile, he closed the carriage door. From their encounter, Violetta could only assume that his sense of smell was behind him.

Violetta jolted awake at the carriage's urging. The world rushed back in an explosion of the senses. Strange sounds echoed through her mind; of ravenous birds calling out to each other, fighting for the rights to nest, coupled with the usual blinding light. She managed to get her bearings just as the carriage began to stall.

The squawking faded. In its place was an eerie silence, which made the sudden touch of a hand even more disconcerting. Her eyes shot to the culprit, to find it resting upon her arm. It wasn't a large hand, but small and frail with dark spots along the back.

'Highness?'

She was greeted by the smiling face of her footman. He waited patiently for her response, but began to frown when he noticed her blank expression.

'Is everything all right, mi lady? You're very pale.'

His concern for her echoed in his tone.

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'Yes, I'll be fine. Thank you, Zeke.'

Violetta made to disembark the carriage, her head held high as she scanned her surroundings. Ancient ruins stretched before them. Their crumbling structures lent the impression that they'd been abandoned for centuries. Violetta took a nervous step toward them and felt the sting of Zeke gripping her scarred hand.

'This way, mi lady.'

A series of cold stone passages stretched out before them, imposing in the infinite darkness. Torches were already lit along the walls, but they did little to guide them, only lighting a few steps ahead of each one. It made it next to impossible to see what lurked out there in the gloom. Violetta wondered if there was a monster that dwelt within this crumbling maze. For their sake, she hoped not.

'Here we are, Highness.'

They had just turned round another bend to spy a clearing not far in the distance. The torches ahead seemed brighter, burning a fierce gold at their approach.

'Behold, the Maze of Oak.'

Zeke pointed ahead with one knobbly finger. Violetta peered through the gloom. A cobbled well came into view, surrounded by a copse of enormous white oak trees. Their low-hanging branches circled the well, forming a protective barrier.

'It's beautiful,' she whispered.

Violetta could do little but stare. She wondered how many people had been allowed to step foot here and was

about to ask when a solemn look crossed over Zeke's face.

'I am sorry, mi lady, but this is where I must leave you.' He gestured ahead, through the strand of trees. 'You must go alone now, through the ancient maze.'

Violetta saw that his eyes were filled with tears. She supposed this must be one of the more intimate parts of the ritual, one reserved for the intendants alone.

'Thank you, Zeke.' She gazed at the footman with his sparkling eyes. 'You look sad.'

A small sniffle escaped him.

'I'm fine, Highness. I'm just a bit nervous for you, given the preparations for this ritual.'

'Nervous?'

The footman nodded. There was a look in his eyes she didn't like.

'Why?'

'Dark Hounds.'

Zeke pointed off into the trees. Violetta had heard of Dark Hounds from fables. They were said to dwell in heavily wooded areas and were only drawn out by the scent of blood. Now she knew. It wasn't a myth.

She followed the footman's fearful gaze, noting the enormous trees with their low hanging branches.

'I don't see anything.'

'Look there.'

The old man crouched low and gestured toward the cobbled well, where a mass of shadows began to form. That's when Violetta saw them. Dark bundles of mist, with blood red eyes and dripping fangs. Her hands

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shook, her eyes trained on them as she leant back to Zeke.

'What will they do to me?' she asked. 'If I can't outrun them.'

Having noted the man's silence, Violetta did a sharp turn, only to find that he had vanished. Bloodthirsty growls seized her attention. Violetta's robe clung to her back as sweat coursed down her shivering form to mingle with the remnants of blood.

She rounded on the cobbled well, her eyes alert. Dark shapes were grouped around it, a gleam of red piercing through her. Time was no longer her friend. With each second the hound's growls grew more persistent, cutting into Violetta's resolve. She knew that if she could find a weapon, then she might have a chance of outrunning these beasts.

Violetta took a step forward. All eyes were fixed on her. Her gaze swept from side to side, taking in the floor for any signs of a stick, or perhaps a rock she could use to divert the attention of the waiting beasts. Nothing stood out to her. With each step she took toward the well, the glare of red eyes flashed brighter. She was close enough now to make out their silhouettes, skinny black bodies with sharp protrusions. They snapped at her, anticipating the moment that she would break into a run.

They needn't have waited. Their howls ripped through the trees. Violetta hadn't dared to walk toward the well, for fear that they would set upon her. She tore away from them, the slap of her feet on the ground only aiding their ability to track her. Her father had never

mentioned the hounds were real. It made Violetta wonder what else existed outside of her knowledge.

Dark Hounds nipped at her heels as she ran. Violetta passed through another stretch of trees before more rose up to take their place. Her speed was her saving grace. The hound's cries began to die down, leaving her in the eerie stillness of a miniature forest. The Maze of Oak hadn't gotten its name by chance.

Violetta glanced about her surroundings, unsure of which path led back to certain death and which would lead her to success. The trees here had twisted in a monstrous fashion. Spindly arms groped at her robe, intent on shredding her to pieces while the distant cries of the hounds rendered her still.

Violetta wanted out. She snatched her arms out from the grip of the trees, determined to pass through the maze using each of her senses to her best judgement. Trusting her instincts, she darted ahead. Behind her lay death. Before her lay the chance at a future. She used the energy of her surroundings to guide her way, leaping across visible roots while the howling shadow beasts continued their chase.

The trees were fewer now, but still Violetta ran, emerging on a narrow path of stone. The darkness bound her in chains of fear. She could feel the hot breath of the hounds against her ankles as she darted along the twisted passages. She prayed that she was getting close. Her lungs had begun to struggle for air.

Violetta raced ahead, motivated by the howling cries which rose around her. For a moment she thought she'd

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glimpsed a light up ahead. If only. Her feet pounded against the earth. The torches ahead began to dim, extinguishing what little light she had to guide her.

Panic ripped a hole in her heart. If the torches went out, then she would be left to the mercy of the hound's snapping jaws. She pushed all of her energy into a sprint when she felt something sharp tear at her flesh. Violetta's legs almost gave way. She could feel blood dribbling down her ankle, but there was no time to stop and check on the wound. The hounds could smell her.

The Dark Hounds were happy to continue the chase. Violetta pushed all her remaining strength into moving, ignoring the pain that ripped through her foot. Her body had just begun to give up when a heavenly glow radiated out from the next passage. Violetta darted toward it. Such intense brightness hinted at magic and magic hinted at the presence of people. *The altar.*

Violetta slowed. She could hear water trickling nearby, likely a run off from the Aum River. Her foot bumped against an uneven plane and a howl that could chill the hearts of the dead pierced through her.

Violetta twisted round. A writhing shadow tackled her, pinning her back with the weight of its form. Her hands shot round the beast's neck, prying jagged fangs away from her face. A claw dug into her soft flesh. For a moment, her grip faltered. She called upon the core of her power, chancing a quick glance to the side. The other hounds were nowhere to be seen.

The steady trickle of magic surfaced through Violetta's veins. She prepared to release one hand from

around the vice that was the beast's jaw. Fear pulsed through her, coupled with a righteous anger as she called forth her flames of destruction. Having noticed her hand release its throat, the hound snapped, fangs poised above Violetta's face. It prepared to strike when the flames grew.

A petrified howl drilled into Violetta's mind. The beast writhed on the ground in fiery agony as she poured more magic into the attack. Before long, she was lording over a mini inferno, struggling to deny the stench of charred flesh as it worked its way into her nostrils.

'Congratulations, my love.'

Violetta's eyes shot up from the fiery ball that was now the dark hound. A figure stood amidst the blinding light, their features bleached beyond recognition.

'Come,' they beckoned.

Violetta was aware of her feet moving, yet she didn't appear to be their leader. An invisible force was drawing her toward the figure.

'The altar awaits you.'

Violetta had only taken a few steps when she felt herself come stumbling to a halt. Something large had caught her unawares. Her eyes travelled down the length of it, exposed by the harsh glow.

A rough stone altar rose up to meet her waist. Violetta ran her fingers along its grainy surface, inspecting a whole host of mysterious symbols that looked to have been carved into the stone centuries ago. A circular structure easily towered ten-feet above it, hewed from the same brand of course stone.

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'As I said, the altar awaits you.'

Violetta turned to regard the figure. The light must have dimmed some time ago, for standing before her was her husband.

'Ryore?'

The emperor's gaunt face loomed above her. His broad shoulders were pinned back, his chest puffed out in an impressive display. He too was draped in a ceremonial robe, the rich red doing little more than emphasizing his pallid flesh. Violetta could feel her knees trembling. Ryore said nothing. He barely looked at her as he leant close, scooping her into his chiselled arms, only to lay her down upon the altar.

The cold stone rubbed at Violetta's legs. She attempted to shift her position, but Ryore's arms held her fast.

'Be still!'

It was more of an order than a request. In anger, his powers seemed to flare from within. Thick layers of frost swept over the altar, circling her trembling form. Violetta obeyed his command. She stared up at his ghost-like face, at the scar that filled itself with frost. *He could have killed me.* Her mind worked itself into a frenzy. *One stray spark and—* 'You'll be all right, my dear,' whispered Ryore, 'That, I can promise.'

Ryore's voice waned, yet it did little to restore Violetta's faith. The feel of his hand as he brushed it against the skin of her cheek brought to life a sea of emotions. She put his outburst to the back of her mind and focused on the task at hand.

Ryore straightened.

'Alas, here comes our saviour.'

Violetta stirred upon the altar. She tilted her head up to spy a shadow creeping into the clearing. She could sense Ryore's discomfort as it slunk towards them with a sound one could only describe as a hiss.

'Mythos,' Ryore whispered.

It was abnormally tall for anything human. *If* it was human. While Ryore shot her a reassuring half smile, Violetta could only stare at the shadowy figure. It continued to advance, sporting a cloak of deep blue, which shrouded its body. A matching hood hid its features, though strands of wispy white hair could be seen poking past the fabric.

The mysterious newcomer inclined their head. Something about them felt disturbingly familiar. Violetta eyed them as they met with the altar, splitting the air with a language she'd never heard. The words were impossible to identify, as was that lurking sense of familiarity.

The moonlight swept over the dark figure. Pale, corpse-like hands reached up to its hood, where it slowly began to peel it back. The urge to be violently sick assaulted Violetta. She shut her eyes, praying that she was living a nightmare, but when she blinked them back open, there it was.

The creature's face was as gaunt as ice, the skin taut as though pulled back from behind and stapled in place. Its slit like eyes glared out from deep sockets. Violetta doubted it could see well.

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'Emperor Ryore.' Its voice was low and snakelike, setting Violetta on edge. 'I'm s-ssso glad you were able to decipher my riddle.'

Violetta watched as curved fangs crept out from its mouth, completing its serpentine nature. Ryore gave a weak smile. 'Charmed, I'm sure.'

Ryore remained still while the Mythos leered at his trembling wife. It drew close, sniffing about her lithe frame in the same way that a dog might sniff out a scent.

'S-sshe is ready.'

Violetta watched as the Mythos pulled open its cloak. She was terrified to see what their clothing might hide. Reptilian scales were her best guess. As the folds of the robes parted, she felt relief sweep over her, for the moonlight revealed nothing more than a ragged tunic.

'And now to prepare the toolsss of fertility!'

That slithery voice never failed to make Violetta's skin crawl. The creature became frantic, digging around inside their robes, where dozens of pockets had spontaneously appeared.

Violetta gulped as various items began to stack up on the altar beside her. Clay pots and old books were among a few. Most had been drawn back into the Mythos' robes.

Violetta could see that they were bent over a trio of simple brown pots, which lined one edge of the stone slab. Each appeared to be filled with a different precious substance, though the scents did little to compliment each other.

Violetta was beginning to wonder when the ritual would actually begin, when the creature's hand shot out toward her. Five wart-covered digits plucked at the tie of her crimson robe, forcing it away from her. Instinct almost saw the young empress lash out, but as she prepared to fling the diseased hand away, she remembered the promise she'd made to Ryore.

The folds of her robe slipped apart, revealing Violetta's blood-streaked form. A fang-tipped smile gripped the Mythos' jaw.

'Perfect.' They leant forward to inhale the scent of her. 'Now we begin.'

One wart covered hand delved into a nearby pot. Violetta couldn't help but watch the hand retract, now coated in a pungent paste. The Mythos glared back with those dark slits.

'Ready?'

Violetta resisted the urge to leap off the altar as the paste-covered hand explored her nude form. Slender fingers adorned her body, leaving mysterious symbols to merge with her blood. The icy mixture trailed along her soft flesh in an intricate pattern of dashes and swirls.

A second pot was soon lifted, a muted blue powder appearing within the creature's palm. Fine granules trickled through the gaps in their fingers.

'This will ensure your continued relaxation.'

They sprinkled the powder across Violetta's skin, focusing on her stomach and forehead. Violetta felt a strange tingling wash over her mind, before she heard the Mythos speak again.

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'And now, the mind's connection to the phy-sss-ical form.'

Ryore drew close as the final pot was brought into focus.

'Ryore, if you'll do the honours.'

It motioned for him to extract the next substance.

Ryore's lips pressed into a hard line as he dipped a hand into the tiny pot. An almost dust-like blend of sweet herbs began to sift through the emperor's fingers. Violetta watched as he began to sprinkle it all around her, his hands flinching as though it were cold to the touch. It was like a fine crystalline rain, pouring down onto the altar. Violetta was thankful that her flesh was free of the onslaught, but she was not free from the stranger's touch.

Violetta jerked as ice-cool skin surprised her body. Her eyes met with those of her husband as he pressed his palms against her cheeks. She suddenly recalled that she was naked. Ryore's eyes bore into her, stirring an inconvenient passion within her loins. Her eyes begged for him to remain, to free her from this strange creature. He did not. Having played his part, Ryore withdrew, leaving her with the image of that serpentine grin, a thing of nightmares.

A tear swept over Violetta's cheek as the Mythos began to circle the altar, reaching a wart-covered hand back into its robes. An audible *pop* drew her attention. She gazed up at an un-stoppered vial which hung above her, filled to the brim with a luminous substance. The creature held it high, tilting its neck until the substance poured out.

A searing pain flashed into Violetta's mind as great globs of luminous green slid along her dewy flesh. Her throat burned something awful, as though struck by broken shards of glass. A second later the Mythos was in her face. 'Fight the pain!' it cried.

Pale arms swung above Violetta as she fought off the growing urge to vomit.

Violetta's stomach felt like it was ablaze with a roaring fire. She stared into space as horrific images flashed through her mind. It felt like something was ensnaring her thoughts as her mind filled with a thousand voices, each one telling of lovers lost and children none. Violetta longed to scream. Her legs attempted to kick the phantoms away, but nothing worked to extract herself from this cruel trance.

Around her came the sound of chanting; quiet at first, in the same ancient language as before. The cruel images faded from Violetta's vision, yet she found her body unable to move. The one thing the world allowed her to use were her eyes. This was not the kindness she'd initially thought. Through the darkness, she thought she saw a pair of red stones, burning like fresh glowing coals removed from a grate. They stared into Violetta's soul, undressing it with every passing second. In that moment, she begged for death.

The mysterious chanting drove Violetta into a frenzy. Thoughts of the gleaming stones began to die, her strength withering as she lay on the altar. The hideous chanting climbed in volume.

'Estal Livitus oon. Estal Livitus oon!'

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Violetta felt like she was nearing death. Her vision clouded with a black fog as she accepted the fate that she'd been dealt.

Light exploded in her vision. It called to Violetta, draining all her pains away. Wherever she was, her physical form was trivial here, a mere vessel in which her soul was trapped. Now it stood before the light, reaching towards a sense of peace that would never come.

The overpowering brightness began to fade as feeling seeped back into her bones. Violetta found herself back on the altar, beneath the polished hilt of a ceremonial knife. Her heart froze as it flashed above her. The blade pointed down, waiting to strike. She realized that if it dropped now, her brains would be skewered. With a deep breath, she began to shift her legs aside.

'Lie still!' Ryore shrieked. He forced down Violetta's wrists. 'Still.'

This time, he spoke in a whisper.

Violetta gulped. She tried to tear her eyes from the weapon, to think of something other than death when the dagger began to lower. Relief flooded her. The Mythos had begun to circle once more. It disappeared from view, causing Violetta's heart to skip a beat.

A flash of light sliced the air. The serpentine creature appeared alongside her, the short blade protruding from its wart-strewn palm. Large droplets of blood collected on their flesh, but they never cried out. They didn't even flinch.

Before Violetta could think, the Mythos tore the knife from its hand, howling in pain as more blood

flowed forth. To Violetta's horror, the oozing hand stretched over her stomach, where a stabbing pain transferred to her muscles.

An otherworldly shriek escaped Violetta's lips as ruby droplets plopped onto her abdomen, only working to heighten the sensation of pain. She screwed her eyes shut and noticed that the stabbing sensation seemed to be isolating itself, one pin-sized spot bearing the brunt of it all. 'Now,' commanded the Mythos 'Touch her s-stomach!' Ryore did as he was asked and stroked the spot where the pain was worst.

Violetta struggled to keep her eyes shut, hoping that somehow this would shield herself from the gut-wrenching wrath that tore at her insides. She braced her body for the next peak, but it never came. Violetta unscrewed her eyes. 'What now?'

Ryore addressed the silent creature, who seemed to stand guard beside his wife's feet. It was staring, almost obsessively, at the spot where its blood had met her flesh.

Violetta forced herself to gaze into those dark slits. Without another word to her, the Mythos began to wrap up its body, before leaning to whisper in her husband's ear. Whatever was said, Violetta couldn't make it out.

'You can move now, dear.'

Ryore motioned to his wife.

Violetta's first attempts to move proved feeble. Her limbs were stiff from hours of dis-use, but with some urging, she managed to pull herself into a sitting position. She glanced down at her nude form, passing her fingertips over the spot where the creature's blood had

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been absorbed. A part of her could not believe it had happened.

'Alass, the fertility ritual iss complete!'

The cool hiss of the Mythos echoed round the clearing. Their hood was drawn as they swept into the darkness, where the shadows embraced them like an old friend.

No longer afraid, Violetta fell back against the altar, limp, yet relieved that it was all over. She wondered if their serpentine saviour had sapped her strength, if only to fuel its own dangerous powers.

'Ryore?'

Violetta eased the tension from her limbs, speaking in little more than a whisper.

'Yes, my love? How are you feeling?'

She studied the waves buried deep in his forehead. 'Drained,' she managed to mumble.

Ryore's eyes flashed with sympathy. This sudden display of concern troubled Violetta, for her husband was a man of great power and means, a strong-willed figure whom she'd never imagined would weep for another. Yet here he was, displaying a sympathetic side with fresh tears tracing down his cheeks. He drew her close, planting a row of kisses along her neck. All of her doubts melted away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Fadius

Fadius blinked, inhaling the darkness. It was silent save for his own shallow breathing. It was true what they said about the dark. It consumed what little light there was, turning everything into a potential threat. Twisted shadows crept up the walls, every crack of a twig a murderous assassin, yet it was the closing footsteps which goaded his terror.

'Stravier?'

Fadius knew of one person that would use this code. It belonged to a series of ancient languages, which unfortunately were lost to most. Luckily, a few fanatics still studied and were able to freely converse in the ancient tongue.

Fadius found himself backing into a comer, preparing to run if need be. He peered through the darkness, in the general direction of the speaker and let fly his own cold reply.

'Estravil, Du!'

Laughter rang out through the gloom.

'I should have known.'

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Fadius' fear ebbed. Two linn clicks and a whispering of 'Aeos Liptus Luminos' saw an orb of light flare into existence. At its centre, blue fire appeared to ignite, highlighting the shadow which moved beyond.

'Were you expecting me to vanish, darling?'

The shadow stamped its feet as it glided closer, their last word practically dripping with contempt.

Another two clicks saw the sphere jolt, flying into a tidy crevice, where its light became a dim glow. Fadius could barely make out the slitted eyes of a corpse-like creature as it continued to glide in his direction.

'Well now, if that isn't a good look for you.'

His laughter burred through the cave, before he felt the sides of his windpipe constrict.

'Enough,' warned the voice, 'Or I shall do more than strangle you.'

Fadius felt the pressure round his throat relax. Fie dropped to his knees, dry retching on the cave floor. 'Honestly, pull yourself together.'

Fadius glared up at his assailant. A final *click* and their glamour unravelled.

A slender figure towered above him, with hair that resembled starlight.

'You know, you don't look half as bad now,' teased Fadius. The glaring yet beautiful face of his fiancée stared back. 'Where's Arlas?' she asked.

Reiza wore a no nonsense frown and raised an index finger to her lover's throat.

'He stepped out for a moment. Said he was looking into some matters.'

Reiza paused, considering his words.

'Very well.' Her arm lowered.

'Did it go well?'

Fadius was eager to hear her news. He'd been holed up in the cave for days and needed to know that they were making progress. Reiza summoned the light orb to her. Her face was curling into a devious smile as she looked her fiance up and down.

'Relax, dearest. It is done.'

Fadius let out a sigh of relief. There was still a chance for them to lift his father's curse.

'And, as for the throne?'

Reiza set the shimmering orb to one side. She edged closer, her hips swaying in a seductive manner. Fadius struggled to control his baser instincts when she ran a lacquered nail along his cheek.

'Patience, my dear. One must not become greedy.'

Fadius recalled the mention of Reiza's affections for Ryore. He knew that his father had promised Ryore to her as a girl, but now he could only wonder what she'd do if they succeeded in their task.

'You're right, of course.'

Reiza drew back, her eyes sparkling with the beginnings of lust.

'Do not worry so. All shall be well.'

Fadius nodded. He allowed her to embrace him as his thoughts took over. He prayed that Arlas was helping to stabilise their chances of success. Their time to act was almost up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

YEAR C-8 Month 3/10

Ryore

With the months that passed, there came a sense of isolation that Ryore couldn't shake. He lay in his bed-chambers beside the most beautiful creature he could ever imagine and yet he felt empty. He knew no-one would bat an eyelid at their failed consummation. Many a ruler had failed to conceive at first, whether down to the stress of their duties or the pressure itself of creating a child.

He gazed across at Violetta. In the fading light she was perfection, an angel still within its prime. What she saw in him, he didn't know, at least not physically. He thought of the nights where their love blossomed, sending passion thrilling through his loins. Then he recalled those where his wife had grown distant, her blank expression now haunting his dreams. He tried to push it from his mind; their failed chances at conception, her silence, but truth be told, he hadn't felt like himself since that day at the ruins.

Ryore reached out to Violetta, stopping to brush his hand against her cheek before he sought to retire to his tower. He had just begun to retreat when he heard her muffled speech behind him.

'Want—freedom,' she moaned.

Ryore glanced back, eyeing the steady rise and fall of her chest. *Freedom?* He pondered the word for a while longer. *Freedom from what?* He certainly wished to be free from this feeling. He slept beside the love of his life and yet somehow he felt lonelier than ever. He longed to detach himself from such emptiness, to escape to a place where he would no longer feel such crushing disappointment.



Ryore's blood boiled. The doctor had advised him once again to remain in the hallway while he took his time to inspect Violetta. The emperor had resisted at first, but having already been ushered from his chamber once, he felt sure that he could withstand it again.

Pacing across the cobbled floor, Ryore pondered the effectiveness of the fertility ritual. The Mythos had spoken to him while they'd awaited Violetta's arrival; of the signs that would alert them to a pregnancy. None had shown. Ryore remained certain that the doctor would be able to tell. He just had to contain himself until then.

Ten minutes dragged by and Ryore could stand it no longer. He refused to pace the hallways like an errand boy. He was the ruler of this Realm and he deserved to

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be at his wife's side, especially since Fadius had watched such private happenings. The thought still burned within his mind.

The chamber door slammed in its frame. Ryore's powerful strides launched him across the room, toward the stunned figure of the doctor.

'Sire! What is the meaning of this? We are not done!'

Ryore smirked. He ignored the physician and paced toward his pale wife.

'Are you all right?'

Violetta nodded, her eyes brightening at his approach.

The doctor was not amused in the slightest and shot Ryore a stem glare, but he was too focused on his wife's eyes. They really were something; chocolate brown, with flecks of gold that gave the impression of miniature suns.

Ryore reached down, stroking her hand as the doctor groped his way around her body. He watched as light pressure was applied to her more sensitive regions and noted the tightness of her grip.

'Almost done,' groaned the doctor.

Ryore detested the man's foul attitude. He watched as the doctor withdrew his gloved hands, causing Violetta's legs to relax.

'So, is that it?'

Ryore stood in time with the doctor, who began to clear away his equipment.

'That's it.'

'And? Come out with it?' Ryore almost reached for the man's shirt, desperate to shake some answers from him. The doctor's face screwed up like a pig's.

'I am sorry, Sire, but there is no change.'

Ryore's world stopped. His biggest fear had been realized. *No child. No heir. Fadius shall inherit the throne.* He was struggling to comprehend how this had happened when the sound of Violetta's sobs wrenched his heart in two. Ryore turned to find her tears flowing in surplus.

'My sincerest apologies, Highnesses, but I don't believe there is any chance.'

Ryore bit back a scathing retort as he watched the doctor leave the room.

Ryore's disappointment could draw no parallel. He had fully expected the ritual to work and was beginning to harbour suspicions about it. In the event of success, his wife's abdomen should have started to bleed, yet there had been no signs of this.

He had noticed other occurrences too. Fatigue had begun to prey on him, cutting him down a little more each day. When he attempted to draw strength from his core, if only to subdue his wife in the boudoir, his entire body would begin to shake. With no answers left within, Ryore darted out to intercept the doctor.

Ryore stood at the edge of the grand four poster, his palms having worked up a sweat. The frustrated physician looked meaner than ever. His cheeks were flushed and a sizeable vein throbbed in his forehead.

'Report your troubles, or risk finding a new doctor!' he snarled.

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Ryore knew that this man's hellish mood was down to his impromptu request, yet for any one man to shout at a Realm ruler was beyond ludicrous. He dismissed the doctor's words and drew in a cleansing breath.

'I believe that my powers have waned.'

Without a word, the doctor formed a cup with his hands and began a thorough physical investigation.

Ryore hated feeling vulnerable, but another man's touch was truly revolting. He reluctantly obliged the doctor and had done everything from the nerve racking squat and cough, to the standard test of magical power, which was performed by testing the subject's blood. By the time the doctor had finished checking him over, his face had gone a chalky white.

'Well?'

The man removed his surgical gloves, his face torn between surprise and horror.

'I'm afraid, Sire, that it is dire news.'

Ryore felt his heart clench. Violetta leant across from her place on the bed to rest a hand upon his shoulder.

'You are right. Your powers have indeed waned.'

Ryore paled.

'I've lost my powers?' He racked his brain for a reasonable explanation. 'How? When?'

Violetta's hand reached down his back, but Ryore merely shrugged it away. He began to wonder if the fertility ritual had been a trap.

'Highness, I'll be blunt. Have either of you been involved with any ancient magic?'

Ryore froze. It couldn't be. The ritual had seemed a sure thing and here was a doctor, telling him that such ancient magic could have cost him his birthright.

Ryore drew himself out of his thoughts.

'What if we had? Could such magic have caused this?'

The doctor's eyes widened as he studied Ryore.

'It's certainly possible. If you did partake in any ritual practices—' He shot Ryore a stem look. 'Then you may have been tricked into having a more harmful ritual performed than you originally intended.'

Ryore struggled to maintain his calm guise. He'd been wrong. Being proved barren wasn't his worst fear, but it did come as a close second to being powerless.

'I know this must be hard, Sire, having just learned that you've lost your magical ability.' The doctor's voice cut into his thoughts. 'But, naturally I have no choice but to expose you as powerless, and therefore unfit to rule.'

Those final three words hit Ryore, hard. *Unfit to Rule?* He felt the bottom drop from his stomach. So much would be at stake now; his throne, his marriage. Even his life.

Ryore's eyes snapped up to the waiting doctor. His blood boiled as he stared at the man who threatened to expose him. There was only one way he could see himself getting out of this mess.

'Well, if that's what you think is best, doctor.' He watched the man's face curl into a grin. 'Why don't I escort you out? After all, you've had a long journey.'

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Ryore gestured to the chamber door, waiting until the doctor took the first step.

'I shan't be a moment my love.'

He blew Violetta a quick kiss, before following the doctor out, into the passage.

Ryore wondered if he could change the man's mind, put him off from mentioning his new-found status. The pair rounded a bend, where they almost collided with a burly soldier.

'Sire, please accept my humblest apologies. I didn't know you were-'

Ryore held his hand up for silence.

'That's quite all right, I was actually in the middle of showing this fine gentleman out.' He indicated the doctor beside him. 'Perhaps you could show him the rest of the way?'

'Very well, if you'll follow me, sir.'

He led the doctor down the hall a ways when Ryore stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. He leant in, making sure that only the soldier could hear him.

'See to it that he does not bother me again.'



Month 4/10

Powerless. How could it be? After all he had done; the years spent under his father's scorn, for his life to end up like this. The week had dragged by with Ryore's hatred

wrestling to gain control. He strode through the draughty passages of his estate. His wife was acting on his behalf this morning, delegating important matters of state.

Since the doctor had confirmed the loss of his powers, Ryore had resorted to posting tighter security, though he still refused to have an accompanying guard. He didn't need anyone outing him now, not when he stood to lose so much.

The moment Ryore crossed into the throne room, he found himself tormented by the harsh glare of the light orb above. He strode forward, the cold walls of the throne room like fresh powdered snow. They were intended to be beautiful, to calm the rulers of the estate, but Ryore had always found them ugly. Unlike the angelic figure before him. Sadly, it was because of her that he had lost his power; a power that she still possessed in spades. As for Fadius, if Ryore saw him again, then he would personally ensure that he spent the remainder of his days in hellish agony.

Violetta's eyes were glued to a series of blueprints, which were laid out before her on a table of marble. Ryore spread out his arms and crashed through the waiting counsellors. Something inside of him had snapped.

"This is all your fault! You bewitching demon!" Violetta's gaze rose to meet his and for a moment Ryore forgot his ire. Her brown eyes glazed over, filling with a sorrow that he had put there. Yet she did not shed a single tear. He had thought her frail within the confines of his throne, but she was far from it.

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Violetta offered no defending remarks, but sat staring, her eyes narrowed to slits.

'Well?' Ryore's voice wavered. 'What do you have to say?' The tears receded in his wife's eyes, siphoned away by the heat that radiated from her. She gave no indication of breaking before him and fixed her attention back on the papers below.

Ryore felt his anger growing, a white hot needle of rage spearing his mind.

'I've lost everything for you!'

He glared round at the room's occupants, his legs carrying him up the steps to the throne, where he continued to stare down his wife.

'My power, my sanity!' He snatched the table out from beneath her, tossing it into the midst of the onlookers. 'And all for a barren whore!'

Ryore glared down at Violetta. She still held the papers that she had been studying, refusing to look up and meet his gaze. *Thwack!* Ryore took a deliberate swing, his fist colliding with the side of her face. Violetta twisted sideways as blood spurted from her lips. She rose from the throne, with one hand held against her mouth.

'I didn't do anything to you.'

Her voice wore a surprising mask of calm as she glided down the steps from the throne. For a moment, Ryore's grin faltered. He watched her stride away, her hand still pressed to her lips.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Violetta

Violetta let the warm water wash over her. She held a damp cloth to her throbbing cheek as she contemplated the events of the day. She had never seen Ryore so angry. He'd blamed her for everything and at first she had wondered why he shouldn't? If his loss of power was indeed a result of the fertility ritual, then he had only lost them to help her. *Or to help himself*, she thought. She shook her head. No. None of this was her fault. Ryore had suffered at his own hands.

Violetta curled up in her metal prison. She felt safe here, hidden from view. It was the perfect place to forge a plan. The Frost Realm had become treacherous, much like her husband. At first glance, both had promised Violetta joy, with the occasional quirk she could have overlooked. Now, the freedom she thought she had obtained was nowhere in sight. She felt that she'd been forced to leave a lot of herself in the past. Even her thoughts seemed to belong to another part of her; a part necessary only to ensure her survival.

Violetta had been forced to leave behind Lord Jork's gift. In a way, it was responsible for her family's deaths,

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yet she had once found comfort in it and longed to do so once again. She recalled the last day she'd played with Darius. The day the storm came. She remembered how her wound from the ice shard had healed, like a miracle. Violetta didn't think such an occurrence could be a coincidence. From the day she had locked that ball away, she began to wonder if it was the key to her health.

She peeled the wash cloth from her aching jaw and watched Ryore's ring glimmer on her finger. Beauty and wealth meant little to her now that her husband had turned on her. She could understand the strain on him to conceive an heir, especially if the rumours were true about his brother wanting to usurp the throne, but his behaviours were not tolerable. She re-lived the moment that his fist had collided with her jaw and could find no way for either herself or Ryore to justify it.

Violetta stared in the bathroom mirror, at a striking bruise of purple and red; the extent of the damage done by Ryore. She turned away, in keen search of a robe to cover her shame and was in luck to have found one hung upon the bathroom door. She slipped it over her exposed flesh, relishing the soft satin feel.

A moment of clarity brought her an idea. It sprouted within her mind, forming the buds of a cunning plan. She would re-ignite the passion between herself and Ryore, in a bid to bring back his honourable side. If all else failed, then she still had her power.

Violetta donned herself in her finest underclothes, a crowning achievement of the royal tailor. She studied the ice blue lace that hugged her curves, her body trembling

from the thought of seducing Ryore. She had stretched herself across the sheets of the grand four poster, concealing all but her legs with their silken feel.

What am I doing? It will be ages until Ryore retires. Violetta bit into her bottom lip. She snatched up her robe, concealing her half-naked form before she tiptoed to the chamber door.

Summoning her courage, she stepped outside. The air in the corridor was cool and soothing. Violetta gazed out from her place in the shadows, searching for a maid. Any maid. She didn't fancy waiting four more hours for her husband to retire. No. She was eager to resolve their differences.

Violetta was just beginning to lose hope when she caught sight of Kaitlyn wandering the halls. The young empress left the safety of the shadows and chased after the young maid.

'Kaitlyn!'

The girl halted. Her face bore an uneasy frown, but when her eyes took in Violetta's face, her strained look shifted into a smile.

'Mi lady?'

'Could you please fetch the emperor for me? It's of urgent importance.'

Violetta stood tall, perhaps intimidating to someone so young. Surprisingly, Kaitlyn nodded. She gave Violetta a prompt bow before scurrying off to locate her master.

Violetta had returned to her chambers and the silken feel of the bed-clothes. She ran her fingers along her glowing skin. The sensation worked to calm her racing

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heart, but did nothing to relax the hairs that stood on end all over, as though trying to protect her delicate form. She lay back against the bed spread, wondering if there was any chance for them to conceive. She used to enjoy the touch of her husband. She'd craved the feel of his skin ever since he'd thrown the ball in her honour. Now, she found herself once more envisaging Xyhoni. She traced the throbbing bruise around her eye. Xyhoni would never have hurt her in such a way, no matter how desperate the circumstances.

Violetta found herself wishing that she had listened to her father. If she truly desired Ryore, then these doubts would likely come to pass, but if they didn't, then maybe she was simply succumbing to the obligation she felt toward him and should tell him that she could no longer be his wife.

She worried that she'd lost sight of so many things, caving into marriage due to a fleeting fondness and a desire for freedom that she believed she had sated.

Such thoughts didn't have time to circulate as Ryore burst into their chambers. The door was nearly flung off of its hinges as he began striding toward the bed.

'Is there blood? Have we news?' he asked.

Violetta's mouth fell open. Ryore's eyes were filled with hope, shimmering a pale sapphire blue. She had failed to recognize that 'urgent' to Ryore would hint at her having fallen with child. He rushed forward, mounting the bed and wrapping his arms about her waist.

'Well?'

Violetta could hardly look him in the eye. Ryore seemed so happy. This was how she remembered him from their first meeting, before he'd turned to abusing her. He seemed so bold and full of promise. This was the man she had given herself to, yet where was he when she had needed him most? She had been told that she was a barren wife and yet he'd shamed her for that which she could not control.

Ryore seemed so happy at the prospect of having an heir that Violetta was somewhat fearful to break the news to him. She rested a delicate hand upon his shoulder and conjured her best sympathetic smile.

'I'm sorry, Ryore, there is no baby.'

She swept a dark clump of hair away from his forehead.

'I don't understand.'

Violetta held his face in both hands and gently pressed her lips against his.

Images of Xyhoni flashed through Violetta's racing mind; of the brief moments they'd spent together. No. She shouldn't think like this. She was trying to rekindle things, trying to hold on to whatever scrap of freedom she could. Her lips parted from Ryore's. She stepped off of the bed, letting her robe slip once more to the chamber floor.

Ryore's jaw clenched as he gazed at her semi-naked form in its ice blue wrappings. He watched as she crawled back onto the bed and lay against the satin sheets. Her golden locks trailed down the length of her spine, waves of the clingy fabric seizing her in their cool grasp.

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Ryore's disappointment fled as he reached out, feeling the warmth of Violetta's dewy flesh. She gasped as his legs slid over hers, his powerful frame revealed at last.

Violetta forgot herself in their passionate embrace. She pulled her husband close, their bodies entwined, lips meeting in a fiery kiss. Her needful moans escaped her as her husband urged his body on. He crashed against her, enveloping her when her body seized.

All sense of her initial excitement vanished.

'Ryore?' Violetta lifted her arms, pressing against her husband's sweat slicked flesh. 'Ryore, please! You're hurting me.'

Her husband didn't appear to have heard her. His body raged on, his eyes vacant. In that moment, everything about him turned ugly. From his piercing blue eyes, to his corpse like flesh and that damned scar. Ryore had marked himself as a villain.

Violetta stumbled down the estate's corridors. She paused and bit down on her knuckles to stifle the waiting scream. Ryore had left her soon after he'd finished with their encounter. The sensation of his body driving into her own was still vivid within her mind as she suffered the pain he had left in his wake.

Violetta thought of nothing, save for how desperately she wanted to escape this man. She thought back to her father's initial wish that she succeed him when his time came. Perhaps returning to be his successor wouldn't be as bad as she'd first imagined. Her

assumed path to freedom had led her nowhere, a false fork in the winding road of life.

Violetta struggled further down the passage when she spied a figure dancing within her vision. She glanced to her right, where it hid within the shadows of an alcove. As she stumbled closer, the figure of a boy stood out from the shadows. He looked to be young, likely brought to the estate in the past year for work. She had noticed that the younger servants didn't appear to favour their master. It was this knowledge Violetta was counting on.

Violetta crept closer, to find that the boy didn't look much older than ten. She thought back to when Darius had been around this age. They had still been the best of friends and she couldn't help but smile at the thought.

The boy before her looked nothing like her brother. Thatch like hair stuck out on his head, his thin arms crossed over his chest, as though he were a sleeping demon from a child's fable. His eyes flickered open at her approach.

'Good day,' she said.

'Highness! Good day.' The young boy gazed up at his royal visitor with a jaw that trembled something fierce. 'How may I help you?'

Violetta motioned him out of the shadows. She was finding it difficult to stand for long, her exhausted form slumping against the wall.

'Are you all right, Ma'am?'

The boy squinted against the lamp light, seeming to have noticed her state of imbalance. Violetta wished she

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could explain things to him, but he was just a child. She didn't want him to share in her suffering.

'I'm fine,' she panted, 'I just need someone to deliver a message for me. It's rather urgent.'

'Well, I'm a messenger. I can ride a horse and everything.' His face brightened with a charming smile. He was clearly hoping to do something more meaningful with his time.

'What's your name?' Violetta asked.

'Allistair, Ma'am.'

Violetta studied the boy. He was indeed a royal messenger, wearing the same navy blue tunic, with a single red stripe that ran crossways. *Allistair. A good name for a good soul*, she thought.

'Well, Allistair, how would you like to deliver this message for me?'

Violetta struggled within her robes, forced to reach a hand to the wall for support. She brought out three identical scrolls, one for each of the other Realms. She thought it wise to seek aid from multiple persons, given the nature of her husband's latest desires.

The empress glanced down to find Allistair's eyes glistening at the prospect of betraying his master.

'Ma'am, I hope you're aware that to defy the emperor is a crime, one to be met with the harshest of punishments.'

His little chest puffed out in an attempt to intimidate. Violetta smiled and leant closer.

'It is only punishable if you are caught.'

Allistair clapped a hand to his mouth. She gave him a playful wink as he finally caught the meaning of her words. 'Oh, right.'

'Here.'

Violetta shared the boy's smile as she placed the three scrolls into his hands. A single gold coin followed, a token of her appreciation.

'Now, you must only deliver these to the names on the scrolls. No one else. Understand?'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

Allistair didn't meet her gaze. He was staring intently at the gold in his palm. Violetta couldn't blame him. He looked to have never seen so much money in his young life, let alone to now be holding such a princely sum.

Allistair entrusted the scrolls to his weather-worn satchel, before bidding Violetta a fine farewell. She watched him scurry off down the passage, doing her best to strangle another cry. Allistair would be safe enough. No-one would turn a little boy out into the cold on his travels. Her allies were sure to offer him food and a warm place to sleep if he should fall short of the next realm by nightfall.

Violetta turned back toward her chambers. She had addressed the scrolls to her father's allies: King Aemon, Lord Jork, and Jermise. She could only pray that one of them would come to her aid.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Month 6/10

Violetta

The months that followed brought only pain. Violetta paced the winter gardens, taking what joy she could from the enchanting plant life. She had informed Ryore of a kindly Samaritan who had promised to provide them with the true keys to fertility. Little did he know that she was waiting upon the help of an ally. Nevertheless, he had agreed to their meeting.

Violetta's scrolls had received no responses. She had asked for Jermise to meet her at this very place in the event that she might be able to offer up assistance. The young empress felt her stomach chum. The eleventh hour had already fallen and there was no sign of anyone.

She plucked a snowdrop from its bed, welcoming its fresh scent. It reminded Violetta of happier times. She tried to cling to the memories flashing through her mind when a shadow drifted into her vision. She backed up, shooting a glance at the dark figure. It stood in the distance, watching, with breath that formed a translucent

mist. Their entire head was concealed below an oversized hood. *A Frost Monk?*

Violetta had heard little about such people, but the ancient writings insisted they were deadly. She abandoned all caution, striding toward them in a sudden rage.

'Holy Elder, this is not your place! We do not worship anymore!'

Liquid flame sprang up around her fists, a warning for them to retreat. The hooded figure leered at her, their lips curling into a grin.

'Do you have the time, Highness? I would have thought it to be the eleventh hour by now.'

Violetta froze. She glanced over to the guards who were busy with gossip and allowed her flames to extinguish themselves.

'It is past the eleventh hour. Am I to take your word that you didn't know this?'

The robed figure glided closer, until their voice was barely a whisper.

'On the contrary, I knew exactly what the hour was.'

Violetta's face lit up at a strand of flaming red hair peeping out of the hood.

'Jermise? Is that you?'

'I don't know how you stand it here, Highness. Too cold.' Violetta began to laugh.

Despite her complaints, Jermise appeared to have come well prepared for the weather. A thick dress-robe in jet black hung over her body, the hood drawn up to

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hide her small face, as well as to protect her from the bitter cold.

Violetta beckoned her friend into a copse of trees where it was unlikely for them to be overheard. Even though the guards had been informed of an impending visitor, that wouldn't stop them from reporting whatever snatch of information came their way.

They emerged into a secluded clearing, where towering fir trees offered limited protection against the biting cold. Centred between them was a grand fountain. The Fountain of Tears.

Violetta held her hand out, indicating the circular structure, where water flowed like the ancient waterfalls of old. Jermise halted within its presence. This centre-piece had survived for centuries, once standing as a worshipping point for the Frost Realm's citizens, but no longer. Religion was a thing of the past.

Violetta shifted her legs across the bench that ran around the fountain's edge. Ancient runes were inscribed in electric blue, like veins running the length of its sides. She patted the space alongside her, indicating for Jermise to sit. 'My dearest Jermise, please listen, for I don't think I have much time.' Violetta's eyes sparkled with sorrow. 'I need your help.'

Her confidant wiggled about on the stone.

'I read your message in full, my lady. Know that I will assist you in any way I can.'

Violetta's face crinkled in a wan smile as she met Jermise's emerald eyes through the shadow of her hood. 'Thank you. I'm not sure what else can be done.'

Jermise's eyebrows arched.

'Highness?'

'Ryore is not the man I thought he was. He is dark, deceptive.'

Jermise glanced about, before allowing her hood to slip down, revealing her waves of flame red hair.

'What has happened to change your mind?'

'Look.'

Violetta bent down and lifted her petticoat.

'Goodness!'

'Shh, please?'

The young empress drew into herself, for fear that they'd be overheard.

Her confidant's gaze solidified her belief that these marks on her skin were in no way deserved. They lurked beneath her skirts, an ugly purplish-red that swallowed her flesh.

'I didn't know how to tell you.'

Violetta could hear the strain in her voice as she fought against the tears that demanded to flow. Her hands had balled into fists and now trembled at her sides.

'Don't apologise. This is not your doing.'

A subtle anger had penetrated Jermise's tone, but she forced it to soften for the girl's benefit.

Violetta hung her head. How had she allowed this to come to pass? She glanced up, where Jermise was reaching a hand toward her swollen leg. Violetta saw her expression change. She withdrew in haste, her hands to her sides.

'My apologies, Highness.'

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Violetta recognised the glint of fear in her confidant's eyes. She had seen it often enough in the reflection of mirrors. She peered through the gap in the evergreen trees, praying that none of the guards had noticed. To spy a hooded monk kneeling before the emperor's wife and especially with her skirt pulled high; it was the stuff scandals were made of.

Jermise's emerald eyes shimmered before her. Violetta had never known her to be given to tears but as she gestured toward the young girl's leg, she couldn't seem to stop herself. 'Violetta, what do you propose we do? Should you not have informed your father about this?'

She brushed a finger under one eye, removing the fluid that had collected there.

'No. He needn't know until I'm safe.'

'But Vi.'

'Jermise, while I'm thankful you're here, tell me, did Aemon and Jork not receive their scrolls?'

Violetta knew she sounded on edge. She had to know. She wanted as much input as possible, in order to put a stop to her husband's crimes.

The steady trickle of water from the fountain of tears did little to soothe her as she waited for Jermise to speak. 'I'm sorry, my lady. I was unaware that you had sent others.'

Although, I did bring these.'

Violetta watched Jermise with growing impatience as she shuffled rather comically within her oversized robes. 'Here.'

She produced a small spherical bundle, wrapped within an old cloth. Violetta eyed it with suspicion.

Jermise allowed her fingers to trail over the object before she let the wrappings fall away. Violetta's mind almost failed to register the item she held. She felt her heart wrench as she gazed down upon Lord Jork's gift, her childhood ball. Sad eyes took in the rich pattern of designs, its vivid reds and bold blues. It had been almost a year since she'd laid eyes on it, yet the pain it had caused was still fresh in her mind.

'Thank you,' was all she felt able to say.

Violetta forced herself to face her confidant, praying that she could keep her own tears at bay. To her surprise, Jermise was smiling.

'Your father found it the other day. He said it was a shame to leave something so powerful behind.'

'Powerful?'

Violetta's eyes began to brighten.

'Yes. He said that it will be the light you need in the darkest of times.'

'But, what does that mean?' asked Violetta.

Jermise pressed the ball into the empress' hands.

'He said that when you're ready, you will know.'

Violetta resigned herself with a weak nod.

'Highness.' Jermise grasped hold of her wrist. 'I also brought this.'

Jermise slipped something out from the sleeve of her robe. The light reflected its rich redness. This was surely a sign of better things to come, for there was no greater symbol of hope to a Flame Realm descendent than that

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of a fully bloomed red rose. Violetta guided it into her hand. Its light scent reminded her of home.

'Is it?'

'Yes, Highness. I do believe master Xyhoni would want you to keep it close.'

Violetta noted how Jermise's lips curved ever so slightly at the comers. She was glad to be holding Xi's rose once more, to feel its wonderful preserved petals against her skin. It reminded her of what she'd have to do in order to obtain her real freedom.

'Listen.' Jermise spoke in as low a whisper as possible. 'We must inform your father of Ryore's behaviour.'

'We can't,' Violetta cried. 'Please, what did my father mean when he said Jork's gift could bring me light?'

Jermise's gaze rose to meet hers. There was fire in the eyes of both women; in Jermise's an urge to protect a child who had come to feel like family, in Violetta's an impatience that was coupled with raw fear.

'I don't know, my lady. Your father said that on some level you would already know.'

Already know? Violetta gazed into the fountain's base, at the churning pool of water below. She had refrained from thinking back to that day for so long; the day that had ruined ah. Now, she found herself searching the tattered remnants of those memories for any indication of what her father could mean.

Violetta recalled being impaled by a shard of ice and having healed almost instantly, though it had never been clear to her as to why.

'Jermise, I don't understand. I'm frightened and I'm asking for your help. Please, don't tell my father about Ryore's recent behaviour. I—'

Violetta's face twisted. She stared across at an empty space, the steady flow of water reaching her ears. She peered about the small enclosure, but there was no sign of Jermise.

Violetta was quick to conceal Jork's gift in her cloak. She paced to the edge of the small clearing and peered out from behind one of the fir trees. There were no others beyond her secret meeting point, save for a couple of guards who were still on patrol. A pair by the gate were bright and animated, something Violetta could tell from even this distance. She inhaled the cool winter air and emerged from the trees with a blank expression.

The path to Violetta's left took her directly in front of the guards. They paused their general mumblings, offering the empress lecherous smiles. Violetta avoided their lingering gazes, maintaining her stony expression in an effort to keep them from intercepting her. Her thoughts turned back to Ryore. He would be lustful tonight, so she'd need to be prepared to fight him if need be.

The bulk of Jork's gift pressed against the bruises lining her ribs. She bit the inside of her cheek, hoping its shape was masked well enough that no-one noticed. Jork's gift had become a curse to her, having taken her mother and brother from this world. Maybe now, she thought, it could bring her luck. She followed the path round, away from the iron gate and its entourage, toward

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her husband. Violetta would do everything in her power to ensure her safety. After all, she still had her magic.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Month 7/10

Fadius

Fadius detested the waiting game. While he was forced to remain in this squalid cave for months on end, his brother had let slip a secret that could ruin them. If such information had already reached the Flame King, then their little trio would be in grave trouble.

Despite such setbacks, Reiza had uncovered a much darker rumour that could be used to their advantage. Fadius had learned, through her, that Ryore had lost his ability to summon magic and was therefore powerless against all future efforts to dethrone him. Fadius promised his father now, as in life, that he would do his best to rid the world of Ryore and to take his place as the Frost Realm's rightful ruler.

Fadius scoured the cave for signs of Reiza's return. He continued to consider the possibility of King Eagan having already heard the rumours. If only Fadius had access to his brother's lense artefact. Yes, he knew about Ryore's glass bauble. How could he not when he was such an adept lock-pick. He knew that if he could find

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the lense, then he could discover what King Eagan already knew and hopefully gain them some precious time in which to complete their task. After all, they had but a few precious months left to complete their deed and break the curse that his father had placed upon them.

Click! The absence of light had never ceased to strike fear into the prince's soul, but the sounds of his fiancée's approaching power were far more intimidating. *Click!* Reiza appeared just a few feet before him, illuminated by the orb in her palm. A second figure shadowed her steps.

Fadius showed no surprise at their sudden appearance. He stared through the haze of light, where a pair of ruby eyes gleamed back.

'Where have you been?' he asked.

'We were busy foiling the plans of a silly little girl.'

Arlas held up two identical scrolls.

'Where did you get those?'

'We came across a young man on our travels. It looks like he was trying to deliver some messages on behalf of your brother's wife.'

Arlas began tutting under his breath.

'And you stopped him?'

'We believe so. Here.'

Reiza threw the orb for Fadius to catch. He dove forward, stifling a yelp as his shin collided with a section of jagged rock. The flickering orb landed with a dull thud in his palms.

Fadius glanced up from his position on the cave floor. Reiza was bent double, her arms working to retrieve something from within the shadows. He forced

himself to suppress a lewd grin as he scanned the Seer's shapelier curves.

'Here we are.' Reiza was brandishing something in his direction. 'For you.'

Fadius held up the little ball of light. Whatever she held, it was worn smooth and reflected the light of the magical sphere.

'What is it?'

'It's armour.' Arlas swept in from the darker reaches of the cave. 'You'll need it to do what you're planning.'

'Excuse me?'

Scarlet eyes flashed before him.

'You plan to stalk your elder brother's rooms, to gain access to a rather interesting artefact, correct?'

'H-how?'

'I have many talents, boy. Do not test my limits, for they far exceed your own.'

Arlas' smile rattled him. Fadius had no idea as to how he could read him so easily. He desired nothing more at that moment than to lock away his thoughts in some impenetrable cell, where Arlas' range of abilities would fail to detect them.

'Reiza has suggested that we transport you to your brother's estate.'

Fadius felt like a pit had opened up in his stomach. 'Transport?'

'Indeed. I should be able to teleport you inside the estate, but only as far as the council room. With Reiza's help as a Seer, of course.'

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Reiza's face took on a somewhat agitated look, which Fadius sincerely hoped was directed at Arlas.

'Between the two of us being experienced casters, we should be able to summon a spell to transport you there.'

'Sounds simple enough. But wait, how will I return?'

Arlas' sabre-like teeth poked out through his lips.

'I'm afraid you'll have to come up with your own plan.'

At that point, Reiza pushed her way between the two men. She cleared her throat, thrusting the polished armament into her fiance's hands, before setting a further shimmering bundle at his feet.

Fadius was thoroughly impressed by their haul. He gazed down into a polished guard's helmet, which displayed a perfect likeness of himself in its mirror-like shine.

'So, what do you think?'

Reiza's face appeared from behind the helmet. Her eyes searched his, expecting an answer. When he could find none, she rolled her eyes.

'Kneel!'

Fadius obeyed. He held the glowing orb aloft and winced as she snatched it from his palm.

'This Frost Guard armour should keep you from being detected.'

Reiza spoke in hushed tones, her words bringing light to Fadius' darkened soul. Perhaps he could retrieve the lense after all. He stared, fascinated by the glittering pile spread out before him. All he had needed to acquire

the lense was access to his brother's Estate and thanks to Arlas and Reiza, he now had a way in.

Fadius struggled with the armour at first. Although it was light-weight, the cold made it stiffer than ever, lending him the appearance of a tin robot as he dragged his limbs along the ground. The sky outside the cave was dark as pitch, a mourning widow in search of her daylight lover.

'Now remember,' warned Reiza. 'Once you're inside, you must act the part. Be confident. For the next few hours, you're a guard.'

She placed a gentle kiss upon his cheek, an act of affection which she rarely performed in the presence of others. Fadius gazed into the depths of her eyes, wanting to run his fingers through the exquisite length of her hair and to press his lips against her own.

Arlas' tense voice broke the connection.

'We must hurry. Ryore shall likely retire to his tower at dusk.' Fadius nodded. He hated the thought of others using magic on him, but to lift this curse, he was willing to do anything.



Arlas had been true to his word. The bland walls of the council room swam into Fadius' vision. He doubled over, clutching at a pain which had begun to radiate through his side.

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A few minutes of careful breathing saw Fadius right himself. He approached the exit of the chambers and strode through, ever thankful that rulers didn't bother to place enchantments over empty rooms.

Fadius strolled through the Estate at ease. *Act the part*, his mind echoed. And he did. He adopted a leisurely pace, just a late-shift guard making his rounds about the Estate.

'Evening.'

He inclined his head to several guards, who returned strained smiles before turning to converse with their fellows. For now they saw Fadius as their equal, serving the same self-righteous piece of filth. With Ryore's growing isolation, the tower would no doubt be harder to access.

Fadius reached the top floor without incident. Some of the younger guards he'd passed had bowed down to his uniform, which only played up his own self-importance. It pleased Fadius to know that even subconsciously, they could sense his divine right.

He prowled the corridors, using the shadows for cover when needed. He hardly realized that he was biting his lip until the tang of blood enveloped his tongue. He eyed the fine tapestries on either side, his heart hammering inside his chest. *So close now*.

His armour creaked in protest of his going further. He was almost there, so close that his fingers could almost grasp the wooden frame of the door.

'You ought not to be here, soldier.'

The sharp point of a sword pressed into his back. Fadius felt a momentary lapse of panic. The blade pushed harder, threatening to pierce through his armour if he didn't react. There was no way out of this. The stranger tightened his grip on the hilt of the blade, his voice a low growl.

'Surrender now and you'll only get a hiding.'

To Fadius' own surprise, he began to laugh, a roaring chuckle that made the newcomer's blood turn to ice.

'What's so funny?' he growled.

Fadius didn't say a word. Fie spun, flipping the blade round so that it pierced the man's chest. The soldier's gaze trailed along his body to where the blade was sticking out from his gut. Fadius dared not waste time. He yanked the weapon free from the guard, whose gushing form slumped to the floor. Fadius took great pleasure in watching as the light of the man's eyes faded to a hollow black.

Fadius glared at the mess of guts which now hung upon the edge of the blade. His eyes alighted on the fresh corpse. He smiled. Dragging the blade along the guard's cape was a better idea than he'd first realized. Blood smeared itself across the shimmering surface, sliding away from the polished metal of the sword. Fadius secured his grip on the hilt. He stared at the point that had punctured his kill. Now that it had drawn blood, it would crave more.

The guard's limp carcass had been tricky to dispose of. Fadius had determined there to be no suitable place to dump the corpse when he rounded a corner and

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praised his luck. A shadowed archway loomed ahead. He figured that its gloom would be enough to conceal the guard for now, until his ghastly aroma began to spread.

Fadius panted with the exertion of lugging the man over to the arch. His large frame had proved somewhat difficult, stiffening arms and legs splayed out at odd angles from his fall.

Having managed to get the body propped up to appear as though sitting, Fadius wiped the sweat from his brow and stalked back the way he'd come. He turned the guard's sword around, inspecting the craftsmanship that had gone into creating such a fine blade. It was made to fit someone about his size and would no doubt prove useful should he run into any more interference.

Fadius knelt before the door to the tower, hands poised above the lock. He felt a strange source of energy pulse about it, invisible and unfamiliar, but easily detected by those with his gifts. He felt about for the lock's tumblers. Locating them wasn't the hard part. Fadius could sense the magic that worked within and was determined to pry the spell apart.

Fadius began by probing the lock with a thin strain of magic. Glittering particles eased into the space, causing the spell to falter.

'Come on.'

He pressed the flat of his palm to the aged wood, parting with a second, more powerful strain of magical energy.

On the second try, the lock fizzled out. Fadius' lips curled as he reached for the handle. His finesse with locks

had been no small fortune. He'd worked at it from his days as a boy when Ryore had kept his toys well hidden. With enough practice, Fadius' skills had soon triumphed. To his mind, it was no wonder his father had preferred him to Ryore.

Fadius nudged open the door. A small slit appeared between the frame, no wider than his thumb. There was no light to see by, but he crept in nonetheless, not wanting to risk another sneak attack from one of the guards. He pulled the door so it was almost closed. It was then that the Darkness descended upon him.

Fadius fumbled about the tower room. His pupils began to adjust to the gloom, his eyes flickering around the shadowy perimeter. Distorted shapes crept into the sides of his vision. Demons. Spectres. The unknown.

'Just shadows,' he assured himself.

He felt his way along the rough stone walls. The shifting shadows were indeed unnerving, but he'd made it this far. He had to push on.

A shape about waist high loomed up so suddenly that Fadius somehow managed to crash over its side. He tumbled down into what felt like a towering stack of books, his sword relinquished from his grasp. Several large tomes ricocheted off his helmet, while the others took to showering the floor.

His subsequent moan was part pain and part disappointment. He wasn't some clumsy oaf with a mediocre plan, yet his appearance at present would suggest otherwise.

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Fadius shook himself. He bent forward and was immediately forced to stifle a cry. Pain gripped him as something wet gushed across his arm. He squinted through the dark, but was unable to determine the source. He yanked off one of his gauntlets, freeing the pallid flesh beneath.

With two fingers, he traced the shape of his arm, where his hand met a dent in his armour. His fingers drew along the gap, bringing forth a familiar smell. Without thought, he brought his hand up to his lips, darting his tongue out to touch the tips of the flesh. There was no mistaking his judgement.

Fadius shot to his feet. He relinquished his blade for the time being. The lense was more important and he wasn't going to stop until he found it, but he knew he needed to do something about his arm. His wound showed no signs of letting up, the metallic scent filling the room. Biting down on his lip, Fadius reached deep into his crystallised core and drew a steady stream of power up through his veins. With his bare hand placed within the shred in his armour, he allowed the magic to flow into the wound.

Pain radiated through the prince's arm. His leg kicked out on instinct, sending yet more objects crashing around him. Once the blood flow had begun to halt, Fadius withdrew his magic and clambered up to peer through the shadows. He scabbled back toward the waist high shape. His father's desk, he now realized. He could make it out by its rough dimensions, running his

palm along the smooth wooden top. If Ryore hid his secrets in one place, then this was where they'd surely be.

Fadius wasted no time. He started from the bottom, rifling his way through each lacquered drawer. Rage began to inundate him when his fingers turned up nothing more than papers, along with the occasional book and quill.

The temptation to upend the desk was immense. Fadius hadn't the time for lengthy delays and the pressure of his father's curse was driving his trio to unspeakable acts. He took a mighty swipe across the desk top, sending something heavy clanging across the cobbled floor. Its unwavering echo gripped the darkness. The lense still remained to be found.

The same painful echo began to fade when Fadius locked eyes with his salvation. A second door. He felt the hint of a smile pulling at his lips. Its tall shadow reached out to him, beckoning for him to draw closer. He was careful to creep, not wishing to cause any further commotion.

With his heart thudding in his chest, Fadius reached out, his naked palm pressed to the wooden frame. He wondered if the room beyond held his brother's treasures and pressed his forehead on the wood of the door, ready to grasp what seemed to him to be a golden opportunity.

Placing his finger on the ancient lock, Fadius began to alter his breathing. He listened as the lock emitted a low whistle, rising to a shrill howl. It struck the air with impressive force, but it would not be a match for his

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particular talents. He bent forward, puckering his lips. Drawing a deep breath, he mimicked the pitch.

An inaudible shriek burst forth from Fadius' lips. It was a sound that most would simply ignore, but he alone knew better than others. Something clunked to the floor on the other side. The tower door buckled.

Fadius collapsed into a dimly lit room. He pushed himself onto his elbows, squinting through the warm light. It felt so strange to be out from the blinding darkness. He noticed soft fabric glinting beneath him in the form of a lush carpet of reds and golds.

Fadius began by working the stiffness out of his limbs. Were these Ryore's chambers? He stared around the opulent expanse. He had never been permitted to enter this room, not since the chambers had belonged to their father.

Fadius focused on moving, relishing the feel of the silken furnishings against his bare hand. For a moment he stole himself away, letting his thoughts wonder in a world all their own. *If I were Ryore and I feared my younger brother's return, would I be more likely to hide my things here?* His thought was interrupted as his head ricocheted off of something solid.

Fadius flew back into the carpet's embrace. He forced a hand away from his throbbing cranium and managed to sit himself back up. An elaborate bed frame sat inches above him. In his stupor, Fadius smiled and lifted his body to meet the bed. His senses immediately picked something out; something close by, which reeked

of magic. He glanced down at the bed's sturdy frame and wondered.

A harsh knock sounded on the chamber door. Fadius barely had time to duck down when a lilting voice drifted into the room.

'Mi lady, are you in here? I need to speak with you!'

It was a girl's voice, young and scared.

Fadius scoured the room for places to hide, not wishing to be caught when he had yet to obtain the object he sought. He pictured the moment the young maid would come in, horrified to find herself in the presence of a stranger. They might even spy through the chamber door and Fadius would be none the wiser. He buckled up, ready for the moment of discovery. The handle of the door began to turn.

Fadius felt as if time were beginning to slow around him. He watched the door creak open, a sliver of light merging with the dim lamps of the emperor's chamber's. 'You there, Miss! What are you doing?'

'Oh, I—'

Fadius held his breath. He could hear fear in the girl's voice. The sound of approaching footsteps only caused her voice farther strain. He needed to find the lense. Fast. He doubted he would find it below his nose, but where else would one hide a priceless artefact?

'Til repeat myself, shall I? What are you doing?' Fadius tried to ignore the voices outside, determined to access Ryore's frame of mind. A crushing bitterness raced through him. He allowed himself to revel in it, searching his thoughts for the object to pin-point his deepest

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desires. He wagered that Ryore would hide such a precious commodity where no one could look; not because they weren't clever enough to uncover the location, but because their duty did not permit them to. With this in mind, he knelt down by the bed.

Harsh words were being exchanged in the corridor. Fadius glanced back to the door, where he glimpsed the shadows of the figures outside.

'Go! Now!' cried the voice of a man.

There was no time. Fadius reached beneath the bed-frame, where his hand fell upon a small sphere. A grin stretched across his face as he pulled out- *a painted ball?* Fadius' gaze skimmed across it's surface. It was coated in a modest layer of dust. Tutting, he rolled it back beneath the frame.

He watched the shadow at the door. It seemed to linger, unable to make up its mind on whether to enter. Fadius flattened himself onto his stomach and groped beneath the wooden frame, where a second, harder sphere caught his attention.

Fadius grinned as the all seeing lense appeared before him. He gripped it tight, almost lovingly between his palms as he smoothed off a layer of dust. He was unable to understand its master's neglect. Such an incredible artefact deserved better treatment.

Fadius broke out of the room just in time as the door he'd been watching burst open. He raced through the tower with sweat trickling down his back.

'Hey!' came the male voice. 'Open this door!'

Fadius was already sprinting away, having sent a thread of frost magic to stick the handle. He wondered if the guards had found their dismembered colleague yet. Perhaps they had, though it would aid Fadius' escape if they had yet to make such a shocking discovery. *Idiot man*, came a voice in his head, *this is no time for speculation*.

Fadius sprinted through the next corridor, ducking into an alcove as several guards in uniform came sprinting by with swords drawn.

"They must have gone this way!" cried their leader.

Fadius pressed himself against the stone, reminded of the guard he'd cut down earlier. He cradled the lense like a newborn babe. He couldn't risk being caught. Not here. It was one thing to be found at his brother's estate, given that his fiancée had attempted to harm the Flame Princess, but quite another to be found near the royal suite. He peered out, wondering if the guards would come back this way when a familiar tingling overcame his body.



Fadius had barely escaped with his life. The cave's insurmountable blackness stole over him, like a cape made entirely of night. A single *click* and a familiar blue orb appeared overhead.

Arlas' bat-like form towered over Reiza. Fadius hadn't expected to be transported back, though he was glad to be out of immediate danger.

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'How did you know I'd located the lense?'

Fadius pulled off his helmet, revealing his sweat-streaked skin beneath

'Luck.'

Arlas' fang-tipped grin began to unfurl. He was holding a large oblong rock that looked to have been pulled from the cave wall. Fadius couldn't imagine the kind of strength it would take to remove such a thing. Arlas set it down between them, beckoning.

'The lense?'

Fadius paced toward the makeshift stand. With great reluctance, he surrendered the orb.

Fadius sat at the edge of the rock. Arlas guided his hands to the centre of the lense, adjacent to where Reiza's were already placed. He watched in fascination as the glass orb responded to his touch.

'Now,' coached Arlas, 'Think deeply about our target. The Flame King.'

Fadius turned his thoughts inward. A gentle rhythm pulsed through the lense, trembling through the length of his fingers.

'Think.'

Arlas' voice sounded distant. Fadius' fingers moved about the glass, guided by the inner power of the lense. Fie felt a pull on his mind, dragging him toward the lense's core.

'Focus.'

This time, it was Reiza he heard. Her voice pierced through the calming space in his mind as his forehead brushed against the glass. A breathless moan escaped the

prince's throat. His skin dragged along the lense's surface to the rhythm of an eerie melody. It reached out from the depths of the artefact below, blinding the cave's occupants with a twinkling green light.

Notes so high that they were almost sweet chimed through Fadius' head. The green glow of the lense bound his mind and body. Swirls of fiery red broke through to the surface, consuming the glass with their blazing trails. It was then that the melody seemed to change. It morphed into the sound of voices, echoing within his mind.

Find King Eagan, Fadius thought. Speak to me of what he knows. The lense swirled with more mist. Red and green fought for control, forming an interchanging cloud of colour. Before long the voices grew to be audible, exuding the personalities of their bearers.

Eagan.'

The voice of Violetta's confidant stood out amongst the swirls of colour. She was so forward with the king. Why is that, Fadius wondered.

'With respect your Grace, the Frost Empress appears to have a grave case.'

A pause. The occupants of the lense were conversing in rhyme. It was like nothing Fadius had ever heard.

'She has informed me of certain crimes and to keep such secrets is less than fine.'

King Eagan could be heard thinking things over. Ums and ahs floated up through the lense.

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'Ryore gains frustration daily; no heir born to your kin. Abuse is now dealt gaily. All that man cares for is sin.'

I can't believe the ritual worked. Fadius felt joy flood his mind.

'Has my daughter mentioned anything else; excessive shows of stress? Rage episodes, no more, no less?' Jermise's voice re-pierced the lense.

'She has indeed, Highness and what is more, it is rumoured they've identified the traitor you sought.'

Fadius could hear the king connecting the dots. Time was running out for their trio. Rumours of treachery were too dangerous to be ignored.

Fadius heard the echo of footsteps before the king's voice boomed out through the lense.

'The council elders must be informed. Dispatch for them at once, before dawn.'

The lense's rhyming insights had proved worthwhile. King Eagan seemed to know a great deal, but discovering for certain that Ryore was barren had been the cherry on top of such valuable gossip.

Fadius was surprised to fly back against the cave wall. The cool rock dug into his back, bringing forth an agonized wail. He clung to the sides of his skull. He was drowning in a sea of pain, brought on by the lense's power for having spied on the great Flame King.

'Did you see it too?' Fadius mumbled.

Arlas swooped toward him, with Reiza bringing up the rear.

They exchanged brief glances, something akin to worry in their darting eyes.

'Yes, I believe so.'

'So someone must have delivered a message, from Eagan's daughter to Jermise.'

Reiza gasped at the same time that Arlas' eyebrows began to arch.

'The boy. He must have passed through the Flame Realm first, before we were able to intercept him.'

Fadius cradled his head in his hands. The Flame Princess had managed to warn someone about her husband's misdeeds after all.

'Wait!' Fadius had begun to shake his head when he realized the truth of the situation. 'This could actually work in our favour.'

Reiza wore a knowing smile.

'Elaborate, my darling?'

Fadius sifted through his thoughts. Matters concerning his brother were beginning to drift out of their control, but to have Ryore's crimes discovered by those who would hold him to justice? Now, that would be a miracle. His brother's wife had unknowingly created the perfect scenario, whereby Ryore would be tried for his crimes. Yes, all was set for the trio to finally be unburdened of this treacherous curse, yet Fadius remained disturbed by the king's knowledge. Such traitorous indiscretions would no doubt see him and his comrades dead, should those spreading the rumours prove able to identify them. Another solution, another problem.

'Stop moping and get a grip!'

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Fadius lowered his hands. Reiza had just appeared in his line of sight when she slapped him hard across the face.

'As it is, we still have the upper hand.'

'We do?'

Reiza nodded. She hauled him up by the scruff of his collar, where he watched as her fingers danced with frost. The razor-sharp tips of her nails glowed white, passing dangerously close to his throat.

'What is your plan?' Fadius asked.

He was forced to squint as her nails grew brighter, radiating a chilling pain through his every nerve.

'*Our* plan is for someone to attend that council meeting.'

The glow surrounding Reiza's hands began to dim. Fadius could see the intensity of her glare.

'If Eagan arranges it, we need you there.'

'But why me?'

A pair of crimson eyes popped into focus.

'You see, while we're all aware of the king's current knowledge, you are the best equipped to deal with the outcome.'

Fadius bit down on his lip, but nodded nonetheless.

'How is that? They won't exactly allow me in. For one, there will be one too many members.'

'Not a problem,' called Arlas. 'One of the seats was reserved for me. You will simply take the seat that I don't arrive to fill.'

While Arlas' idea made sense, Fadius remained focused on the ludicrous idea of him swishing past the

council elders, where they would no doubt seize him the moment he entered. The elders held more power than any other collective force. If they said something was to be, then it would be, and as far as King Eagan was concerned, he and Reiza were two of his greatest foes.

'That still leaves the matter of me appearing before those who would wish me harm.'

Reiza dealt Fadius another strong blow. His head reeled, his vision laced with a pattern of stars.

'Don't be so stupid. You know as well as we do that you can't just intrude as yourself!' She pulled him close, her lips hovering but a breath away. 'In order to learn their secrets, my love, you will need to learn how to blend in with the crowd.'

'And if I don't?'

'Oh, trust me. You shall.'

Reiza watched her fiance like a hawk as she began to release magic into his veins. Fadius had agreed to let her work her charms, but he still worried about how he would look. As the flow of magical energy increased, he felt his skin begin to tingle, as though he were being hit by little bursts of lightning all over. He watched his own skin bubble and morph.

The tingling subsided. Fadius stood tall beside his fiancee, gazing into her disbelieving eyes.

'Well, how do I look?'

Reiza smiled. It was one of the wannest looks she had ever given him; a smile full of joy, maybe even hope. Even Arlas appeared to be impressed with her work. He could only gape at Fadius' transformation.

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'Well?' Fadius inspected his olive skin, admiring the precious little he could see of his new form. 'Who am I?' Fadius could hear that his voice was lighter, almost airy, yet still maintaining its masculine depth. Reiza looked to be breathing in the very scent of him.

'Does it really matter who? You'll get in, I guarantee it.' 'Oh?'

Arlas still hadn't spoken a word. It was nice for him to be silent for a change. It gave Fadius a sense of inner power.

With no answer to his burning question, Fadius reached up to touch his mouth. It felt different. He could feel the way its shape had changed, plump lips having replaced those of his thin, bloodless kind.

Every point of his body had transformed. Each movement felt odd, so strange and new.

'I think I'm ready,' he whispered.

'Good.' Reiza planted a kiss on his cheek. 'Good luck.'

'Yes, make haste.'

For once, Arlas' words reflected sincere emotion. Fadius met the strangled look of fear that shone in his eyes before gazing once more into Reiza's.

'Please, tell me who I am, my love.'

'Very well.'

Reiza walked away, fading into the gloom of the cave. Seconds passed and she returned holding Fadius' helmet. She held it up at face height, gesturing for him to take a look at his new reflection.

Fadius stared in awe of himself. Reiza had chosen their template well. His once hollow cheek-bones had become strong yet full, his eyes having transformed into shimmering emeralds. He knew that the elders meeting was now their one chance to condemn his brother.

With an appearance like this, there was no doubt that he would be admitted, for who was better to cosy on up to King Eagan than one of his closest allies. Xyhoni.

Fadius grinned at his change of reflection. He had to see this through for them. If he failed, then there would be no hope of ever lifting their curse.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Month 8/10

Ryore

Ryore sat in his tower, alone and frail of mind. With all that had happened in the months following the doctor's diagnosis, he had drawn into himself. It became habitual for him to strike back at his wife who still possessed his two lost qualities; qualities he'd lost because of her. No longer could he challenge the thoughts of others, particularly those of his late father. *Weak. Pathetic!* They spat at him and for once, their venom appeared to take root.

Ryore's thoughts lingered on his failing marriage. He plucked a quill from a collection sat on the nearby desk and with an ink well beside him, began to compose an entry in his prized leather tome.



My wife detests me. I suppose I should ask, why shouldn't she? As I wrestle with these inner demons, I cannot help but think back to my wedding day. That elven boy daring to stand up, almost

sealing my fate of celibacy. No. I am glad that I know the truth now. Violetta can't have loved me then, nor does she love me now, for I dare say I have never heard such words spoken from her lips. It is clear to me that though I believed I had won her heart, this couldn't be further from the truth. No. My pain is understandable.

Ryore found himself staring out through the arch that served as the tower's one window. He kept the quill clenched within one hand. While he skimmed the estate for signs of intruders, he found himself agonizing over his thoughts. Almost a year of marriage and what did he have to show for it? No heir, not even a chance at real love.

With an exasperated sigh, he set down his quill and rose to meet the small arch of a window. Ryore felt a light breeze ruffle his dark locks; a waiting invitation for him to seek fresh air.

Ryore stepped into the corridor. He hurried down the passages, desperate to feel the wind on his flesh. As he rounded a bend, several guards appeared, each standing to attention as he came within range.

'Move, you fools!'

The emperor sought his power to sweep them aside. He felt his soul split into a million pieces. The guards remained directly in front of him, while his raised hand hung limp in the air. He made a quick show of reaching for his scar before striding toward the silent pack.

'I said move!'

The guards did as they were instructed and hurried aside so their master could pass. Ryore had almost made it out of the passage when a low whisper caught his ears.

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'Not much of a good Samaritan, is he?'

Ryore's body stiffened. *Samaritan?* Where had he heard that word before? He recalled Violetta having mentioned a meeting with a kindly Samaritan a few months prior, but she had attested that they could offer no further help than what they had already tried.

Thinking back, it had roused his own suspicions. He had been in his tower room throughout that day and had caught but a glimpse of the hooded stranger. It was, however, that one glance that had sparked such suspicion. He remembered, in vivid detail, the scant strand of flaming hair which at first had seemed but a trick of the light.

Ryore thundered back to his chambers. Could his own wife be conspiring against him? He rounded the corner to his chambers and crashed into an empty room. *The lense!* Ryore had to find it and learn all that he could. What if word got back to Eagan that he had knowingly taken out his frustrations on his daughter. Or maybe he had learned about the loss of the emperor's powers. Either way, Ryore needed to know if such knowledge had reached the Flame King. He wasn't sure if he could trust his wife on the matter, not when it came to potentially betraying one of her allies.

Ryore slipped his hands beneath the solid oak frame of the four poster. He needed the lense. He couldn't risk having a war on his hands, given the recent loss of his powers.

Dust brushed across his fingertips. Ryore stretched out toward the back of the bed when his palms slid along something soft.

'What on Peradon?'

He lifted out a small ball, every inch covered with vivid patterns. He had never seen such an object before and twirled it about within his hands. Making a mental note to keep an eye on this item, Ryore set it aside and reached his arms further, where they caught only air. This couldn't be right. He positioned himself onto the flat of his stomach and peered into the dusty abyss. Nothing.

Ryore jolted in unrestrained rage, the top of his head connecting with the solid oak frame. He didn't allow for his pain to calm before he burst back out of the chamber door and into the passage that lay beyond.

'Guards!' Ryore raced along the passageways, scanning each bend for the next set of armoured men. He ran through a list of perpetrators in his head. *Fadius. It has to be him. Wait!*

Ryore paused beside a suit of armour and ran his fingers through his unruly hair. *Perhaps this was the work of the good Samaritan*, ventured the strained voice within. Ryore ignored its sly remarks and darted round the next bend when an angelic figure floated into view.

Ryore could scarcely comprehend the rage that consumed him when he caught sight of her. Violetta sparked so many deeper feelings in him; desire, sorrow, anger. All were feelings his father had long ago instructed him to conceal.

'Dearest?'

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Ryore saw her eyes dart up to meet his. She stood within the centre of the passage, her face devoid of expression.

'I have just discovered my lense to be missing,' Ryore declared. He struggled to keep the rage from his tone. 'I wondered if your saintly Samaritan was to blame.'

The cracks were falling through his calm pretence. Ryore made to lessen the distance between them, but held back when he noticed her eyes. They stood out against her peaches and cream complexion, as narrow as he'd ever seen them.

Ryore found himself as mesmerized by her now as he'd been at first sight. The light lent her golden waves of hair a warm glow. It was a shade matched only by the miniature suns that ringed the inside of her hazelnut eyes. Eyes that were glaring right through him.

'I need to know. Did you take the Lense?'

His father's voice chimed through his head. *You are weak! Just force the information out of her. What are you waiting for?* Ryore clenched his eyes shut. Too many times he had heard this voice and too many times, he had allowed it to rule him.

A hand grasped the emperor's shoulder. His eyes snapped open to the face of his wife. Lines of pain marked her forehead. She gazed into his soul, the usual warmth of her eyes extinguished.

'I truly thought I'd found my freedom with you.'

Her voice was but a breathless whisper.

'Ryore, I'm afraid I was wrong.' Her lip quivered under his gaze, her shoulders squaring up to him. 'I have to leave you.'

Ryore blinked. Had he heard her correctly? *Make her tell you where the Lense is, coward!* Ryore forced his father's voice from his mind, unable to believe what he was hearing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Month 8/10

Fadius

The Flame Palace shone like a rare jewel. Fadius studied it, entranced by such surreal beauty. This was the home of his enemy, of the people his ancestors had attempted to smite. He forced himself to turn away. He wasn't here to marvel at the architecture. He had a job to do.

Xyhoni had, until now, been absent from all council meetings; something Fadius sought to use to his advantage. He, amongst others, were already striding toward the palace, where a lustrous blue sky reigned over all. In the final moments before he reached the entrance, Fadius began to wonder why his ancestors had thought to attack such a beautiful place.

Several members of the king's staff appeared before the main entrance. They smiled at their guests' approach, beckoning them to enter through a colossal pair of double doors. Fadius found himself praying that King Aemon would not attend. He knew that his heir disliked such events, playing the part of the morally undecided.

Fadius wasn't sure just how dangerous it would be to confront Aemon in his current guise.

Just as Fadius felt his bones buzzing with his growing anxiety, King Eagan himself strode into view. His smile was warm and pleasant. He might even have gone so far as to say uplifting. He glanced at the faces of his guests, with two well muscled arms raised high in welcome.

'Greetings honoured elders! If you'd please follow me, we shall now adjourn to the council room.'

It had taken longer than Fadius had expected for the council to come together in order to discuss his brother's crimes. He stared at the generic white walls that surrounded him, the heavy scent of musk forming a cage around his lungs.

Hoping to avoid the unpleasant smell, Fadius opted for one of the closest seats to the door. It had taken a while for him to get used to his disguise. Existing within a new skin brought on a certain sense of shock, one of which he'd been given no warning. He turned to find that the tall gentleman opposite was grinning at him. The would-be Xyhoni smiled back. It was strange how Fadius projected the nature of someone honest, someone who would help others in need with no regard for his own desires.

As drinks were being poured for the guests, Fadius found himself examining the other council members. Greetings were exchanged in a timely fashion. Some hugged, while most were perfectly content to give the briefest touches of their palms.

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In his flawless disguise, the prince accepted a tall glass, which contained a spiced-mulberry wine. He took a tentative sip, placing his palm against any that passed his way when whispers began to seize hold of the room.

'Did you hear?'

'Indeed, I did.'

Fadius felt his body jerk. His gaze met with that of Lord Jork's. The wise elder appeared to be sizing him up, the tips of pointed fangs hanging over his bottom lip. Fadius glanced to either side of him and found that he was situated between Jennise and King Eagan. That's strange, he mused. *Why would she be here?*

He glanced across at the remaining seats where a stranger sight was yet to be found. One chair remained empty. Part of Fadius wanted to enquire who the seat was intended for, but in that instant, a figure stepped through the doorway. Fadius felt his courage snap. King Aemon towered before him.

No-one heard Fadius' strained cry as he gazed upon Xyhoni's master. King Aemon had entered the room, smiling like a satiated Dark Hound. When he turned his head to take in the other half of the room, his lips recoiled into a frown.

'Xyhoni?'

Aemon stopped short of Fadius' seat, eyeing him from nose to navel. The prince froze. His greatest fear had been realized. If he didn't act swiftly, then the game would be over before it began.

'Sire!' He practically leapt to his feet, bowing low before Xyhoni's master. 'Forgive me for startling you, but

I wanted to be here for this meeting. I hear the emperor has mistreated Violetta and I cannot let that pass.'

King Aemon gave the boy a blank look.

'Ah, right you are, my boy. Right you are.'

He gestured to the elder one seat over, muttering all the while. 'Yes, I know. Strange but fair,' Fadius heard him say. He glanced over and found Aemon perched in the seat of the other elder. Its former occupant scuttled toward the empty chair across from them.

Having adopted the seat beside Fadius, Aemon took to pouring himself a generous glass of the mulled wine. He gulped it down, his cheeks taking on a slight blush.

'I suppose there's a first time for everything.'

He let out a raucous burst of laughter and patted the prince upon his back.

The council were a varied assortment of folk. Fadius was quite surprised at how well he fit in, a complete socialite in contrast to his elder brother. Of course, his new-found disguise was a tremendous help.

'So Xyhoni, why haven't we seen you?'

He knew Lord Jork was speaking to him, but Fadius' attention shifted elsewhere. A glimmer of orange made him jolt as King Eagan appeared behind his seat. He was approaching each of his guests in turn, greeting them as you would an old friend.

'Ah, Xyhoni. At last!'

Eagan bowed to the prince's grand disguise. His demeanour was warm and full of life. Fadius did well to convey the same cheery disposition.

'A pleasure to see you again, Highness.'

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He reached his palm toward the king's. It was odd. Seeing Eagan now in his warmth and his glory, it seemed a terrible shame that his life be endangered.

'So, I suppose you're all wondering why you're here, called upon from your homes and your duties.'

Fadius snapped himself out of his thoughts. King Eagan had re-taken his seat. A few of the elders called out in reply, playing upon the king's good humour.

'We are here today because a serial law-breaker lurks among us.' Low whispers were exchanged between members. 'He sits on one of our four thrones, hiding his long unpunished treachery.'

'Traitor!' cried an elder with a beard of grizzled grey and white. One of Eagan's arms rose into the air, commanding silence from the rest of the room.

'Fellow Elders!' No one dared to interrupt this time. 'We have a grave matter on our hands. I have received reliable evidence that Emperor Ryore Frost is not only abusing my daughter, but has also lost his powers!'

Frantic whispers rose once more. Fadius took no part in them. He was staring intently at the king. He liked this man more with each passing second. *If he finds out that we're a traitor, then we'll be done for.* Such warnings flew round Fadius' brain. To Eagan, he appeared as nothing more than a devoted young ally. Strangely, Fadius found himself wishing that were true.

Thud! King Eagan pounded his fist on the table, bringing immediate silence to his quarrelling friends. 'Enough!' A dark look passed across his face. 'Having

broken several of our key laws, it is time for us all to consider his punishment!

The elders exchanged worried looks. The proposed idea would need to fit the emperor's crimes and while a lot of the elders had fine suggestions, the king would only take note of those most agreeable.

'We need a clear decision! I have tallied the most suitable punishments upon these papers.' King Eagan held them up for the elders to see. 'Please read over these documents and then confer.'

Eagan passed the documents round himself. The elders took their time to study them, whispering to their colleagues as they considered the choices. Fadius glared down at the list of options. He did his best not to smile as he read.

Suitable Punishments for High Treason:

1.) *Exile to a remote locale*
2.) *Imprisonment for life*
3.) *Where deemed appropriate,*
Penalty of DEATH.

Fadius glanced up, where other elders could be seen nodding in respect of the options. It was some time before King Eagan called out, having reflected on his own decision.

'Given the charges, which punishment of the three before you, do you deem most suitable?'

Eagan's question rang out through the cramped room. Fadius had to think for a moment. While each punishment held its own sense of importance, his brother's murder would be best called for. He had

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consistently neglected his role as ruler, his own people left to starve like dogs. *And with Ryore dead, the curse shall be lifted*, he thought.

'Xyhoni?'

Fadius imagined what it would be like to finally be free, to escape to a distant location and live out the remainder of his days with Reiza.

'Xyhoni!' A hand fell upon Fadius' shoulder. King Aemon's golden eyes bore into him. 'Eagan is awaiting your vote.'

Fie gestured to the waiting ruler, whose expression seemed a might stony.

'Sorry, Highness. Punishment Three.'

A small twitch played on Eagan's lips.

'Very well.'

It would appear that his brother had received a fair trial. The counsellor's votes were tallied up, with a single vote deciding the outcome. King Eagan motioned for silence.

'By one vote, I hereby declare that Emperor Ryore of the Frost Realm is to be executed on the grounds of treason, resulting in loss of magical ability, in addition to abusing his spouse and no longer providing due care for his people.' Fadius couldn't help but grin. Ryore was finally going to answer for his crimes. That deciding vote had been his own.

'Now, does anyone know the Frost Estate's layout?' The elders paused, eyeing each other.

'Pardon me, Highness, but I believe I might.'

Fadius had fashioned his voice perfectly. Although in tone it was a perfect match to the real Xyhoni, one also needed to play the part.

'And just how did you acquire such information?' asked Eagan.

Fadius racked his brain and let fire a quick lie.

'I was there once as a boy, a messenger.'

King Aemon turned to him, astonished.

'I'm surprised you remember. You were so young at the time.' He ruffled the prince's hair, making his skin crawl in mild disgust. Fadius tried his best to smile, his needle-like teeth disguised by Xyhoni's plump lips.

'Very well,' cried Eagan, 'Those here present, I call upon you now. I propose that we join forces to march against the emperor!'

All were silent in the presence of the king. They watched as a slim shadow floated in from a lonely comer. It bowed low before the king, shrinking back from the harsh lamplight.

'Please take these to the guard towers of each realm, excluding Frost.'

Eagan held out his hand to the spectre. It reached out a ghost like palm, briefly touching it to Eagan's, before accepting the three wax-sealed scrolls from its master. With a final bow, the shadow disappeared back into its world.

Fadius took a sip of his wine, relishing the expensive zing of ingredients. The council meeting appeared to be nearing its end.

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'On another note.' King Eagan had re-commenced speaking. 'It has come to light that Prince Arlas of the Air Realm is also suspected of treason.'

Fadius outright choked on his liquor. His vision clouded with subconscious tears, his mind reeling with thoughts of the angry faces that would no doubt view his reaction to such news as a guilty tic.

When his vision cleared, Fadius realized that no-one was paying attention to him. Not a single head had turned away from their host.

'Highness, are you quite sure of this?' Fadius couldn't help but use this opportunity to pry into the king's sources.

'I'm quite certain. I propose that we send out guards to capture Arlas. All Realms are to work together in order to apprehend this vile fiend. We need a confession and one way or another, we are going to get it!'

'Actually, Highness!'

Lord Jork stood up, drawing the attention away from his dear friend. The entire table gazed open-mouthed at the blunt interruption.

'My brother has gone missing. I had posted guards on watch around the clock, but as I've mentioned previously, he has this way of disappearing.'

The room fell into a shocked silence. A few of the elders met Jork's frown, lending him an air of sympathy. Others simply stared in horror as they realized what this meant. A potential traitor was loose in Peradon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Month 9/10

Violetta

Violetta wanted out. She sat in the royal chambers, an ordinary quill poised in her hand. It had been months since that day in the corridor with Ryore. Ever since, she had felt the need to jot down her thoughts. They plagued her like a fatal disease, eating into anything good left within.

I hate Ryore. Truly, I have never hated anyone as much, save for the traitor that stole away my mother and brother. And why not hate him? Everything about him has become tainted by his foul temperament and despicable actions. He has used and abused me and now all I can do is try and evade him. Yes, he has saved my life on two occasions, but that does not give him, nor anyone the right to treat me so poorly.

When I saw him in the corridor that day, I confessed that I have to leave him. He didn't respond right away. He looked to be torn between a fiery rage and a sorrow, the likes of which I have never witnessed in him. His fist arced toward me before I could

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move. I closed my eyes, waiting for the pain of his knuckles crashing into my jaw. It never came. My eyes unclenched to see fire spreading from my fingertips, holding my husband's hand at bay. He wouldn't risk himself by touching me. Even without his magic, just one burst of flame could have stopped his heart.

This is not the path to freedom that I sought, but the path to a hell more vicious than I could have imagined. I had desired this once, to be free to revel in the intense feelings I'd experienced for Ryore. I just wanted to live. I didn't want to end up like my mother and brother. But, what use is living if you end up dwelling within a cage. Now, I know that I was wrong. I've acted the fool.

Violetta's hand shuddered. Something about the air felt different. Dense. It drew her mind away from her writing, suggesting that she set her quill back into its ink well. She peered across the extravagant chamber where a sudden pulse of energy shook her, rattling the bearings of her mind. She felt her right arm tighten reflexively around Lord Jork's gift. She had come to the conclusion that *gift* was a more apt term than curse, for since the ball had been returned to her, her husband's welts had ceased to exist. Not that he dared to approach her anymore.

Violetta half expected the energy she felt to be the all-consuming fear she'd come to live with in this bitter Realm. The sensation seemed to throb with an urgency she couldn't place. She set the ball below the bed and followed her senses out into the corridor. The pulse grew stronger with each passing step.

Violetta had requested Kaitlyn's presence at her side. It was here that the mysterious sensation had led her, down several winding corridors, until she reached what

appeared to be an ancient stone mural. The concentration of energy here was profound. It was foreign, powerful. Violetta had merely thought of the mural as decorative when a sudden stumble had seen her crash into the rough stone. The moment her scarred palm made contact with the wall, an unnatural reaction began.

Violetta memorized the section of the wall that had been altered.

'Mi lady, you wanted to see me?'

'Yes, Kaitlyn. Come.'

Violetta was determined to put the young girl to the test and ushered her toward the ancient mural. She scrutinized every crack, searching for the split in the rock where she'd first noticed the anomaly.

'Here.' She indicated a somewhat discoloured section. 'What do you make of this?'

'I don't understand, Mi lady. 'Tis just cobbles. Why do I feel all tingly?'

The word came out as an *'ingly'* sound, something Violetta couldn't help but smile at. *So, she can feel it too.* It wasn't just her.

Violetta gazed down at the young girl and noticed that Kaitlyn had begun to retreat from the cobbled wall. She saw the girl's eyes shimmer and prayed she wasn't about to burst into tears. While Violetta had no issue with comforting the young girl, the pressing matter of this energy was far more important.

Violetta allowed Kaitlyn to back away for now and turned back to the waiting mural. With the tip of a finger, she ran her flesh along the fractured stone until it came

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to rest against a slit in the rock. A crimson glow pulsed at the joint. Violetta darted back as every cobble of the mural began to light up with the same glow. A warning? She watched as the crimson light vanished without a trace.

'Kaitlyn, I need to ask you again. What do you make of this?'

Violetta didn't bother to mask the waver in her voice. She trusted this girl to be open with her, to tell her exactly what she saw and felt.

It took a moment for Kaitlyn to summon her courage. She stepped forward and peered at the cobbled wall before her, taking in the details of the ancient mural. With a trembling hand, she reached up and tapped the highest cobble she was able to reach. At her urging, the glow appeared.

'Hmm, it seems to react to touch, Mi lady.'

Violetta nodded her agreement.

'It would appear so.'

Violetta wondered if this were some type of defence mechanism that the estate had built into itself. She regarded Kaitlyn for a moment before turning to pace the corridor while she contemplated this latest development. A shadow blocked Violetta's path.

'Excuse me, I need to get—'

The last word never left her lips. The dark figure of her husband stared down at her. A look of scorn played on his lips, but something about him lacked the sincerity of true rage. Violetta dared to gaze into his eyes; eyes that

had brought much pain and misery. In those ice blue pools, fear stood above all else.

'So, you felt it too.'

Ryore's scowl began to soften.

'Felt what?'

'The pulse. That's why you're here, isn't it?'

Ryore could only nod. Violetta saw his eyes lock onto the girl beside her.

'What is she doing away from her duties?'

His words were spoken with venom.

Violetta manoeuvred herself in front of Kaitlyn. She whispered for the girl to stay back and summoned simmering flames that enveloped her arms.

'I requested her presence. I had to see if a non-royal could leave the same impression on this wall.' Violetta glared at Ryore, gesturing to the cobbled area behind. 'See for yourself.'

Ryore's eyes flashed with intrigue. He swept past in folds of black silk, being careful to avoid Violetta's flames. She watched him trace a hand along the stone mural, merging his flesh with the coarse rock. Thin creases appeared between Ryore's eyes. His hand began to shudder on contact with the stone, as though an allergic reaction were taking place.

The spasm looked to have run the length of his spine when he leapt back and the red light appeared once more. 'Good gods!'

'What is it?'

Ryore's eyes were like pale moons, reflecting a snatch of every emotion Violetta could think of. He

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turned then, aiming to grab her when he remembered the flames. His face seemed to drop as he whispered, 'Something is coming.' Ryore's hand faltered half way to his face.

'Go.' His gaze broke away from her. 'I will double, no, triple the guard around the perimeter. As for you—'

Ryore trailed off. His face twisted as he stared into the heart of her flames.

'You will never be free, for I forbid you to leave this estate, or it could be the last thing you do.'

Violetta felt the dread growling in the pit of her stomach. Her husband's eyes were narrowed to slits, transforming into a dull storm grey. He turned on his heel and strode out of sight.

Violetta would never understand Ryore. She turned to face a cowering Kaitlyn and let her eyes slip shut, withdrawing her magic.

She opened them to find Kaitlyn reaching up a tentative hand.

'Mi lady?'

Violetta laced the girl's fingers through her own.

'I'm here. It's okay,' she whispered.

Violetta stared down the corridor where Ryore had vanished. There had been a look in his eyes that suggested he would make good on his threat if she did in fact attempt to flee.

'Something is coming,' he had said.

She would be prepared.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Month 10/10

Fadius

Fadius gazed up at the cloudless blue sky of the Flame Realm. A good omen, as far as anyone was concerned, and one which boosted the troop's morale. Per the trio's plan, Fadius was ready to lead King Eagan through Ryore's estate, in disguise of course. Thick layers of near-impenetrable plate stroked his tender flesh. His new sword and shield were close at hand, though the latter appeared to weigh a ton.

It hadn't taken long to draw support for Eagan's proposition. A sea of troops stood before him, three hundred strong. Sadly, there were fewer men than they had originally anticipated, rounded up within the month as they'd been. Others simply weren't ready to raise a hand against Ryore. Despite this shortcoming, Eagan's men cheered him on more fiercely than ever.

'Take heart today men, for we stand ready to conquer the emperor.'

Fadius couldn't help but cheer on with the rest of the troops. There was something infectious about the

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way Eagan spoke. His voice possessed such a rich tone, with a warmth and pride that he'd never known in another.

'I must tell you now that there is a chance some of you may lose your lives in our efforts!' Fadius saw several troops begin to retreat. 'To preserve the Realm's individual peace, we must push through, regardless of the sacrifices!'

King Eagan bowed toward his soldiers, a gesture Fadius recognised as common among army generals, to show appreciation of those who would later fall in battle. The men seemed to follow his lead, bowing low at the waist before returning to their earlier positions.

Eagan could be seen wiping away a glistening tear. Fadius wondered if he was thinking about the family he'd lost. He imagined what it would feel like to lose Reiza, or to lose a child should they ever conceive. Maybe it was the disguise rubbing off on him, but for the briefest of moments, Fadius felt as though he could weep for this man.

'Let us go,' cried Eagan. 'Let us unite, to bring down this tyrant!'

'Aye!'

The hell-bound army marched on, a sea of red armour in the glaring sun. The Southern trail led them toward the gates of the rich Inner-City. Fadius marched along without complaint, knowing full well that Eagan wouldn't rest until his daughter was safe. If they were too late, then he imagined the king would never forgive himself.

'Mark one reached!' barked Eagan.

The troops at the front began to slow, waiting for their comrades behind to match their pace. Fadius struggled with the weight of his shield. Held aloft, it covered most of his height. It was a wonder none of these men had dropped dead.

Fadius followed the gaze of his fellow troops. Up ahead loomed a plethora of buildings. Sunlight reflected off shimmering glass spires that seemed to stretch on forever, parting the clouds for a spiritual ascent. It was a sight that boasted obvious wealth.

A set of towering opalescent gates gave them passage to a haven unlike any other. Vast wonders of architecture surrounded them from all sides. Fadius didn't blink, for fear that he would miss something, some rare and beautiful jewel of creation.

The troops watched as the city's occupants went about their daily life. Most were dressed in a vibrant array of reds and yellows, hauling goods along streets or passing by to speak with their neighbours. The sight of the winding rows of soldiers did not alarm them as Fadius thought it should. The citizens gave them but a cursory glance, showing only mild concern, as though the king's forces waltzed in on a regular basis.

This scintillating haven gave the impression of a mini paradise existing right beneath the troop's noses. They turned into a quaint cobbled street where the smell of freshly-baked goods drifted over. Each row of men stared, drool dripping down their chins as bakers summoned gentle flames to lick at their various pastries

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and breads. The delightful scent wafted over, combining with the freshly cut grass as the inhabitants neatened their modest lawns.

Fadius noticed a line of young men giving demonstrations of their god given power. Each man closed their eyes, reaching into the core of their ability. Moments later there came a blinding flash and swirling patterns of fire began dancing for the curious onlookers.

Such entertainment appeared common here, but one glance at Eagan showed the king's obvious disapproval. Fadius had heard it said that Eagan preferred for magic to only be used when necessary. He supposed that the death of Eagan's loved ones may have influenced his judgement. Being partial to the identities of their killers and having lent them his support, Fadius found himself growing more sympathetic for Eagan by the moment.

The troops were sad to have their visit end. They had never seen such a place as dazzling, where life seemed to thrive of its own accord. Where the front gates had promised extravagance, the rusty trail beyond promised nothing.

'Mark two!'

Noticing their shuffling feet, Eagan urged his soldiers to quicken their pace, which was difficult due to their cumbersome shields.

After what seemed like forever, the whole battalion had sifted through. Fadius wasn't the only one to gasp. The men began to halt in place, gazing down at a ramshackle excuse for a town. The troops nearer the back

had to dig in their heels to avoid crashing into the men in front.

'Forward,' cried Eagan. 'We can't afford to delay!'

The humbling outskirts dragged into view, paling in comparison to their heavenly forerunner. Fadius looked down his nose at the ruins. They were built in a haphazard fashion, with moulding huts that weren't far off from being made up as beauties, had it not been for their noticeable neglect.

'This is...unexpected.'

The words left Fadius' mouth before he could stop them. A few of his fellows nodded in agreement as King Eagan steered them down a winding lane.

The houses here were stacked a-plenty; of moderate size, with clay-chimneys that spouted lime green smoke. From what Fadius could see, most of the dwellers wore ill-fitting white shirts, with dark trousers held up by coils of rope. A few elderly gentlemen strode by and were the only ones to sport large over-coats. They waved to King Eagan as they passed, showing great respect for their war-ready ruler.

Eagan returned the men's greeting in kind and made his way over through the gathering crowd. The troops closest to the king converged around him. Fadius thought this to be a bit extreme. What harm could a few old men pose to them? He supposed that one could never judge a man's nature on his appearance alone and conceded that they were simply doing their job.

'Here.'

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Eagan fished a hand inside of his robes, producing a modest amount of coins. Their golden sheen reflected back at the elderly gentlemen.

'Take these to those who are in need.'

Eagan pressed several coins into each wrinkled hand.

The men gazed down with open mouths as though they'd never seen such wealth in their lifetime.

'Sire, are you sure this is all right?' came the protest of one man. 'After all, we are but humble folk here.'

Fadius watched as Eagan clapped the man on the shoulder. 'Nonsense. You are part of this land and I shall never have my people want.'

At that moment, several dirt-clad children ran out of an alley. Their eyes registered fear when they noticed the horde of troops stretching into the distance, and made to scurry behind their elders.

'No need to fret, young'uns. The king won't harm ya.'

The elder spoke only the truth. Several dirt streaked faces peered round his side. Eagan flashed a warm smile their way. To Fadius' surprise, the young children came out of hiding.

'My humble soldiers!' King Eagan raised his voice to a shout. 'Might I ask that twenty of you remain here and assist our people as you will!'

He gave the trail of troops his famous, hard-worn battle glare.

A sea of tentative faces stared up at him. Each set of eyes showed the indecision of the individual as they

began assessing their skills and strengths. After some careful consideration, Fadius saw twenty soldiers inch forward. Each man reached their king, performing a customary bow, before accepting a single gold coin that Eagan pressed into every palm.

'Thank you all. You show great dedication to our people, who I'm sure already appreciate your sacrifice.'

His words rang out through the run-down town. Even the steaming chimneys appeared to salute the great Flame King.

The troops had since been on their way and drifted toward the border which saw the Flame and Frost Realms merge. Fadius could see the iridescent glow of the Flame- Frost barrier; an ancient magic placed by the Seers of old. Frost shifted around its surface, one of the only indicators of its presence. It was said that if you attempted to cross away from one of the four designated bridges, then your body would ricochet off of the barrier, causing every bone in your body to break.

'Huddle up!'

Eagan led them to the Eastern bridge, a narrow straight between the enchanted walls. With the men packed so tight together, the effects of the barrier began to subside. It wasn't warm, but the chill in the air was kept at bay as they began to file into the no man's land.

The border's nickname was surprisingly apt. Fadius' gaze swept across the barren landscape, taking in every noticeable crack and groove in the unhealthy terrain. There was something bleak about this place. There was

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no life, no essence of creation. It was an unrelenting hell, which sought to drive you mad.

The troops remained huddled close as they passed through the veritable wasteland. The scent of earth and decay was prominent here and sparked a primal fear in Eagan's men, who clutched their weapons in white-knuckled hands.

'Hurry! We need to be swift!' cried the king.

Fadius worked to double his efforts. The clamouring throng pushed against him, driving him on toward the Frost Estate.

His brother's fortress appeared on the horizon, backlit by the setting sun.

'Xyhoni!'

A gap appeared between the troops, allowing the still disguised Fadius to saunter through. The mild warmth he had recently shared was stolen by a sudden gust of wind. Several of the men also felt its effects as it seared through their aching limbs, winding its way into their resolve.

'Sire.'

The prince's disguise still worked a treat. He rushed over to the waiting king, who handed him a pristine scroll.

'Xyhoni, I want you to help me lead these men. Think you can do that?'

The false Xyhoni saluted the king with a gleam in his eyes.

'Sir!'

Eagan smiled. It was a look that demonstrated pure trust in another being and almost wanned the prince's heart.

Fadius watched the king clamber up onto a nearby projection, where his brave troops rallied around him. They gazed up in adoration, waiting on their leader's command. 'Xyhoni, get up here!'

Fadius almost forgot himself. He dashed toward the rocky outcropping, where a weary Eagan helped him up.

'This is it!' Eagan's hands were raised high, a signal for his troops to remain silent. 'Our enemy is just beyond the horizon. With strength and determination, we can cut down our greatest foe!'

A wave of cheers went up from the men. While Fadius noticed a few who held caution in their eyes, he knew deep down that all would selflessly die on behalf of their king. Fadius startled as Eagan positioned him before the men.

'Xyhoni will be leading you alongside me. I pray that you will heed his advice.'

Several troops began to shout their encouragement. They must have sensed that Fadius was nervous. Flow could he not be, disguised as he was and about to plough into his brother's territory?

The troop's morale moved Fadius, as it clearly did the king. It was this hearty courage which outweighed all doubt, demonstrating just how dedicated they were to their Realm.

Eagan stepped forward, his tone suddenly harsh.

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'If any one of you wishes to leave, stand forward now!'

An eerie silence stole over the crowd. If anyone was in fact reluctant to stay, then they certainly seemed to be hiding it well.

'Anybody?'

Eagan fixed his men with a vulture-like stare, causing some of the troops to shift in discomfort. Then, almost like clockwork, a few hands shot up.

With all those wishing to leave sent back to help the unfortunate poor, the remaining soldiers stood proud and strong before their master. Fadius totalled them at some two hundred and seventy men. All saluted their gracious leader.

'So,' cried Eagan. 'Our strategy is?'

The king stood tall upon the same misshapen cleft of rock, where he studied the remaining troops.

'Kill all enemies!' piped a sandy haired fellow.

Eagan grinned at the man's response when another, smaller man in the back stepped forward.

'Save all citizens and bring them here?'

The king chuckled.

'I've taught you well. And those of you who've begun training at the Flame Realm Academy?'

Fadius noticed some of the men in the front row paling. One amongst them, a small youth, ventured a guess.

'You expect to see us put our studies to use?'

The king bowed his head. When he glanced back up, he was wearing a smile.

'Exactly.'

Fadius saw the boy's face light up.

'To Victory!'

The men soon repeated the cry as one, straining to lift their shields above their heads.

King Eagan had mimicked their grand war-cry, leading his men into the jaws of the emperor's land. They advanced steadily, without remorse. It was a shame, thought Fadius. With so many troops on foot, they risked losing any element of surprise.

He thought about the numerous skills these men must possess. Sure, they were all skilful in the art of the blade, trained beyond what their years would suggest. But, were they skilful enough to best Ryore's guards?

Fadius' limbs began to tremble. Although he'd lived in the Frost Realm all his life, the sudden change from the pleasant warmth of the Flame Realm was almost more than he could bear.

He led the troops alongside Eagan, darting glances back every now and then. The men's morale looked to be wearing thin. Their swords and shields had grown cumbersome, weighing them down as they trudged along the harsh terrain. Even the great Flame King could be seen straining against the cold.

'Not far now!' he called back.

Fadius gazed up into a haze of drifting snow, where a colossal shadow broke the horizon. Towers stretched far up to the heavens, ringed by a pair of wrought iron gates that glared down at the approaching intruders. Eagan motioned his men forward. He had his second in

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command draw them out of the snow's direct path as they continued to advance.

Fadius couldn't help but smile. He hoped that his disguise would last, for they had reached their mark. Soon it would be live or die.

'Wait!'

The troops darted round, shocked at the rashness of their king's tone. They ceased their marching, weapons dragging against the earth. The emperor's gates loomed before them. None seemed to notice the immediate threat of the guards standing either side.

The troops remained still, finding it hard not to stop and marvel at the estate's size, not to mention the formidable task-force which guarded its walls. King Eagan remained uneasy. It was then that Fadius began to understand the nature of his fear.

There was simply no way for Ryore to have known of their arrival. He was no longer in possession of the All Seeing Lense, though Fadius was the only other to know of its existence. Without it, his brother had no source to learn of their plans. His apparent preparation was considered unnerving.

'Xyhoni.'

The king called Fadius out of his stupor. When he realized that Eagan was referring to him, he snapped to attention, his false emerald eyes glowing with focus.

'Yes, Highness?' He brought a hand to rest on the king's shoulder. 'What is it?'

Eagan gave him a despairing look. It was like a sudden veil of hopelessness had settled upon him.

'There are too many,' he exclaimed. 'I need you to tally up the numbers for me. Let us see what we're dealing with.'

Eagan considered him for a moment. Fadius' brow bunched at the middle. He peered past the mighty gates, where countless blue uniforms patrolled the perimeter. From the corner of his vision, he realized that Eagan was still watching him. He appeared to be studying his behaviours, particularly interested in the prince's eyes. *Does he know of my disguise?*

Fadius was still gaining a rough estimate of the visible guards when he turned to the king, his face ashen. 'Surrounding the back gates alone, there are one hundred strong!'

The king nodded.

'Thank you, boy.'

All around, Eagan's troops were becoming restless. The great king (who had already begun to pale alongside his second in command) turned and addressed his men as one. 'This is it. From the looks of things, the emperor may have had previous knowledge of our intentions.'

Several of the men shifted in place, as though to ease the tension from their limbs.

'As your king, I warn you to take caution. All of you.'

Eagan clapped Fadius twice on the back for luck. His eyes were darker than their usual brown. There was a hatred in them that defied any Fadius had ever seen. Even that of his late father.

'Here we go.' Eagan signalled his army and prepared to dance to a deadly tune. 'Be brave and be fierce.'

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The gates towered above them, watching as their tiny forms skulked around the edge of the veritable fortress. Fadius tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword. It would take courage to do what these men had planned. He intended to help them in their endeavours so long as his brother fell dead at his feet. He caught a glimpse of Eagan before the attack. The King turned to Fadius, seeing only his disguise, and winked.

While the troops exchanged frightened glances, the king bolted through the gates, launching a battle cry to be heard for miles. Fadius watched as the guards closest did a double-take before being sliced clean in two. A fine mist of blood sprayed into the air, leaving a nauseating smell as clumps of guts fought to escape their host's collapsing forms.

Eagan didn't pause. The jaws of their foes dropped in astonishment as the sea of troops hurtled toward them, wielding blades that far surpassed their own. Ryore hadn't bothered to train his men with shields. Their emperor was more focused on their skill with blades alone.

Fadius saw their foes reaching to draw their weapons; saw their hands groping at sheaths. The blades stuck. *Delicious*, he thought. Several of the guards stared in horror, their sheaths rigid from months of disuse.

'Oh, God! No!'

Their fellows took up the cry and put all of their might into drawing their swords.

With an almighty heave, one man managed to free his blade. He glanced up, the pride on his face twisting into horror. Those moments had been far too precious.

The troops had barely caught up with their king when he sliced off the head of the closest guard. He whipped his arm back, yanking his bloodstained sword away, and watched as the corpse's hand went slack on its blade. He ducked down, using his buckler for coverage as another lunged toward him.

Eagan leapt up and drove the man back with his shield before his blade pierced his racing heart. Fadius was impressed. The king was still well in his prime and their foes knew it. He saw men attempting to flee the area, but Eagan simply cut them down, swinging his blade with the greatest of ease.

'Forward, men!'

His order echoed round the estate's gardens, instilling fear into the hearts of their foes. A righteous smile spread across the king's lips as he carved his way through blood and bone.

Fadius sliced through one enemy, then another, as if he were leading a deadly game, hell bent on spilling the guts of every guard that came within range. He urged the troops forward, thrusting back to sever the neck of a guard who had crept up behind him.

'Sorry, friend.'

Fadius sneered at the man's ashen face as he watched the light blink out of his eyes.

One by one, Ryore's men were gutted where they stood. The gardens, once having been pure and white,

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were unrecognisable, fouled by the bloodied guts of its own protectors.

Fadius lashed out to his right. He struck his foe below the waist, relying on his childhood memory of fencing. No sooner had he ripped the blade free, had a fresh wave of guards appeared at their side. Together, they brandished gleaming sabres, knocking down the weakest links in the chain.

Eagan's men ducked. They were eager to put a great distance between themselves and the blades that had managed to fell their men. They glared at the opposition, allowing their fury to build and inundate them. Their weapons rose of their own accord. With instinct overriding reason, they dove into the onslaught.

They fought to parry their foe's attacks, striking them down from every imaginable angle. Fadius watched in delight as their life seeped out through their stomachs, their chests, and even spurting out from the sides of their necks.

Within minutes, Eagan's troops had butchered their foes. They had taken a few casualties, of course. Fadius gazed down at the bloodied point of his sword, fascinated by the fact that such a simple piece of forged steel could end the life of countless men.

A hand brushed against his shoulder, prompting Fadius to whirl round. His blade was raised and ready to jerk forward when his gaze met that of his commander.

Highness.' He struggled to maintain Xyhoni's smooth tone. 'Please, forgive me. I thought you were one of those wretched fiends.'

'No matter.' Eagan's reply was more terse than usual.

Fie sheathed his sword and beckoned Fadius out from the pile of broken bodies at their feet.

Eagan urged Fadius toward a pair of enormous side doors. The troops followed, forming a ring around their commander.

Highness! That's the servant's entrance!

Eagan froze and turned to face his second. Fadius projected the image of the boy the king had come to love as his own. He stood before him, risking his own life to save Violetta's; an act the true Xyhoni would have undertaken without pause.

Eagan's gaze darted to the elaborate moulding of the doors before them.

'The servant's entrance, you say?'

The king already seemed to be doubting him. If Fadius faltered now, then their entire operation would go up in flames.

'Sir.'

Fadius raised his hand in salute to the king. He waited, his innards clenching in a painful manner as Eagan's gaze swept across his face. Would he see the sweat beading upon his brow, or the jagged teeth behind this stranger's plump lips? If he did, then he made no comment.

Eagan rallied his troops around him. He instructed two of their strongest men to force open the doors, an effort which appeared to test even them. Each man gripped hold of a door, where they began to strain against its ferocious bulk. Being set so deep into the buildings

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foundations, it took all of their efforts to make them budge.

'Highness!'

Fadius leapt forward, whisking Eagan back as hundreds of men poured out from beyond the doors. The two troops who had succeeded in their efforts to force the doors open, now sat atop of the enemy's blades, their shields having proved of little use.

Fadius' heart pounded throughout the entirety of his armoured form. He was relieved to have gotten to the king in time, refusing to have him die before the true fun began. Fadius needed to make his brother suffer and until they reached him, he needed the king.

Fadius slammed into the enemy ranks. He was forced to duck an oncoming blow, losing balance as his shield crashed to his side. A burly soldier thrust his sword out. Fadius tensed.

Before he realized how he had done it, he was staring at his blade, having gutted the beady eyed man, dispatching him into the realms of hell. Side-stepping any who surged towards them, both himself and the king were proving formidable. The emperor's guard, though still well-trained, lacked a greater sense of perception.

Together, Eagan's men thrust their blades forward. Arms and legs dangled limp from the bodies of their foes, while others fell upon the snow-packed earth. If it hadn't been for the uproar around them, Fadius might have thought that the men looked almost peaceful, blood-soaked snow angels buried two feet deep.

Fadius resisted any who tried to force him back from the king's side. He abandoned his shield, not about to let these common thugs dispatch the one bargaining chip he had at his disposal.

Fadius rose up amongst his fellows, cutting down his enemies with a deadly precision. To his side, Eagan began to pulse, an unseen energy pouring from his flesh. *Could it be, Eagan's powers?* It was rare for anyone to see him make use of them. Since the loss of his wife and son, it was almost unheard of for Eagan to appear so careless in the presence of others.

Fadius darted right, hacking away at more brutish limbs. The first few rows of enemy guards had collapsed. Yet more were speared upon their own swords, a tragic and yet delicious twist of fate.

Fadius watched several stragglers sprinting away from the scene as Eagan's right hand burst into flame. It was a memorable sight. One fist-sized orb of plasma, gathering energy, only to increase in size. Fadius commended those that chose to flee. It was a wise move considering the power that the king had summoned. Others, having accepted their inevitable defeat, prepared themselves to be turned to ash.

A sudden blur to Fadius' vision shocked him. Unable to see, his other senses began to sharpen. His nose filled with a familiar scent. It was part ridicule and part lust; an overwhelming concoction, which only one individual he knew possessed. *Reizya?* Fadius spun round, aware of her presence. No matter where he turned or

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how many balls of flame rocketed past, he couldn't find her.

Fadius crashed into a wall, where his sword-point glanced against the stone. The blurred figure of a royal guard stood before him. They forewent their traditional steel blade, choosing instead to wield a dagger, brandishing it toward the stunned prince.

Fadius felt the grip on his weapon automatically tighten. As the dagger launched toward his heart, he dove right, his sword colliding with the side of the enemy's throat. The blade sliced clean through tissue and bone. Fadius whipped his weapon back down to his side. There it rested, dripping precious blood and poised for the next strike.

Eagan's voice drifted into his mind. Fadius blinked and the world rushed back to his eyes. He was unaware of how long he'd been standing there, drenched in the enemy's blood, but it was apparent that it had been a while.

'Xyhoni, thank the gods you're back with us.'

Eagan threw an arm around the vacant prince, who could do little more than accept the embrace.

'Please Highness, you know it doesn't do well to speak of the gods.'

Hush!

Fadius pulled himself out of the king's grip, seeking the shield that he'd forgone. Eagan drove himself back through the crowd of troops; all allies, as far as Fadius could see. By the time he'd heaved his shield out of the snow- strewn ground, he found Eagan beckoning him

forward. Seeing him now, cheeks flecked with the blood of countless men, Fadius felt cheated by his earlier impressions. This was no mere man before him. Eagan was the equivalent of a Lord.

Fadius raced to keep up with Eagan. All around lay the most horrendous of corpses; broken bodies with eyes gouged out, jaws lain to waste, even some with their entrails wound round their own swords. He stifled the need to vomit, almost colliding with Eagan in the room beyond.

It appeared to be some sort of storeroom, with dozens of barrels and baskets piled against one-another. While cramped and in obvious need of repair, there was something about the room that had the king looking awfully disturbed. As Fadius searched the quaint abode with his own eyes, he soon realized what that something was.

Something round and streaked with grey could be seen quivering behind a nearby crate. Fadius motioned for King Eagan to look and noticed other shivering grey masses protruding from behind a collection of barrels.

'What is this?' the King growled.

Fadius held his sword at arms length. The shivering objects appeared to be lined with fuzz; an oddity if ever there was one. He motioned for Eagan to remain in place, while he alone scouted ahead.

Fadius watched the streaks of grey as he neared the first quivering orb. His blade pointed out at his target as he reached the crate and peered over its rim. A pair of

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red-rimmed eyes gazed up at him, a silent plea for mercy written upon a face as weathered as old leather.

Fadius drew back. He couldn't explain the emotions raging through him. What was this creature doing here, hidden away in this pitiful excuse for a room? He rounded on the king, hoping to find the guidance he sought. 'Highness, civilians!'

Fadius watched in awe as a gaggle of elderly servants appeared from behind the numerous baskets and crates. They were crouched low to the ground, preferring to remain half-hidden by their choice of shelter.

'As you can see,' explained Fadius, 'Civilians.'

Eagan's gaze was fixed upon the appearing servants. All were elderly, likely fifty or sixty years of age, with skin that looked almost paper thin. Both men studied their silent expressions of terror, wondering why they didn't cry out or wail. The sight of the troops beyond the doors was enough to make them cower in fright.

Eagan set his shield aside. He turned, gesturing for his men to do the same, in addition to also sheathing their blades. He stooped low to avoid the shallow ceiling, shuffling forward, in a rather dignified way, Fadius observed. He watched as Eagan knelt towards the elders, offering out a hand to help them up.

'Please, come. There's no need to be afraid.' Not one of them dared to move a muscle. 'Here.'

Terror played through the elders' innocent eyes as Eagan stretched his palm out further. Fadius noted a haunted look to their faces that spoke of all the deaths they had witnessed at the Flame King's hands.

A minor scuffling drew the attention of both Fadius and the king. Several troops teetered on the edge of the room, intrigued by the sudden rise in activity. Assured that the elderly folk were no threat, Eagan beckoned Fadius to follow behind him. They paced the room, following the mouse-like noise with their ears. Strangely, the other civilians showed no reaction. They simply stared at the men as though they were mad.

A large barrel jutted out from a corner of the room. Unlike the others, it was un-stoppered. The men gave it a suspicious glance, with Fadius readying his sword in case it was needed.

'No!'

Before they so much as touched the barrel, a small girl leapt out from its rotund base. Fadius fell back, doing his best to avoid catching her with the blade. Eagan had scarcely finished helping to right him when the girl's legs began moving at a furious pace.

'Halt!'

There came the gentle click clack of her shoes against cobbles. Fadius sheathed his sword and scampered after the young girl. He extended his arms, grasping hold of the frayed fabric of her garb as she made for the door. His fingers closed around the worn cloth.

'Hush, now.'

Fadius held her arms at her sides.

'Let me go!' wailed the child. She pulled against him with all her might, hoping to land a wounding blow. 'I shall not be your doxy! I'm not but twelve years!'

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Fadius flinched, stung by her words. With his hold on her diminished, the girl leapt up, landing an impressive scratch upon his nose. She managed to get but a few feet away when Fadius, ignoring the girl's protests, scooped her into his muscled arms and placed her before the wide-eyed king.

The girl's lists grew still. She quaked before the great Flame King, who looked upon her with a smile. In the light, she was a rather dainty thing. Her hair hung in thick clusters around a pointed face, with big, beautiful eyes that implored him to halt. Fadius saw those eyes widen with sudden recognition. Her slight frame bent down in several jerky movements, as though her legs operated on rusted hinges. He recognized this as her attempt to courtesy.

'Highness.'

She refused to meet the king's gaze. Fadius couldn't blame her. He had no idea what this girl was feeling. They didn't even know her name.

'So child, would you care to tell me what's going on here?' Eagan spoke in a voice far softer than that of his usual self. No doubt he was hoping to warm the young child to him, to coax her out of her frightened shell.

A tense silence hung over the room. Numerous pairs of eyes lingered on the proud king as he gazed upon the young slave girl. With time running short, Eagan opted for a different approach.

'I am sorry if I frighten you, Miss—?'

Her innocent eyes seemed to search his soul.

'Kaitlyn.'

The young girl stared at him with a wary expression.

'Are you mi lady's father?' she asked.

Eagan's eyes bulged in their sockets.

'Mi lady? Tell me Kaitlyn, does mi lady have golden hair and brown eyes?'

The young girl nodded.

Eagan shot Fadius a worried glance.

'Do you know where mi lady is right now?'

Fadius couldn't help but grin as Kaitlyn's face broke into a smile.

'This way, Highness,' she beamed, 'Follow me.'

CHAPTER THIRTY

Fadius

The young girl, Kaitlyn as Fadius had heard her called, had explained the nature of the elderly servant's impairment.

'They're deaf!' she had cried, much to their disbelief. 'Now quick, we must hurry to mi lady.'

She had left the fearful elders with a small contingency of Eagan's guards, but not before helping to convey the king's intentions. Kaitlyn had jumped in front of her elders, drawing their attention by waving her palms. Tier hands began to dance in an elaborate arrangement, forming a language that while unfamiliar to Eagan's troops, appeared to make all the sense in the world to her friends.

Having knelt down to inspect the elderly, many troops cried out in disgust at what they found. Fadius paused a while longer, waiting while others peeled back the scraggly strands of hair from their heads.

What Fadius saw repulsed even him. Deep, ugly scars made up the remains of the citizen's ears. It looked as though large metal spikes had been shoved through

with brute force. In that moment, Fadius felt like he had never known his brother.

Now was the time for them to finish their attack. Fadius knew that if Ryore's specialist guards hadn't been alerted to their arrival, they soon would be. It hadn't taken him long to catch up to the grand Flame King.

Fadius waded through a forest of troops, lugging his preposterous shield, when he spotted Eagan up ahead. The king had kept young Kaitlyn to his side, worried that she might be set upon if he allowed her to roam.

'Highness,' panted Fadius, 'I thought it best to let you know that I sent some men to escort those poor people away.' Eagan's eyes never strayed from the path before him, but he nodded his head, appearing glad.

'Do tell me, how is it that they came to be deaf? Such an odd number of people, all without their hearing, don't you think?'

Several troops shot glances in their direction before fixing their attention back on the passage. Fadius considered the king's question. He could feel himself struggling to fashion his voice. His trio didn't have long before the year was up and their magic was likely beginning to wane.

'Ryore. He carved into their ears, Highness.'

Eagan paused. His troops, on the other hand, didn't miss a beat. They continued stalking down the corridor, eager to flush out the rest of their foes. Fadius remained. He could hear his own heavy breathing as he waited for the king's response. To his surprise, Eagan began walking once more, his lips pressed into a thin line.

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Fadius helped to lead the charge of remaining troops as they stormed the next floor and the one after that. Their footsteps were muted on the stairs' plush carpets, the estate groaning in protest beneath the weight of their armour. Fadius felt his shock at his brother's crimes begin to ebb. He had grown up with Ryore. Yes, they'd had different mothers, but why did such treachery surprise him?

He breached the final landing, forcing his way through the throng of young initiates. Here, the passages became far more ornate. The decor alone was breathtaking. Golden tapestries lined each side, every painstaking detail crafted in a way that made them leap off the walls.

Fadius noticed that the lights here were dimmer, leaving the troops in a surreal haze. No sooner had they turned a corner, had they encountered thirty savage, balding men, all polished to gleam before their eyes. They stood hunched at the end of the passage, their soulless eyes cutting into the men's resolve. These were the emperor's personal guard.

Fadius snatched up the hilt of his blade, preparing to ram the men with the bulk of his shield. He was proud to lead the charge on these brutes, wanting some small measure of revenge for the elderly citizens that their master had wronged. He desired nothing more than for his elder brother to burn in the fires of hell.

Fadius darted in from the side. He noticed their foe's only response to be a menacing scowl.

'Stand back, vermin!' snapped one of the brutes. 'Don't come any closer, or I'll chop off yer head!'

The other troops exchanged worried looks for these men were battle hardened warriors, each with a wealth of experience under his belt. Not Fadius. He threw his weight behind his shield, toppling over the closest men.

Ryore's men wore blank faces, devoid of any human emotion. They didn't bat an eyelid at their fallen brethren, seeing Eagan's men as a nuisance, rather than a threat. That's where they were wrong to assume.

Ryore's men lunged. They were swift, their blades catching the light as they made their first deadly arc toward the king. Fadius anticipated a closing strike. Gripping the hilt of his sword, he cut down his foe, just as Eagan's first line of defence clattered to the ground.

Oh no, Kaithyn! Fadius watched as her quivering figure appeared amongst a torrent of blood. The breath was driven from the lungs of their men, the light of their eyes dancing for a moment longer before vanishing entirely.

Fadius shared in the glare of the troops. He felt his right hand split the air as his blade slammed into the nearest guard, wrenching the man's torso in two. A collective battle cry went up from the troops. It echoed around him as the men swept toward their foes.

They danced circles round them until they grew queasy, stabbing any point where armour met flesh. Their once pale flesh became slick with blood as men from both sides slumped to the floor. From some, it burst forth from their necks like spurting fountains, spraying the entire passage with the scent of death.

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Fadius panted, glancing about the passage. The immediate area appeared to be clear. He yanked his blade free from the closest corpse, smearing blood against the face of its owner.

'Sweet justice,' he whispered.

He was half considering returning his blade to its sheath when a deafening scream split the air. Fadius wheeled round, his sword drawn. He could feel his skin blanch as he stared ahead. Pinned up against an ancient tapestry was little Kaitlyn.

Fadius darted forward. Eagan stood to the left of the burly man who was holding the blade. The king had his sword trained on the man's chest, but at risk of harming an innocent child, he had yet to make a move.

'Highness!'

Fadius ducked under the swinging blade as the beast of a man turned to intercept his unwelcome distraction. A jolt to the shoulder told Fadius that he'd had a close call. Any swifter and he'd have surrendered his head, which is exactly what his enemy was about to learn.

Eagan lunged before his foe's blade had finished its arc. Driven by his need to save the girl, Fadius watched in slow motion as the tip of the king's blade arced round and severed the head of the brute before him. There, it plunged to the cobbled floor below. Fresh blood began to pool on the stone-work, seeping into every available crack.

Fadius twirled about in the chaos of blood and bone. Kaitlyn's body continued to shake. She took turns staring

between the two men, paying no attention to the remaining troops.

It was the look in her eyes that startled Fadius. They were wide and glassy, spilling over with tears.

'Shh, it's all right,' he cooed. Fadius had never done such a thing in his life, yet for some reason he felt responsible for the child. 'Kaitlyn, it's okay now. No-one here is going to hurt you.'

Tier bulging eyes settled on his.

'T-thank you,' she whimpered. She turned to the king. 'Both of you.'

Fadius reached an arm around the girl's shoulders. At first she flinched, an understandable reaction given what she'd witnessed. He allowed her to rest against him a while, enough for her heart to slow and her breathing to soften.

Eagan urged his men on. All around them, men lay dead from their wounds, yet a golden light seemed to shimmer about the king. Fadius watched him snatch up the head he had severed, only to dangle it by its matted hair. The eyes had only just finished blinking, as though it were still re-living the moment that its death had been wrought.

Fadius turned with Eagan to address the troops that still clung to life.

'Well met, all of you.'

There was a look of pride in the king's eyes. The troops could see it reflected back at them as Eagan assessed the strength of their skill.

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'Xyhoni, come.' Fadius felt a large hand clap onto his shoulder. 'Why don't you lead the way?'

Eagan shepherded Kaitlyn out from his arms, leaving Fadius to suppress a grunt of pain.

'Of course, Highness.' He shuffled forward, pretending to inspect the surrounding passage. 'I believe what you seek is over there.'

Fadius raised a long finger in the tower's direction, smiling through the full, salmon lips of his guise.

Eagan followed the prince's gaze to a single door at the end of the hall. The wood appeared to possess some unique quality, emitting the tiniest sliver of magic.

'We must be cautious. The emperor is said to have an endless supply of guards at his beck and call.' Fadius signed by pressing a finger to his lips, hoping that all of the men had heard.

Fadius was the first of them to approach the door. The steps of his comrades were far from the stealth that such a crusade required. Fadius' grip went slack on his weapon from palms that were dewed with sweat and blood. He fought to gain a better hold, just as King Eagan swept in front of the door.

'Wait, Highness!'

An urgent shriek sounded behind. The troops spun round, only to find themselves part of a horrific nightmare.

A withering line of corpses ringed the passage. Their bodies looked to be mostly bone, flesh falling in rotting clumps. Fadius' eyes wandered down the length of the spectres. In each skeletal hand rested a familiar blade.

'What sorcery is this Xyhoni? Have you ever seen the likes of it?'

Fadius had been about to ask Eagan the same thing and dearly wished that he had. To his knowledge, not even Reiza and Arlas combined had the power to resurrect the dead.

Fadius never had a chance to answer the question. He was forced to dodge several oncoming blades at once. For some, it was too late. Eagan's men stared ahead, frozen in place by what they saw. In what proved to be a horrific display, fine beads of blood sprouted round their throats, forming into the shape of a pearl necklace. Every man with the mark was already dead. Fadius witnessed his comrade's torsos sliding away from their bottom halves, where they flopped onto the waiting ground.

'Demons, vile spectres of the night!' cried Eagan.

His men began to pale, appearing sicklier than the creatures which now bore down upon their meagre ranks. Their fellow's blood pooled around them, leaving the stone-work slick beneath their boots.

'Get back!'

Fadius watched as one of their own cleaved a head from one of the corpses. He watched as it preceded to bounce along the stone floor, like a ball intended for the use of a child. With no respect for such obvious evil, Fadius kicked it, hard, as it neared his boot.

'Here!' King Eagan caught the attention of the waiting ghouls and hurled the severed head he'd been holding right into their midst.

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The troops kept a firm hold on their swords, their eyes darting between corpses as the severed head sailed through the air. Hollow eyes fixed onto the human projectile. *Boom!* The passage shook from an almighty blast of fire.

Fadius leaped back, pulling young Kaitlyn with him. *So that's what the king wanted with the head.* Fadius raised a hand against the growing inferno, able to pick out no more than a few shrivelling figures. The decimated corpses let out a collective, otherworldly howl before any remaining flesh sizzled off of the bones. A dry snapping indicated that the dead were no more.

Fadius was the first to break his gaze away when Eagan clapped him hard on the shoulder.

'That, my boy, is how we conquer evil.'

Fadius stared into Eagan's face. The king's hand was stretched out before him. He took it, hauling his aching form back onto its feet.

Fadius would have smiled at such a victory, had it not been for the peculiar sensation that worked its way through every fibre of his being. Beside him stood a towering troop, their jet eyes searing into his soul. There was something familiar about those eyes. He had never gazed into such darkness before.

'Are you all right girl?'

Eagan's words shot through Fadius' mind. He turned to find Kaitlyn cuddling into his side. She gazed up at them both and gave a silent nod of the head.

'That certainly was close,' said Eagan, 'You fought well.'

Fadius allowed the brewing smile within to stretch out across his lips. He turned to regard the strange troop once more, but found an empty space where the figure had been. It was only now that he realized just how big of a hit their forces had taken. Dozens of their comrades lay sprawled across the bloodied cobbles, appearing as little more than the skeletal corpses that had crumbled before them.

The king gave no warning before striding past the panting prince. Now that their foes were vanquished once more, an eerie stillness had settled upon them. Every stifled breath became a bark, every creak of the foundations another blade at their backs, threatening to prove the mortality of men.

The king was an arm's length away from the tower door when Fadius sought to hold him back.

'Please, Highness. Allow me.'

'What is the meaning of this, Xyhoni?'

Fadius exhaled. The troops had been working to quiet their pace, but with the king's raised voice, they abandoned all attempts.

'Forgive me, Highness, but what if there's a spell on this door, designed to incapacitate any who were to touch its surface.'

The look of suspicion Eagan wore soon softened into understanding.

'You make a sound point my friend.'

The king's face formed into a mask of kindness, something Fadius had taken years to feign. For a moment, he wondered what it was like to feel sure of

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your emotions; that they weren't just some befuddled ideas of what one should feel. Did it hurt Eagan to feel so deeply? He'd never know.

Eagan withdrew from the tower door, lending Fadius ample space so that he could approach instead. He reached down, pressing against the wood of the door to find that it immediately stalled.

'Is there a problem?'

Eagan's voice exerted a promising force. Fadius felt it press against the small of his back as he knelt before the door's tiny keyhole. He cupped his hands so that no-one would hear and began to work the tools of his trade. Two tense minutes later the door clicked open, much to the amazement of the other troops. Eagan's face pulled down at the comers, yet he said nothing to indicate any hint of suspicion.

Fadius paused in the doorway. The spelled lock his brother had placed had endured no more than the last he had broken. However, while it may have been little effort to remove, Fadius was damned if he didn't err on the side of caution. After all, his brother's powers were supposed to have waned.

He peeked his head into the darkness beyond. As far as he could tell, there was no-one there; no waiting assassin hiding in the depths of the shadows. He turned and nodded for the king to approach.

Eagan's men crept in behind their ruler. They couldn't have totalled more than thirty men, given the additional casualties they'd suffered. With all of their bodies packed tight together, they formed a sort of

human furnace, easing the briskness of the tower chamber.

'Feels like too small of a space for an emperor.'

'Aye, that it is.'

Afraid that they'd give away their position, both Fadius and Eagan shushed the troops.

'I can't see anything, Highness.'

Fadius tried to locate the king by his presence, but his attempts were proving futile in the gloom.

'Just a moment.'

Eagan's voice echoed out through the shadows. There was a faint tsk and a flicker of light came into being.

From half way across the cramped space, there appeared a mass of golden flames. They sat poised within the king's palm, illuminating the small space before him.

'There we are. Come along little one.'

Eagan shepherded Kaitlyn on, but she refused to leave Fadius' side.

Fadius was grateful for the break in the darkness. It gave him hope that they still might accomplish their task. He glanced around the dust-ridden excuse of a tower, keeping young Kaitlyn close.

The troops were certain that this room was some kind of a joke for surely no high-ranking royal would dwell here. Fadius may once have shared in their thoughts, but he knew his brother well enough and was aware that the tower held more of a sentimental value than anything else. Although not outwardly lavish, it was a place that Ryore had always considered sacred. A place

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where he could wallow in whatever pity he'd envisioned for himself.

Fadius pushed through the throng of men. They remained quiet, all eyes on the man they thought was Xyhoni as he approached the distant shadow of a door. It hung within a dark comer, haunting the wall in which it stood.

Fadius searched for the king, only to find himself facing Eagan's flickering palm. He motioned for Fadius to step aside.

'Is this?'

Fadius nodded.

'It is.'

The royal chambers stood behind that door. Fadius had ventured in just once before when he had searched for the coveted All Seeing Lense. He recalled the moment he had almost been caught. Such a moment it was, full of fear and adrenaline. He wasn't sorry to have passed it by.

Eagan held up the flickering flames that enveloped his palm, serving to illuminate the doorway. He leant his weight against the wooden frame and found the door already ajar. Fadius jumped to the king's aid. Ryore would never have left such an important door open. He watched as Eagan pushed it the rest of the way, drawn in by the soft light of the royal chambers.

Many of the troops gasped at the sight of it. Although still simplistic in style, Ryore's chambers far exceeded the tastes of the rough-looking tower room. The men could see it want for nothing. The rich oak panelling of the walls was to be admired, the sheer carpet

and elegant four-poster divine in their own right. And as for Violetta.

'Violetta!'

King Eagan cried out at the sight of his daughter. She teetered on the edge of the grand four poster, rocking ever so gently back and forth. For once, Fadius found himself stunned.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Fadius

Violetta continued to rock to a silent melody. She appeared to be in a dream-like state, her eyes unblinking, like two burning suns that lured the troops toward hidden danger.

'Mi lady?'

Kaitlyn darted across the room. She had barely made it half the distance to the bed when Fadius placed an arm out before her.

'Stop. Something about this doesn't feel right.'

Kaitlyn gazed up at him, her eyes fighting back tears. She gave her usual silent nod and followed Fadius back to the others. It was only then that he noticed. Violetta was facing the crowd of men, almost as though she had expected their arrival.

'What has he done to her?' cried Eagan.

Fadius turned to meet the heated gaze of the great Flame King. A dangerous look had filled his eyes.

'If that snake has harmed her in any way, I'll—'

'Highness! Stay calm.'

'Calm! You want me to stay calm when that monster has my only child in some sort of trance?'

Fadius knew it was a bold move, but he went ahead anyway. He placed both hands on Eagan's shoulders and looked into his eyes. It was a terrifying experience. This man had seen things Fadius couldn't comprehend. There was a quality to his eyes that allowed his soul to shine through; a soul plagued by its fair share of sorrow.

'Highness, she is safe with us here. He cannot harm her any more than he already has.'

Eagan's eyes began to lose their edge. He glanced over Fadius' shoulder, pulling the Mage's hands away as he watched his only daughter swaying back and forth to an unknown rhythm.

'Violetta?' She didn't respond. 'Daughter, can you hear me?'

Violetta didn't appear able to perceive her surroundings, oblivious to the swarm of men that hung back in fear. It was more than just her helpless rocking that unnerved them. It was those wide, unmoving eyes. She looked like a poor and traumatized child, resorting to a repetitive series of motions, in order to calm herself.

'That's it. Move!'

The king pushed through the small crowd.

'Eagan?'

A slender figure weaved through the lines of troops, passing Fadius and Kaitlyn, before finally reaching the king. They wore the same battle armour as any other troop, yet there was a certain oddity about them, an unnatural streamlined sway to their shape. Their face was hidden by a metal visor attached to their helmet, a luxury that most troops could ill afford.

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The stranger approached Eagan with a warmth and familiarity that Fadius found both astonishing and in some way indecent.

'Eagan, you must keep your mind, otherwise the traitor wins.'

The king turned to face this mysterious figure. They held his gaze, dipping into a low bow.

'I didn't realize that you had come.' Eagan was staring at the troop's headpiece, the visor partially fogged by their breath.

'Why?'

Fadius watched as the troop reached up and removed the helmet in its entirety. A pointed face appeared, with skin that showed a mild flush.

'I'm sorry Eagan, I had to come.' Jermise stared into the king's eyes. Her own were bloodshot and appeared to be withholding tears. Fadius noticed her hand rising close to the king's face, before it fell back to the side of her armoured waist.

'My orders?' Jermise's eyes darted over to where Violetta waited. The sudden lack of familiarity made Fadius wince. He felt as if he had been privy to some more intimate exchange, with Jermise having only just realized the nature of her prior actions. Eagan studied her with grave eyes.

'Go to her, sweet Jermise. Try to get her out of this.'

Fadius was sure he'd seen Violetta flinch as her confidant paced toward her rocking form. Jermise's face was devoid of emotion. With each step, Fadius was

certain she'd uncover some gruesome trap, yet Violetta continued to allow her approach.

'Vi, can you hear me?'

Jermise rested herself on the edge of the bed. Milk-bottle arms gripped Violetta's shoulders in an attempt to bring her back to the world.

'It's me, my lady We're worried about you, your father and I.'

There was no change to Violetta's wide-eyed expression, except for the slightest twitch from one of her eyes.

Fadius struggled to put thoughts of his brother's cruelty from his mind. He stared across at the beautiful young woman, poised as she was at the edge of the grand four poster. *What has she done to Ryore, to any of us, to deserve this?*

Violetta failed to respond to Jermise. Her confidant pulled her into the crook of one arm, where she began to stroke her golden waves of hair.

'Come on, Highness, I know you're in there.' Her slender hand reached to cup Violetta's chin, turning the young empress to face her. 'There you are.'

Fadius supposed that Jermise must have noticed that flicker in the girl's eyes; a movement that hinted at some lingering connection to the world.

'Vi, I brought your father. He's here.'

Jermise's porcelain smile began to wither. She darted back from the elaborate bed, staring at Violetta's skin.

The Flame Queen

The girl's face had turned an icy white. Her eyes, though still vacant for the most part, reflected a somewhat hypnotized look.

'What is this?' Eagan spat.

Fadius could tell he was losing his nerve. Eagan stepped out from the crowd of troops when his daughter shot up from the bed's edge. Both he and Jermise were forced to duck as Violetta took a swipe at their faces. Fadius gasped as talon like claws began to protrude from her outstretched fingers.

'Highness,' he asked, 'I don't suppose your daughter naturally has—'

'No!'

Kaitlyn had begun to sob behind them. Violetta must have been good to the child. Why else would she have shown such heartfelt emotion?

The crackle of unseen magic filled the air as Violetta's would-be victims dodged the first blow of her fearsome claws.

'Please, my lady!'

Jermise did her best to re-bridge the gap, but every step she took brought another blow.

King Eagan shouldered Fadius aside.

'Enough!'

He swept his arms out and began to advance. At that moment, Fadius was sure he'd felt something brush past him. He glanced to his left and there, with the faintest hint of frost on one finger, was Reiza.

'Are you insane?' Fadius whispered through clenched teeth. 'If anyone sees you.'

'Hush.' Reiza matched his whispers perfectly. 'I know what I'm doing. The question is, do you?'

Fadius had to admit that he was coming to be rather fond of Eagan. He hated that harm might have to befall him in order for them to accomplish their task.

'I know what is to be done, my love.'

Reiza didn't return the sentiment.

The pair watched as Eagan closed the distance between himself and his child. Violetta swung her claws in his direction. It was a long shot, but Eagan took the risk. He leaped forward, where he was struck by the blinding rage of those claws. Fadius gasped as he saw a deep gash blossom into life across Eagan's cheek.

'You monster! What have you done with my daughter?'

The king clutched a hand to his throbbing cheek in a vain attempt to halt the flow of blood.

'Bravo. You've gotten this far.'

A cold voice slithered into the room. There was a haunting quality to its depth that saw both Fadius and Eagan halt in place. Even Kaitlyn's tears ceased as she backed away into the sea of men.

The king looked to be straining his ears to distinguish their speaker. Fadius needn't have bothered. He knew that voice.

'Ryore?'

Eagan's face reddened, his voice a guttural growl of discontent. An adjoining door glided open to their right, revealing the figure of the infamous emperor.

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Ryore wore a malicious grin, his eyes beady like those of a falcon. Fadius glared. He wanted to rip out his brother's throat. He knew he had but days to accomplish his task and couldn't risk Ryore escaping unharmed.

Eagan's eyes never wavered. He glared first at Ryore, then to the mysterious sphere that sat poised in one hand.

'So nice to see you as always, Eagan.'

Ryore strode toward the grand four-poster, to which his bride had begun to retreat. He bent down, cradling his wife's delirious form.

'What is that, in your hand?' asked Eagan.

Ryore's lips moved against the soft flesh of his wife's ear. He rested amongst the luxurious waves of her golden hair, as if it were some sacred paradise that only he was permitted to enter.

Eagan couldn't tear his eyes from the sphere Ryore held. He studied the emperor with a look so dark that even Fadius fought the urge to tremble

'It is nothing you need concern yourself with.'

At this, Eagan appeared to explode.

'What have you done to my child? Tell me, or I'll have your limbs ripped off, one by one!'

A moment of silence followed the king's outburst. Accompanying it was a cruel laugh as Ryore rose to meet Eagan's challenge.

'Your daughter is cursed, Highness. Her mind is now bound to mine.'

'How?'

Fadius stared at his brother with true bewilderment. It was said that Ryore had become powerless, yet to

sustain such power would require at least some small shred of magic. Ryore's laugh refused to falter.

'An agreement between my source and I.'

He flashed Eagan a sly wink.

'You heartless bastard!'

Eagan began to draw power up from his core when Ryore backed toward Violetta.

'I wouldn't if I were you.'

Ryore inhaled, one sharp intake of breath that saw Violetta rise from the bed.

Fadius watched as Eagan recalled his power, his eyes forming dangerous slits.

'As for this.' Ryore held up the colourful sphere. 'I believe it belongs to your daughter. Some sort of keepsake, perhaps?'

Fadius felt Eagan's courage falter. The king's mouth had fallen open as his lips fumbled for the right response. 'Jork's ball.'

Whatever the provocation, it seemed to be the final straw. Eagan took a running leap, managing to dodge a blow from his daughter's talons. A powerful glow saw him freeze.

Fadius pulled his blade free of its wrappings. This situation was becoming more complicated with each passing second. He needed to be done with this, to take out his brother and flee the scene of the crime. He stared at the fire which sat poised on the tips of Violetta's fingers.

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'Come now,' spat Ryore, 'You know you can't win.' Fadius knew his brother was referring to Eagan, but on some level those words resonated with him.

Ryore tossed the sphere to one side, where it rolled into the folds of the bedsheets.

'I see your men do not intend to help.' Ryore's lips curled into a sneer. 'Just as well.'

Fadius felt his brother's eyes fix on him. He raised his sword, a silent warning for Ryore to keep his distance.

'No matter, why don't you try this on for size.'

Ryore stood back from his mate. He brought his hands together in a harsh clap and the powers of hell prepared to unleash.

Violetta's hands brightened to a raging red. Fadius looked on as a molten fireball formed in her palms, preparing to launch at Eagan's troops.

'Shields, now!'

The troops were quick to follow Eagan's example and mounted their shields up over their knees as the searing ball of flame engulfed them. Fadius felt something tug at his hand and turned to find Kaitlyn crouching beside him, struggling to remain in the vicinity of protection. Fadius pulled her close.

'Thank the Gods for fireproof coating!'

Eagan's cries were hard to hear over the roar of the flames. Just as Fadius began to lower his shield, a second burst of flame collided. He clutched Kaitlyn to him, struggling to hold the shield in place with one hand.

The troops strained against the pressure of the flames. Each time they attempted to shift their weight

forward, another burst of plasma hit home. *Ryore didn't predict this*, thought Fadius. No matter how much fire the shields soaked up, they held strong, protecting their wielders.

Ryore's frustrated cries alerted the king. Fadius joined in peering over the rim of his shield, to see his brother glaring through the aftermath of his little stunt. His eyebrows were arched. It was clear that he hadn't expected to be greeting survivors.

'What now, Ryore?'

King Eagan lowered his shield to the ground. He motioned for his men to stand before gazing into the cold, unforgiving eyes of the enemy.

'Just what did you do to lose your powers?'

Ryore answered with a serpentine snarl.

'I tried to give your wretched spawn a child, but it was all for nothing. Instead of curing my bride when we sought help—'

Ryore glanced down for a moment and Fadius realized something. His brother was genuinely disturbed by the emotions he felt.

'Everything was taken from me,' growled Ryore. 'Naturally, I had to make the bitch suffer.'

Ryore's retort cut like ice. Fadius could sense the fury spreading through the king's veins as he gazed upon this foul excuse for a man. Fadius ushered Kaitlyn across to the other side of the troops, his right hand wandering down to the sheath that held his sword. His fingers entwined around the hilt, ensuring his weapon was but a whip away.

The Flame Queen

'Hmm. I appear to have struck a nerve in you, Highness.' Ryore's voice dripped with disdain. Fadius refrained from lashing out with his own blade. His brother was taunting Eagan on purpose, but what he had to gain, Fadius didn't know.

Ryore circled round his silent wife, like a hungry vulture, his eyes lingering on her full chest.

'It would appear that ancient magic cannot be trusted. You should know all about that.'

Eagan's hand flexed on the hilt of his weapon.

'What are you suggesting?'

'I simply find it convenient that your wife and son perished in an accident that you yourself could have prevented.'

Fadius' shield clattered to the ground. He couldn't believe his ears as a hearty chuckling filled the chamber, only this time it didn't come from Ryore. The emperor stood, speechless, as a wide grin split Eagan's face.

'What? Why aren't you fuming?'

Ryore ran a pale hand through his jet locks. Fadius paid his brother no heed. His attention was fixed on the king's eyes.

They flickered to something behind the emperor, glinting with a sense of mischief.

Before Ryore had a chance to glance behind, his body froze, lips prized open in a silent scream. Fadius watched with relish as Ryore's body crumpled out from beneath him. He lay upon the sheer carpets, hissing in agony.

'You...knew?'

Ryore's eyes rolled up to glare at Eagan. His voice had become a faint pant, embers glinting on his robes, having raged through the centre of his chest.

'That I did.'

'You vile—'

A second burst of flame pierced through Ryore's stomach. His body shuddered, spewing blood as he collapsed into a crooked heap.

Fadius stared, transfixed by his brother's chest. A dark stain had begun to spread, trickling down his torso, where it was left to run across the plush carpets. His eyes travelled back up to meet Ryore's assailant, having previously been hidden by the emperor's physique.

Fadius managed a small smile. As his brother lay helpless on the chamber floor, he felt Reiza's hand slip into his own. He glanced over to find that tears spilled down her pale cheeks, shed for the one man she couldn't have; a man she had been charged to kill.

'Its all right,' he whispered.

Fadius wished he could have offered more comforting words. He silenced the jealousy swelling within, knowing that to Reiza, the wounded body below them was still Ryore; still the elder brother she'd loved since childhood, no matter how much her duty had commanded she kill him.

Fadius darted a quick glance in Eagan's direction. So far, no-one had noticed their silent embrace. A sharp intake of breath alerted him to Reiza's growing fury. Fadius took another glance to his side, where he noticed frost gathering round the Seer's palms.

The Flame Queen

'Stop it,' he growled, 'We can't fail now just because you can't learn to keep control of yourself.'

Fadius felt the sting of his words as he heard them aloud. His teeth sank into his bottom lip, pinching the delicate flesh. Still, Reiza's powers grew. Fadius knew he needed to create a diversion, lest she ruin the chances of their plan finally coming to fruition. He was about to ask as to Arlas' whereabouts when Eagan's voice echoed across the room.

'What a terrible pity.' Eagan looked to his daughter who had now grown still upon the edge of the bed. 'It seems that your source's mighty spell has worn off.'

Eagan smiled at Ryore's assailant as they made their way back amongst their fellows.

'Good work, Tobias. I've trained you well.'

Eagan clapped the young man on the back. His eyes conveyed his sincere thanks, a pleasant change from the steely gaze he had given Ryore.

'How on Peradon—did you do that?' gasped the emperor. His breathing was ragged, each word sounding like an uphill struggle as he fought his gradual loss of blood. Fadius noticed the king's smile grow brighter.

'Go on Tobias, tell the emperor.'

The young man wore a grin of his own as he gestured around the side of Ryore.

'I had guessed the empress could only attack what Emperor Ryore could see. That would have to leave a blind spot somewhere.'

He paused, as though for dramatic effect, which Fadius found to be rather amusing.

'King Eagan has taught me to channel my inner power. If Ryore couldn't see me coming, then neither would the empress. I had to risk it.'

Fadius saw the sense in Tobias' logic. He'd done whatever he could to forestall the situation. Fadius darted a look back to the Seer, but was met by an empty space that resonated with magic. He only hoped that he could take his brother out before the curse came to claim his soul. Or his fiancée did anything drastic.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Violetta

Feeling jolted back to Violetta. Her body began to reclaim its senses, the wall in her mind beginning to buckle. The cold sensation of air slammed her back into a conscious state. For a while, she could scarcely feel a thing, though her body was vaguely aware of the slick silk covers embracing her form. It took a while for her to register the curved shape of something beside her. It felt familiar; a texture she knew all too well, yet her mind remained unable to place it.

The darkness surrounding her vision ebbed. Violetta reached out with tentative fingers and felt for the unusual object beside her. It felt like a perfect sphere, perhaps a ball of some sort.

The realisation dawned on her as light filtered through the shadows that had formed her cage. *Could it be?* She gripped what she assumed was Lord Jork's gift, the bah he had given her as a child. Violetta felt the love within its craftsmanship and thanked the stars that it was within her reach.

Voices. They echoed around her. So many voices, like individual droplets massing into a flowing river of

conversation. Violetta's ears pricked up, straining to make out a heated exchange of words. Her surroundings, while bestowed with light, remained blurred, surreal. Her joy at occupying real space once more distracted her for the time being. She relished the way that her body felt actual and whole, in a place where life was not a realm of shadows, but an enlightening web of myriad colours.

Violetta's attention returned to the raised voices. She wanted to speak, to tell whoever it was to be still and silent for their voices were pain, ringing in her ears. She worked to dart her tongue across her lips and winced at the sudden swelling she encountered.

An odd taste rested on the buds of her tongue. Blood. It was twinned with the putrid stink of decay close by. Violetta didn't like this. Her slight form began to shake as she held tight to Jork's gift. To be drawn back from the abyss, only to be thrown headlong into more suffering; it was more than Violetta could bear.

A slice of that vile darkness remained. Violetta's focus was on the heated discussion in the near distance. She prepared to speak, pushing her tongue beyond the swollen boundary of her lips when a muffled yelp startled her into silence. It was so close that she could feel the vibrations of the cry. They cut deep into her flesh, jagged knives of sound wrenching her apart.

Violetta couldn't help but wonder who had made it. Part of her hoped it was her cruel husband, perhaps having been struck to the floor by one of his servants who had sought to tip the scales in their favour. It would be about time, too. She cradled Lord Jork's gift in her

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palms, wanting nothing more than to be free of the dense shadows that obscured her vision.

When Violetta thought she could stand it no longer, the remaining shades of darkness lifted. Lighter greys merged with the dark and various shapes and outlines began to form, clearer than she could recall. Her eyes darted among swirls of rich colour as they burst forth, a rainbow of life.

She allowed her eyes sufficient time to focus. Had the colours of the world always been so rich? She pondered this as figures appeared at the edge of her vision. Men sporting crimson armour stood in neat rows, their hands resting on worn leather sheaths. Not a single one of them glanced her way. That's when she spotted Kaitlyn. The young girl was huddled between the armoured troops, white as a sheet, with tears dribbling down her face.

Her gaze trailed back to the men. Violetta studied their eyes, the multitude of colours that they were. It was curious indeed that they should all be filled with the same look of disbelief. Although her neck proved stiff, she managed to turn, to face the object of their awe.

A brutal scene met Violetta's eyes. She gasped at the blood that pooled beneath her, oozing out of her husband's prone form. It was no wonder that Kaitlyn looked terrified. 'Violetta?'

That voice. It was familiar. Violetta struggled to raise her head. Her eyes darted toward the edge of the chamber, where they fell upon her father's face. His skin

was set with lines of worry, his eyes damp and bloodshot, but the smile he wore for her was as broad as any.

'Father.'

Her voice was a strained whisper in a room that had recently fallen into a hush.

'Father, how did I get here?'

Violetta felt the nape of her neck. The skin there prickled in an awful way, as though hundreds of insects were tickling her flesh.

Her eyes travelled across the room, where they fell once more upon the emperor.

'You.' Her lungs expanded as she tested her weight on the balls of her feet. 'You!'

Violetta rounded on her frail husband.

'What did you do to me, Ryore?'

Her words possessed an inner sting that saw the emperor shy away. His lips moved in a clumsy fashion, but no words came forth.

'Pathetic!'

Violetta could feel her blood boiling deep within. Her mind became frenzied and unclear, the first sparks of her power shooting into her veins. As she stood to take the full weight of her body, she found the lines of the room beginning to blur. Air rushed to greet her as she tumbled back toward the floor. She felt Jork's ball slide out of her grasp and shutting her eyes, braced herself for the inevitable.

Violetta expected the floor to rise up and slam against the small of her back. She blinked her eyes open,

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searching for some reason as to why it had not. Two strong arms supported her waist, suspending her mid-fall.

'X-Xyhoni?'

Violetta stared up at the sprite's smiling face. A strange warmth rushed over her as their eyes made contact. 'Xyhoni?' Her father's voice pierced through the somewhat intimate moment. 'But, Xyhoni is right here!'

Violetta hated to part from Xyhoni's emerald gaze. She glanced round from her precarious position, to see another man wearing Xyhoni's face. His fingers brushed against his lips in a plea for her to remain silent.

'Men, after that impostor!' She cried.

Xyhoni's clone shifted his legs and began to flee from the elaborate room. While the real Xyhoni helped to right her, Eagan's troops looked to him for further instruction.

'You heard her, move!'

'Sir!'

Those closest to the exit sprinted after the fake, hoping to catch him before he should change his appearance.

Violetta held tight to Xyhoni's side. She hadn't a clue as to what had transpired here and frankly, she wasn't sure if she wanted to know.

'How did you get here?' Her father gazed upon Xyhoni. He had voiced the very question that had brewed in her mind.

Eagan demanded an honest answer, having already had enough of these games.

'King Aemon was taking a stroll in his garden. I was tending to the plants along with the gardeners when I heard talk of your noble quest.' Xyhoni inclined his head towards the king. 'When I realized where you were headed, I sought a carriage to come to the border. I saw Ryore's guards, all dead.'

Xyhoni's eyes trailed across to where Ryore lay, panting in a pool of his own congealed blood. He remained unable to stand as more of his precious life fluid bled out of his wound.

'What happened here?'

Violetta took a good look at her husband. His skin was as pale as the morning frost, the occasional cry escaping his lips. She stole herself away from Xyhoni, wanting to confront her husband, to look into the eyes of the abusive demon he had become.

'You're a lecherous wretch! That's all you've ever been!' she scolded. Her eyes felt like they were burning within their sockets as she stared him down, letting the toxic anger inside of her build.

'Behold her as I see her, Eagan.'

Ryore directed a snide smile at the king before glaring back at his young wife. As Violetta gazed into those ice blue vessels, her powers pleaded with her for release. She felt her resistance begin to wear and welcomed her birthright.

A glimmer of white light shot into her vision, causing her to abandon her rage. Violetta glanced about in confusion when a large figure collapsed onto her.

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Violetta heard a woman's scream as she flew back with the weight of the figure. Its bulk pressed against her chest, driving the breath from her lungs. It took an eternity for her to fall. Her head smarted, wanning with droplets of blood as it struck the base of the grand four poster.

Violetta clenched her jaw against the blinding pain. Her eyes pulled shut against it, enduring what she could. Then, just as swiftly as it had come, the pain fled. Her eyes unclenched.

A quick glance to her chest saw the bulk of a man lying against her. His weight sank into her, even as she attempted to heave him off. She struggled to pull breath into her lungs when a second figure darted toward her. Several others caught their anns.

Too weak to shift the weight of the man and with her anns buckling, Violetta stayed her hands and waited for her vision to clear. She tried to scream. Truly, she did. Her mouth opened, but no sound came forth.

She stared at the familiar figure sprawled across her chest.

'No,' she gasped, 'No, No!'

She gazed into the worn face below, trying all she could to resist the tear drops massing at her lashes. Eyes she knew all too well stared back. Her father's breathing had become shallow, his pulse faint, but still there. For now.

Guilt flooded her. Violetta couldn't find a single wound upon her father's person. Not one mark of a blade, not a single ounce of spilled blood. In her head,

she blamed herself. Another family member lay dying because of her. 'Not again, please?' she wailed.

Her father reached up to grasp her hand, giving it a weak kiss. *How? How could I have caused this again?* Violetta broke into sobs. She gazed down at yet another member of her family; the final member, in the throws of death at her own expense. Violetta couldn't bear it. She allowed her tears to break free, surrendering herself to her grief. Xyhoni could be heard barking an order at her father's guard as a second figure was seen fleeing the scene.

Violetta couldn't take her eyes away from her father. A part of her pleaded with the Ancient Gods, even though to do so was thought of as treason. She prayed for them to spare his life, to allow such a good man to continue living.

'What's the matter Eagan?' Ryore's sneering voice reached out, burrowing into what little resolve Violetta had left. 'Can't handle the truth of what she is?'

Violetta glared across at Ryore's splayed form. The once plush carpets began to absorb the living stain that he had become.

Violetta felt her father's body begin to shift. His eyes relinquished their hold on her and turned in the direction of the fallen emperor.

'You know nothing of the truth, Ryore.'

Eagan's voice was but a low rumble in the back of his throat. 'Oh, but I do.' Ryore grinned. 'More than you think.'

Violetta wanted to scream. She urged herself to give into that need, to pierce the air with a wail of agony.

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None came. Heavy tear drops were sliding down her father's cheeks. Perhaps if she had listened to her father's warnings, or that terrible day hadn't come to pass, then maybe she would never have thought to pursue Ryore.

Violetta's thoughts quieted as she felt her father grasp her hand in his. He squeezed it, offering what appeared to be a reassuring smile.

'Violetta, look at me.'

The king exhaled with every syllable, lending his speech the impression of a balloon, with more of its air escaping by the passing second.

Violetta returned the gentle squeeze to her father's hand. She searched his eyes as her own teared up, hoping to see some spark of hope.

'Father, you can't leave me.'

She held him close, prepared to beg the heavens for the rest of eternity, if they would only spare him.

'Violetta. You must beware. My time grows short and danger looms.'

'Father, you must tell me what I can do for you. Please.'

The fallen king shook his head. His tears grew fewer as he reached a lined hand to cup his daughter's cheek.

'Flush now, my child. There is nothing that can be done.' 'You mean?'

Violetta recognised a familiar blue glow surfacing in her father's gaze. With a sudden gasp, she connected the two. 'Polar magic?'

Tier lips felt tainted by the poison of those words. While her father struggled to summon the strength to nod, Violetta felt her body begin to tremble all over.

'V-Violetta?'

Tier father's breathing began to slow. She felt his grip on her hand suddenly tighten. Despite being somewhat painful, Violetta endured it and held him close.

'Yes father. I'm here.'

The casual scoffs coming from Ryore's direction were ignored by all those who were present. Although Violetta knew that the impostors were the ones to blame for her father's state, she couldn't shake the feeling that she could have prevented this.

A gurgling sound expelled itself from Eagan's throat. It might have been an attempt at speech, but the combination of his waning strength and cracked lips did nothing to aid Violetta's understanding.

'Here.'

She tilted an ear to her father's mouth, hoping to hear him over Ryore's moans.

'Violetta. I'm so—proud of you.'

Eagan's eyes flickered to and from Ryore as Violetta's tears slipped down past her neck. He stroked the smooth flesh of his daughter's cheek.

'Take care of—your people, and promise me?'

'Anything.'

His chest rattled with a shallow breath.

'Promise me that you'll free yourself.'

He gazed upon her for the last time before his eyes closed and his hands fell limp.

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'Father?'

A numbing sensation enveloped Violetta's mind. She shook the limp form that lay across her, but it was evident that the great Flame King was gone. She couldn't move. Her mind seemed to whistle and chum as her father's final words sank in.

'Promise me you'll free yourself.'

Everything that lay beyond was lost to the trauma of her father's death. Xyhoni spoke to her in gentle tones, but he sounded distant, as though trapped beneath the swift current of the Aum River.

'Father, you can't leave me,' she whimpered.

Her body hung limp as two muscled arms lifted her father's corpse away, before wrapping themselves about her waist. If only she could go back. She would save her father from the culprit's magic and do away with the pathetic half-corpse that remained of her husband.

Violetta was placed upon the edge of the grand four poster. She could feel an intense anger burning throughout her. She would not rest until her father's killers were captured. He was all she'd had left.

Her body stiffened as Xyhoni reached out, to pull her close. She found herself standing, fuelled by the most tremendous rage.

'Vi—Highness! I'm so sorry.'

She barely heard him over her thoughts. *This is it*, she told herself. *My only chance to remove a further evil from the world.*

Violetta tore herself away from the spot where her father had died. She turned to find his gaunt form curled

up upon her marriage bed, where the red silken sheets enveloped him like blood. Violetta wished that he would wake, if only to smile at her once more, yet even she knew that rebirth was beyond the power of magic.

She passed by the remaining troops, who held back the arms of a red eyed Jermise.

'Highness, wait.'

Xyhoni blocked her path, his arms raised as though surrendering to some unseen foe.

'I don't want any trouble.'

Violetta's voice was a whisper that he alone would hear.

'Are you sure you know what you're doing?'

Violetta glanced up at Xyhoni's handsome face. The bright emerald of his eyes pierced her own, a rich hue that could still cause her knees to tremble.

'Yes, I am.'

She pressed a hand against the base of his chest and exerted enough pressure to see him step aside.

Beyond the troops rested the bloodied figure of her husband. Violetta's eyes narrowed. Here lay the man she had openly given herself to, the one person whom she had trusted with her life.

'Pathetic.'

Violetta spat at the floor before his face. She was sure that in other circumstances, Jermise would rebuke her for not acting as the lady she was.

The chill of Ryore's eyes speared through her. Those emotionless pools meant nothing to her now. Her husband had burnt all the bridges he'd created. Now, all

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that was left were the decaying feelings of warmth they'd once shared.

She watched Ryore flail around on the sodden carpets. The look on his face suggested that it hurt more than he let on, but it didn't prevent him from staring her down.

'You have the nerve to label me pathetic?' He attempted to scoff.

Violetta's lips had just begun to part when she felt a familiar presence at her side.

'Xyhoni?'

His warmth was a comfort beyond any other. It enveloped her soul, providing the necessary strength she would need to see this through

'Hey!' Ryore dug his nails into the bloodied carpet. 'Don't touch her! She's mine!'

His last word carried high above the rest. Ryore hauled himself forward, shrieking with the agony of dragging his guts along the blood-sodden mg. Violetta gagged as his wounds split open, further spreading the ghastly stench. 'Stay where you are!'

She raised her hand, calling on the power within.

'You don't scare me any more than your father.'

A grimace of pain haunted Ryore's features as he darted a sideways glance at the king.

'You're not worthy to look upon him!'

Even Violetta was surprised by the harsh tone of her voice. She pulled away from Xyhoni's embrace to retrieve the ball Lord Jork had made her. She paused beside the stiffening form on the bed.

'I love you, Father.' With great sorrow in her heart, she bent over him, planting a kiss on his unscathed cheek. 'I always will.'

Violetta pulled the fluid red folds across her father's face. He'd been a good man and the good deserved to rest in peace. She did not want him to witness what came next.

Trembling with the force of her own emotions, Violetta rounded back on her snivelling husband. Her fists clenched into tight knots as Ryore's taunts rang in her head. *He should be scared*, she thought. He knelt before her, his grievous wounds refusing to heal. Violetta swallowed her fear and embraced the grim sight of him.

'What you did to me was unforgivable.'

She strode forward, slapping him as hard as she could. Rage welled up inside her. She felt it blazing within her eyes, ready to be unleashed upon the world. For once in his life, Ryore appeared to be genuinely afraid.

Violetta decided to relish this moment. She allowed her power to inundate her. There she stood, no longer a meek child, but a beautiful and courageous woman. For the first time in her life, Violetta felt reborn, like a Phoenix rising from the ashes. She feared nothing. Would deny herself nothing. She knew her purpose and it was time to exact it.

It took all of Ryore's strength for him to meet his wife's gaze. Violetta glared down at him.

'You will harm me no longer!'

The sting of her words struck him hard. Ryore watched her with a carnal hatred, his eyes shrinking into

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mean little slits. Violetta allowed her own eyes to drift shut and focused on the power flowing through her veins.

'You will never harm anyone ever again!'

Violetta sucked in a breath, clearing her mind in order to summon the full strength of her core. Lord Jork's gift was still within her grasp, resting in the crook of one arm. She held it close to her heart, to feel the love that lurked within. It had been made solely for her. She could still remember Lord Jork's words.

'Let this always aid you in your troubles. Let it heal any holes in body or spirit.'

Feeling the warmth of its protection, Violetta unleashed her magic.

'Goodbye, Ryore.'

Her right hand began to smoke as merciless flames roared to life. Somewhere in her vision, Xyhoni shrank back from the heat. He said nothing, but watched as Violetta made for her husband, the flames burning ever higher from her shaking palm. Justice would be delivered this day.

Violetta felt the magnificence of her power; saw her palm as a brilliant mass of liquid flame. She was surprised that the heat of the flames didn't touch her, licking her smooth flesh as they did.

Ryore cowered upon the floor. He shielded his eyes from the fierce glow, his cries barely audible over the roaring heat.

'What are you doing, you wretched harpy?'

Violetta scowled at her husband's words. Her flames grew, spiralling into a miniature inferno.

The air behind her began to smoke. A startled cry pierced her lips as two fiery appendages carved their way out of her smooth flesh. Violetta clung tight to Jork's ball, able to dull the pain with whatever magic lay within. She shifted as great folds of skin unravelled themselves from her back.

It was beyond anything Violetta had ever felt. She watched as Ryore's eyes lost their colour. That's when she knew. She had earned the strength she wielded before him, in the form of these flaming wings. She was a true phoenix. Reborn. Unstoppable.

'Highness?'

Xyhoni's voice wavered as he made to reach for Violetta's arm.

'No!' She darted out of the sprite's reach. 'You mustn't touch me!'

Her voice dripped with fear. She couldn't allow Xyhoni to touch these wings. The thought of him doing so sent sirens off within her mind.

'What are those?' he asked.

Violetta strained against a head full of new emotions. Rage and despair battled for dominance as she fought to remain calm.

'That's for the gods to know and me to find out.'

Before Xyhoni could interject, Violetta turned back to Ryore, where she stared into the depths of his soul. There was a darkness there, an unrelenting gloom that sought to govern every living thing.

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'Do you suppose you can hurt me now?' she asked. 'As I stand here before you, radiating with the core of my birth rite.'

Ryore refused to meet her gaze.

'Your powers mean nothing.' His voice was little more than a gasp. 'And I'll always be in your mind.'

Ryore's arrogance failed to mask the quiver in his voice. He hid beneath his bloodied hands, chuckling to himself. Violetta threw a cinder at him.

'Silence!'

She watched as Ryore's body twitched, blood spilling out from his wounds.

'How fitting,' she cried. 'Even your blood wishes to be free from your tyranny.'

This did not have the desired effect. Ryore's pasty skin stretched with his upturned jaw.

'You would know a lot—about blood.'

Fury burned within Violetta. After all the pain this man had caused, all the heartache, and still she was allocated the blame for his own despicable actions. *No more*, she told herself. *I shall not blame myself ever again.*

Violetta held her magic within her centre, focusing her rage and torment at the man sprawled below.

'Just what I thought, you can't—'

Whoosh! Violetta sent her flames arcing round her bloodied husband. Ryore howled as the power of her magic seared into him, making his skin crawl with the feverish heat. His wife smiled as his body writhed about. She wanted his cold heart to boil within his chest, for his veins to expand and tear apart.

Violetta pushed more power into the flames. What was once Ryore's pale skin, now began to flake off in grotesque clumps. She wanted her husband to feel the same pain he'd inflicted on her; a pain so agonizing that it felt like her heart had been ripped from her chest.

Ryore didn't look like he could take much more. He was struggling to breathe, steam pouring off of his charred flesh. Violetta bent down to his level. She drew back a portion of her power, allowing her flames to dim so that Ryore could see her heated expression. She needed him to look at her when she gave him the good news.

Violetta locked eyes with what remained of Ryore's. 'You used your powers on me, didn't you? Before you lost them?'

Violetta could see the fear swimming in his eyes. He refused to look directly at her, but she was certain that was about to change.

'It would seem that you got your wish, at last.'

Ryore's eyes shot up. Once a sea blue, they were now but a clouded white. Violetta wondered if he could see much, if at all. She leant in as close as she dared and cupped a hand across the pain in her stomach.

'I'm pregnant.'

Ryore could only stare. His burned flesh sagged around his jaw line as his clouded eyes searched her for some sign of pretence.

'Let's call them a gift.' From the look in Ryore's eyes, she was certain he believed her. 'Given to us from a dear lord.'

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Violetta held up Jork's ball with her free hand. She supposed she'd understood all along what his gift was for, though on the day that Jermise had returned it to her, something within her mind caught alight.

'Let it aid you. Let it heal. Let its power be the light you will need in the darkest of times. When you're ready, you will know its true purpose. On some level, you already do.'

Violetta had the knowledge inside of her all along. Jork's ball had saved her life when she was but a girl. It had prevented her father from losing all of his family. When she had married Ryore, she'd been forced to leave all she had behind. Including this.

Violetta felt a hand grip hold of her ankle. She glanced down to find Ryore attempting to pull her to the floor. Her foot kicked out, flipping him onto his charred back.

'No more,' she snarled. 'I'm keeping the baby.'

Violetta called upon the lull force of her power.

'And Ryore?' She brought her flaming palm up against his face and stared into the heart of that hideous scar. 'It's a girl.'

Ryore's frown triggered fresh hatred within her. Before he'd had a chance to curse, Violetta drew herself back and without looking, removed her engagement ring.

'Here.'

She tossed it at Ryore's feet and unleashed the frill extent of her magic.

Crimson flames sprung up Violetta's arms and legs, catching alight to her fine garments. Jork's ball remained safe, but her clothes crinkled, all possible force pushed

into her power. Ryore's piercing screams only spurred her on. 'Till death do us part.'



It was at this moment that Xyhoni spun round. Intrigued by the sudden rise in heat, he watched in horror as Ryore's body shrivelled into dust. Above him stood a stranger, with flaming wings like none he had seen.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Violetta

Violetta peered through the haze of smoke. Her eyes flicked to her husband's body, or rather what was left of it, for the once mighty emperor was little more than a pile of ashes on the chamber carpet.

With her task complete, the flames surrounding the empress' body dimmed.

'I killed him.' Her voice didn't possess its usual, familiar lilt. 'I killed a man.'

Violetta's eyes filled with the realization of her actions. She would have been justified to kill Ryore a thousand times over, but the act of taking a life felt wrong.

Violetta swayed where she stood, eyes widening at her now naked flesh. Xyhoni leapt forward as exhaustion took her, managing to catch Jork's ball in the arch of his foot. Violetta felt her wings fold into her flesh as her power slipped back into her core. *Enough*, she thought. *Enough destruction.*

Rough hands surprised the empress as they seized hold of her slender waist. She gazed up to see a familiar set of emerald eyes looking back.

'Xi?'

'Highness, are you all right?'

Xyhoni held her close, stroking her hair as she came to.

'I killed someone.'

'He was going to be killed either way. Your father—'
'Xyhoni bit his tongue. 'Ryore was ordered to death, on account of his crimes.'

Violetta gave a weak nod.

'Xyhoni, I'm—'

'Think nothing of it. I'd do anything to put your mind at ease.' 'No. Xi, I'm—'

A sudden blush bloomed across her skin. Her eyes gestured down to her chest, where her milky flesh reflected the lamp-light.

'Oh! Of course.'

Xyhoni's face had never looked so red. Violetta held her breath as he laid her down on a section of unspoilt carpet. He lifted Jork's gift from the arc of his foot and tucked it in the crook of one arm.

'Better, Highness?'

Violetta nodded. Her legs trembled from his touch. Their eyes locked. Xyhoni's had always been such a beautiful shade, a bright emerald like her guardian tree. Both had sheltered her from terrible things. The pair stared at each other, as if searching one another's souls.

Violetta rose from the carpet, the soles of her feet brushing the softer sections.

'Please, can I?'

Her eyes flickered toward the ball in Xyhoni's arms.

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'Of course.'

He extended his hand, allowing the ball to slip between Violetta's palms.

'Thank you.' She glanced down at it, astounded by the strength of its magic. Her eyes fixed back on Xyhoni. 'I guess you never know what will free you.'

Violetta glanced back to where her father lay with the crimson sheets pulled across his cold form. A hand caught hold of her chin and tilted her head up, to face Xyhoni. His thumb brushed her forming tear-drops away as she stared into his emerald eyes.

Violetta could feel something stirring within her. A surge of warmth jolted her nerves like a lightning bolt inside of her chest. Her lips subconsciously drifted toward Xyhoni's.

'Xi?'

His cheeks looked to have grown hot as he too began to drift toward her.

'Yes?'

'Excuse me, Highness!'

Violetta's eyes darted across the room. Jermise stood with her arms folded, her eyes red rimmed from the tears she'd shed. Violetta had forgotten they weren't the only two people left in the room. She glanced back to where her father lay beneath the silken bed-coverings.

Violetta knew that funeral arrangements would have to be made. She stepped forward, then, as if only just remembering, she rounded back on Xyhoni. His eyes were so bright. So beautiful. So loving. Violetta brought

Dax Munro

a hand up to touch the swell of his chest and in a breathless whisper she said, 'Call me Vi.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Approaching Midnight

Fadius

Keeep up.' Fadius ran ahead of Reiza, his words lost on the surging wind. They'd managed to lose the Flame Realm guards a few miles back whilst weaving in between the branches of the ancient maze.

'Wait.'

Reiza's voice failed to rise above the violent drumming of Fadius' heart. The pair raced past stretches of cobbled wall, the torches which were housed there having momentarily burned out. Fadius focused on the little light given by the twin moons.

They needed to return to the cave, to go into hiding until the commotion had passed. He leaped over a small hump of rock, not needing to see where he was going. Fear drove him in the right direction.

'Fadius. The cave is—up ahead—to your left.'

Fadius darted his gaze sideways. A rocky outcropping was barely visible amongst the ancient ruins.

He edged left, slowing just enough to grasp Reiza's hand when vicious growls sounded behind.

'Hurry!'

Before Reiza had time to think, Fadius sprinted the final distance, pulling her along in his wake.

Fadius leaped in through the cave's mouth. It swallowed them whole, burying them in an avalanche of darkness. He released Reiza's hand, pressing his own against the jagged rock as he struggled to pull in a breath.

'We did it. It's over.'

'Back at last?'

A familiar voice swept through the gloom. Its sheer depth sent an echo booming through the night.

'Arlas?'

A pair of glowing eyes opened before them, like burning coals in the pit of a fire.

'Well, how did it go? I assume from your demeanour that our plan was a success?'

'Our plan?'

Fadius glared through the gloom. With a sudden flash and low muttering appeared Reiza's palm, rippling with blue flames.

'Better?' she asked.

'Much.'

The echo of cracking knuckles filled the cave.

'You've been gone for some time,' seethed Reiza. 'Just where have you been?'

The light of the orb streamed across Arlas' face, casting shadows along his jaw. He wore an ever-widening grin, which sent Fadius' skin crawling all over.

The Flame Queen

'I had some important matters to attend to.' He brushed their concerns aside, inspecting his fingers for signs of dirt. 'He is gone, then? At last?'

'Yes, although Reiza—'

Fadius felt his mouth run dry. He had intended to congratulate his fiancée on her part, but when he looked her way, his heart fell. Reiza's head was bowed, her body trembling with the force of her stifled sobs.

'Darling, what's wrong?'

The Seer pressed herself tight against the cave wall. Her eyes were distant, as though peering into another world.

Fadius' heart ached for his fiancée. He crept over to where she rested, unsure if touching her would be ideal at this moment. Nevertheless, he tried to embrace her.

'Please Fadius, leave me alone.'

Reiza wrenched his hands away, whimpering into the base of her chest. Fadius refused to move. He held his position, waiting for her sobbing to slow.

'You were still in love with him, weren't you?'

He did his best to keep any anger from his voice. He was more concerned about Reiza's feelings.

Fadius supposed most men would grow furious at the idea of their mate suppressing affections for another man, even more so were that man a brother. However, Fadius had always known he would rank second best. The truth? He didn't care. He adored the woman that knelt before him, even if they had been lumped together due to their past indiscretions. She was an enchanting

and, at times, terrifying creature, yet still his heart went out to her. A troubled Seer. The last of her kind.

When Reiza failed to provide him an answer, Fadius reached a hand out for her chin. He grasped the soft curve of her flesh, tilting her head so she could face him. A set of pale blue eyes avoided his gaze.

Fadius could see the sorrow buried deep in her heart, could feel it feeding on her like a wretched parasite. The puckered split of her lips trembled and surrendered a few words, choked with sobs.

'Yes. I was in love with him.' Every syllable was laced with pain. 'I'm sorry.'

These were words that Fadius had fully expected, yet for once, he found himself shedding a tear.

'I don't want your apologies.' He used his hand to scourer the dew from his eyes. 'I just want you.'

He reached his other hand up to the back of her head, to run his rough fingers through the silk of her hair. Their lips drifted inwards, drawing together like powerful magnets.

Fadius pulled back, his eyes wide.

'Darling?' Reiza suppressed a further sniffle.

The dank cave felt different to Fadius; there was something coming for them, but what? Before Reiza could ask again, he pressed a finger to her lips. He craned his neck, searching for Arlas' current position.

There was no sign of Arlas' presence among them. Even the tingling sensation of his magic had withdrawn. Fadius tilted his head and listened to the surrounding tunnels when Reiza began to squirm in his grip.

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'Shh, we're not alone,' he warned. Fadius winced as his whisper carried on the foul air. 'Quick. The orb.'

Reiza untangled herself from the prince's limbs and began drawing her power back into herself. The light orb flickered and died where it sat. Fadius lent his fiancée a weak smile, just as muffled footsteps converged up ahead. It was the sound of men marching in single file.

Fadius ushered Reiza into one of the darker corners of the cave, where a jagged pillar of rock reached into the ceiling. They crouched behind it, waiting for the men to pass. Fadius had been about to suggest that his fiancée keep quiet when a hand clamped itself over his mouth.

'Over here, I'm sure I heard voices.'

Fadius tilted his head to peer round the pillar. The slight form of a man lumbered into view. A small scruff of hair peered out from the front of his helmet as he tried to maintain some level of stealth. Fadius felt a wave of dread wash over him. He struggled beneath Reiza's grip, adamant not to let her be snatched away by a Flame Realm pawn.

Reiza's grip tightened across his jaw, her sharp nails biting into flesh, releasing a sobering stab of pain. Fadius grit his teeth to prevent himself from crying out. He darted a glance back to the creeping man, whose body was little more than a dark shape amongst the gloom. The guard stumbled in the dark, calling to others for assistance.

Fadius fought to still himself. If they were to escape from this situation unharmed, then they would need to save their strength.

'Hey, over here!'

Fadius' heart sank as torchlight glinted overhead. He watched a further two shadows come bustling over, clearly eager to finish their search.

'Anything?'

The first man shook his head.

'Not yet, but—'

The silence that ensued was nothing short of agony. Where there had previously been the faint patter of footsteps on dirt, was the sound of earth being scraped at by nails.

'Could it be a sign?' asked one of the men.

The tufted hair of the first spilled forward as he knelt to inspect something. He brushed the tuft away with the side of his wrist, his other hand trembling toward the earth.

'It's hard to tell. Pass me a torch.'

One of his fellows obliged and handed over a flickering wooden beam. In that moment, Fadius could just about make out the first man's face. Jet eyes sparkled in their sockets, reflecting the warm glow of the fire. He stared past the bridge of a wide-sloping nose, to whatever trifle had caught his fancy.

Reiza's hand slipped from its perch upon Fadius' lips. His eyes darted to her own, searching her for an explanation when a pale glow met his eyes. He wanted to scream at her, to convince her that whatever she was thinking could not possibly help them.

Reiza leered out from their place in the shadows. Her eyes narrowed into glittering daggers, threatening to

The Flame Queen

tear apart the intruders before them. Fadius understood. This had become their home and now the enemy rummaged through it at will. He joined Reiza to peer back across the hovel.

Men ransacked their makeshift camp. Sweat slicked fingers smudged the Seer's sacred books, her ritual circles prodded at with no more care than a child running with a crystal vase. Fadius knew what she was planning. Reiza's eyes burned bright enough to make clear her intentions, as did the pale shimmer of frost surrounding her palm. The way the troop's hands trailed along her prized possessions; it appeared to rouse a nausea in her that could not be stomached.

Reiza raised her hand, forming a curse Fadius had seen her use before.

'No.'

He grabbed a hold of Reiza's fists, forcing them down where they quivered in rage. Fadius struggled to restrain her. He was certain they had been overheard and couldn't risk creating any further noise. He darted a quick glance back into the cave. The first man was still knelt on the floor, studying one of Reiza's spells. As for his fellows, they appeared to have vanished.

The tension in Fadius' anns slackened. He'd been so intent on making sure they were safe that he hadn't noticed his fiancee cowering in the gloom. She appeared to be fighting against her rage, shivering as she began siphoning her magic back into her core. Her eyes were still fixed on the same spot.

'My creations,' she whispered. 'He's going to destroy them.'

Fadius craned his neck back toward the pillar. She was right. From the way the cave floor grumbled, the first man's colleagues had returned. They appeared in the distance and came to kneel beside him in the dirt, inspecting a collection of ancient designs.

'As long as they can't translate it,' whispered Reiza.

The young Seer leant close to her love, whispering so only Fadius could hear. He held her up against the cave wall, willing her legs to cease their infernal shaking. He prepared to slap her if need be, if only to shock her out of it. He readied himself when something awoke from within his core. It surged through him, searing through his flesh and bone.

Fadius' eyes roved across his body, to settle on the quivering mass that had become of him. He couldn't understand it. His bones seared with a merciless heat, limbs chattering within their sockets.

'Oh, gods.'

'It has come for us, darling,' whispered Reiza.

There was a haunting quality to her voice. Fadius knew what he would find when he turned to face her, but that didn't make it any less terrible. His fiancée stared, eyes wide and unblinking.

'We failed.'

Fadius whipped his hand across her mouth. He didn't understand. Failed? In their task?

'But, we killed Ryore,' he whispered.

The Flame Queen

Reiza's own hand pulled at his until it relinquished its grip on her.

'Silence won't help us now, my dear.' A flare of light drew Fadius' eyes. 'They will burn it all. They feel no remorse.'

Her predictions had always been unsettling, but the raging heat that was pouring through him made this one all the more terrifying.

The pair watched the men from their place in the shadows as they drew themselves up. One by one they turned, glaring in Fadius' direction.

Fadius felt the arch of his back trace the crooked ridges of the cave wall as violent shivers seized his spine. His legs crumpled from beneath him. Dark stone rushed up, crunching against his bare face.

This couldn't be the end. Fadius surrendered himself to a wail of agony and prayed that Arlas would return in time to correct this mistake.

'We completed our task,' he whimpered, 'Why now do you condemn me, Father?'

Reiza loomed over him. She struggled to remain upright, but did so with every ounce of her remaining strength.

'No. We didn't. One of Eagan's men completed it for us.' Those creepy white eyes bore into the prince's soul. 'And so, our lives are forfeit.'

Arlas had left them at a time of great danger. Maybe he knew all along that they were doomed. Fadius' vision began to fade at the edges. He could still see the pale glow of Reiza's hands as she began to advance on the waiting

troops. The curse hadn't lifted after all. Fadius struggled to move his arms. His head seemed to be weighed down; with what, he couldn't tell. He wished he could look upon Reiza's beautiful smile, or to hold her hand as the room darkened around him. As the cave exploded in a flash of white light, Fadius' vision left him for good.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

YEAR C-9 Month 1/10

Violetta

Violetta sat upon the golden bench, erected in honour of her impending coronation. For now, she rested in an empty grove as the warm wind of her home Realm caressed her flesh.

A week had stretched by since she'd watched the light fade from her father's eyes. A week since her powers had taken on a whole new form. She had heard whispers circling around her ever since. Some referred to her as a madwoman, hell bent on reducing all people to ash. Others had taken to calling her *The Phoenix*, a woman reborn from the ashes of sin.

Violetta had since ordered her husband's ashes to be stored within a sacred urn the kind often used for deceased rulers. Her order saw them locked away within his tower, with a series of charms and guards posted at all times, in the event that someone attempted the impossible.

The fact that she was capable of murder terrified Violetta. She had felt no loss for such a twisted man as

Ryore. Neither had his own people. On the contrary, they seemed happy to be free of his oppressive rule and were looking forward to a brighter future.

It was hard for Violetta to admit, but it was the pretence of a lover that she would miss; of the well-rounded gentleman who'd danced and caressed her. For the man who, albeit briefly, had once treated her like a lady. Now, she would never know if that man had been real.

Violetta put such thoughts aside. The week since then had been spent fixing things, starting with the dismissal of her husband's most senior staff. The others she'd kept on, bringing them new clothes and refurbishing their living quarters. Kaitlyn had been brought to work at the Flame Palace, along with young Allistair. That the two had become fast friends in such a short while had not surprised her.

Kaitlyn had needed a friend her age. She was a polite and courteous young woman and always smiled whenever she saw Violetta in passing. When she played with Allistair, it were as if Violetta was watching younger versions of herself and Darius.

'Highness.'

Violetta started, gripping the golden bench for support.

'Oh, Xyhoni. Forgive me.'

Her eyes alighted on his olive skin. Copper lashes fluttered above his emerald eyes with a warmth that caused her heart to swell.

The Flame Queen

'They're ready for you now, for your father.' A thin smile creased his lips.

'Understood.'

Violetta forced a cleansing breath into her lungs and bid herself to rise from the makeshift throne.

Xyhoni had left the Earth Realm for now, until such a time as King Aemon commanded his return. He now stood as Violetta's personal guard. While there were some who would gladly see Violetta dead, her dearest friend had pledged his life to the defence of her own.

Violetta was glad to have chosen the Flame Gardens for the joint ceremony that day. They offered much in terms of beauty, considering the grim nature of the occasion. She made the short walk across the lawns, with Xyhoni supporting her most of the way.

She felt strangely at ease in his presence, a familiar warmth stirring within her heart. *What am I thinking? We could never!* Violetta knew how people would feel if they joined in union. It didn't matter that Ryore had been a monster. Marriage was seen as eternally sacred and until a significant portion of time had passed, there was nothing she could do to sway public opinion.

Violetta found peace in Xyhoni's reassuring smile as they unclasped hands and stepped through a traditional arch of roses. The beauty of the scene brought her to tears. Exotic plants bloomed all around, their sweet aromas lingering in the most resistant of noses.

Jermise had helped her to arrange the entire affair. The guest-list was small, only close friends and allied dignitaries who sat atop pews of freshly carved oak.

Violetta had wanted her father's final farewell to be just as he was in life; modest, grand, and undeniably full of love. She watched the solemn pallbearers scuffling away down the red velvet carpet, which had been laid in honour of an old pet name. King Eagan, *The Red*, a tribute to his exemplary skill with blades.

Violetta quelled another flow of tears. She could only assume that the pallbearers had already brought out her father's casket, to be loaded onto a wooden pedestal, giving the guests ample time to say their goodbyes.

Xyhoni guided her before the sea of pews. It was true that there couldn't have been more than fifty people in attendance, yet Violetta felt the lacquered seats beginning to close in on her, trapping her in an everlasting cycle of death. Several guests kept their eyes on the floor, not wishing to look into the eyes of someone so ruthless.

Violetta tried to convince herself that it was all in her head when she caught faint snatches of a conversation.

'Yes, the daughter of our mighty king. They say she made a deal with the dark prince and now look at her, about to be coronated at her own father's funeral.'

'I heard those wings open at the light of the full moon and rip helpless citizens apart.'

Violetta bit into her lip. Dread gnawed at her, like some feral rodent chewing through the veins of her racing heart. She turned her head a little to the right, hoping to be spared from her guest's scorn, and was met head on by her father's coffin.

The Flame Queen

It had been Violetta's idea to hold the coronation and funeral together. That way, her father could watch her take flight as his rightful heir. She wondered if he would have approved. The glint of pride in Xyhoni's eyes told her he would have, but it didn't stop her guest's sly tongues.

Her attention turned to her father's crimson tomb. Amid Violetta's conflicting emotions, she was at least glad that her father's final abode would help him to rest comfortably; a gift from a loving daughter, for he who had loved and cherished her until his final breath.

Violetta allowed herself to be brought before her father's casket. The top half had already been lifted open. She braced herself to peer into his depths.

Out of respect for such private a moment, Xyhoni adjourned to the side of the display. Violetta clenched her eyes shut, forcing a breath into her lungs, before she felt safe enough to let them blink open. There, amongst a sea of ivory silk, lay the body that had once housed her father's spirit.

It didn't feel real. Any of it. Violetta gazed down at her father, fitted as he was in his finest robes, his skin fresh and almost back to the peachy shade it had been in life. It felt as though this were the first time she'd seen him, so still, silent. A rose bush framing his still form brought his cheeks some much needed colour.

He looked so peaceful in death. That's what shocked her. Violetta reached out, tentative at first and cupped the side of her father's face. Cold flesh greeted her fingertips. It was true. This couldn't possibly be a dream.

'Oh, Father.' She ran her hand along the moulding of his jawline. 'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry,' she wailed.

Xyhoni took this as his cue to step in. He reached for Violetta's hand, brushing the silken skin with his own.

Violetta was glad of his company. Of all the days she would need him, this one possessed an urgency she could not deny. She might appear to be calm and composed for the sake of her guests, but inside, her heart was tearing anew.

'Highness.' Xyhoni brought a hand to rest on her shoulder. 'I think this may be enough for now.'

Violetta knew that his advice was sound. Part of her refused the idea of leaving her father's side, but as the warmth of Xyhoni's touch kicked in, her resistance began to ebb.

Xyhoni led her away from her father's casket, as well as the leering eyes of her guests. Violetta knew that this was her reality now and she had to accept it, whether she wanted to or not. The moment she was out of sight, people began to approach her father's casket.

Violetta pulled Xyhoni close. She embraced him as one would an old friend and hoped that those invited, should they see, would not chastise her for wanting such comfort. It was, after all, an occasion that warranted such emotional support.

Xyhoni held Violetta steady. They looked on together, through the foliage, as the guests approached Eagan's lifeless form. Some merely bowed to the coffin, unsure of what to do or say lest they risk angering the king's spirit. A few, who were still stricken by their grief,

The Flame Queen

had engaged in full blown conversations with the deceased.

'They seem to think he can still hear them.' Xyhoni released her from the embrace they'd shared. 'It certainly makes you wonder, Vi.'

'Yes, it does.'

A dark figure approached the side of the casket. Violetta watched as Lord Jork threw himself upon his dear friend, his repeated apologies strained with the intensity of his emotions. The guards on duty peered round at Xyhoni and he in turn glanced at Violetta.

'Leave him,' she commanded. 'He has earned his time alone with my father.'

'Of course.'

Xyhoni held up his palm to the waiting guards before returning his attention to Violetta.

'Vi, are you sure you can give the speech today? What with your coronation and—it all seems a bit much.'

Violetta couldn't help but wonder if he was right. It was a lot to ask of anyone, much less herself in her present condition. She felt for the slight swell which lay just below her stomach. It may not have been as prominent as expected, but she could feel the life growing within her.

Only two of the six months of her pregnancy remained. Despite the nature of her child's late father, Violetta did not regret the choice she was making. This baby was hers.

The peal of bells sounded above the gardens, filling the air with their loathsome shrieks.

'It is time.'

Violetta tensed. She had known Xyhoni would have to leave her at some point, but today of all days? *No, enough.* She drew in a breath and began the slow walk back to her father's casket.

Xyhoni retreated into the pews. Violetta ached to call him back. She hated being without his touch, even if it were just for a few moments. Her gaze swept over the wooden pews. One by one, the guests bowed their heads, a great mark of respect, not just for the ruler who had passed on to another life, but for the only child he had left behind. 'Highness!'

Violetta was almost upon the golden bench when a figure in navy came striding toward her. Tobias Baynerd wore a weak smile as he reached her side. Late guard to her father, he had been the one to free her from her hypnotised state.

'Tobias, you're looking well.'

Violetta pressed the base of her palm against his, in greeting.

Since Ryore's death, Tobias had been put on a pedestal, praised for his actions in defence of the crown. 'My deepest condolences on this sad day, your Highness.' Tobias gave his customary bow. 'But, congratulations on this, the day of your coronation.'

His stoic expression did little to convey such adoration.

'You're so formal today, Tobias. Come, let us talk before the service begins.'

Violetta shot Xyhoni a look of reassurance, to which he dipped his head in kind.

The Flame Queen

'Are you enjoying the fame that playing the hero has brought you?'

Violetta exited through the rose-strewn arch. She had only meant to tease. It was no secret that Tobias had recently been awarded a medal for bravery, which now dangled past the broad slope of his shoulders.

Noticing the way the young man's brows drew inward, she shifted on the balls of her feet.

'Come now, you know how much I appreciate what you did.'

It was no exaggeration. Tobias had probably saved her life that day. Violetta had not thought a simple medal to be enough of a repayment for such heroics.

Having honoured her father's request in appointing herself as his successor, there would be a vacancy left in the grand Frost Realm. With no sign of the crowned prince arriving to claim his title, Tobias had been the logical choice.

The pair halted just out of reach of the funeral attendees.

'Highness. May I request the honour to offer you my embrace?'

Tobias watched as her eyes glinted with several tears.

'You may.'

With a nod, Tobias extended his arms, swooping her up in a firm hug.

Violetta fell into his chest. The warmth of him was wonderful, his hugs so alike her father's. She missed the feel of them; of the arms that had once held her close and of the place where she had grown to be loved.

'You must be careful, Highness.'

Violetta felt her chest constrict.

'Tobias, what are you—'

'Shh, evil is watching.'

Violetta took several measured breaths. Surely all evil had now been expelled from her life. What else could possibly seek to plague her?

Violetta didn't offer to test her voice. Tobias understood the evils she'd already faced in the Frost Realm. It was these evils that had prompted her to refuse their throne. She needed space to distance herself from the bitterness that had gorged on her soul.

'Do you know the evil of which I speak?' asked Tobias. Violetta nodded.

'Partly. You're referring to the creatures you saw, that night at Ryore's estate.'

Tobias shook his head.

'If only it were that simple.'

He held Violetta close, stroking the silken waves of her hair.

It frightened her to imagine what he must have seen. The idea of corpses walking freely amongst them chilled her to the bone.

'I must go.'

Violetta felt reluctance burn within as Tobias began to retract his arms. She hated to part from something that reminded her so much of her father.

'But—'

Tobias placed a finger against her lips.

The Flame Queen

'If I could hold you all day and remind you of him, then rest assured that I would Highness, but duty calls.'

Violetta understood. She turned on her heel, striding back toward the flowered arch where her guests would be awaiting her speech.

'Highness, one last thing. Jermise, how is she?' Violetta reflected on his question, but was afraid that she lacked an answer. She had seen little of her confidant for several days.

'She's having trouble adjusting.'

Violetta knew it was an understatement. Jermise hadn't been herself from the moment that King Eagan had died. Violetta was grateful to see a hint of understanding in the young man's eyes.

'Well, time for your speech. Knock them dead.'

It felt like a brand had been driven into Violetta's insides. She could see that Tobias regretted his choice of phrase from the moment it had escaped his lips.

Tobias had given her a lot to think about. If the danger Ryore presented was gone, then this evil that he spoke of clearly stemmed from a source unknown to her. But what would it have to do with those foul demons? Her grip on her emotions tightened as she attempted to put his words and his warning from her mind.

Violetta padded through the rose arch, her heart hammering against her ribs. She was greeted with crude stares and suspecting eyes as she made her way back to her father's casket. King Eagan had been an amazing public speaker. He was articulate, witty: everything that the job required. Now it was her turn.

Xyhani had instructed the pallbearers to set the golden bench down beside the casket. Once Violetta had spent one final moment with her father, she turned and lowered herself into the makeshift throne, where she shifted beneath the watchful gaze of her guests.

Lord Jork, her father's childhood friend, was perched upon the edge of his seat. Violetta spied her family ring, poised upon a red velvet cushion within his lap. *So much responsibility*, echoed a voice in her head. She wondered if she'd ever feel ready to accept such a burden.

Violetta jumped when a hand fell upon her own.

'I thought you could use a hand,' came a familiar voice. 'This one at least.'

Five sprightly digits squeezed her own. Violetta gazed into a face she knew by heart. She swelled with confidence, thankful for the reassurance of Xyhani's presence beside her. With one last deep breath, she began her speech.

'Good day to you all, friends, allied dignitaries.' The gardens fell silent. 'For all of you who knew my father, King Eagan Flame II, I know that we can all agree that he was a most kind and courteous man, as gentle and as caring as anyone could be. He was intelligent and often stubborn, but he never gave up on anyone. Including me.'

Violetta paused as a flashback of her father's face filled her mind. She could see the lines etched so clearly in his skin that all she could think of was how much she longed to reach out and touch him; to run her fingers along every delicate crease. She shook the vision of her father aside. *Breathe*, came a voice in her mind.

The Flame Queen

'My father was a wise man. He taught me most of what I know. We both believed that it was our people who should be put first and that family and love are two of the greatest assets a person can have.'

At her words, a cheer rose from the throng of guests. Violetta smiled through the pain she felt in her heart.

'King Eagan's heart was full of love. If you came to him in poverty, he would offer you a job, while sending out workers to build you a proper residence. He had many strengths of character, but one of his greatest was his ability to pull through for both himself and for those in need.'

There came another cheer as Lord Jork rose from his seat. He stepped forward, holding her inheritance upon the same red velvet cushion.

Violetta reached down to feel the swell of her stomach. 'When I have a family, I hope that my children will be just as wise and compassionate as my father was.'

Jork knelt before the golden bench. Violetta didn't know if she was ready to take her father's place. Although he was gone from this world, he had taught her many wonderful things. He had taught her how to bear the strength of an anny. Without his guidance, she felt lost. Alone. She reminded herself that this was not the case. She had plenty of people around to offer words of wisdom and encouragement.

Violetta glanced down at her ancestor's ring glistening on its crimson perch.

'Today, we bow our heads to my dearly departed father and begin the cycle of leadership anew.'

Pale fingers reached for the ring, curling round in order to present it to her. Violetta's hand lifted in expectation of Jork's next action. He grasped her right index finger and began to slide the precious ruby home. She watched him turn to her guests, his arms raised toward the heavens.

'Your graces and all else here present, may I present to you your new queen.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Month 2/10

Violetta

Violetta watched a dark figure being led through the gardens below. Her father's study had become her safe space, a place where she alone could exist in peace. The bold blues and pinks of plant life exploded in her vision, but there was to be no distracting her from the approaching quarry.

Weeks of grieving had failed to mend the young queen's heart. Her father's funeral was but a distant memory. Without him here to guide her, she felt overwhelmed. There were so many new responsibilities for her to consider, starting with Prince Arlas' interrogation.

It was lucky that the guards had come upon Arlas when they did. They'd found him fleeing from a sacred cave, having left two others to suffer mysterious deaths.

Violetta's mind clouded with the fury she felt toward him. She could make out the polished metal of the chains Arlas wore. They bit into his gaunt flesh, raising beads of scarlet fluid to the surface.

Even from here, she could feel the ominous tingling that preceded him. How was she to deal with such a monster? Violetta rested her head within her hands. Perhaps her father had been right. Perhaps she did need someone to support her reign, an advisor to guide her through the daily motions of this new life.

Violetta allowed herself to drift off with the birds that passed by the window. They looked so free up there in the sky, their feathers streamlined in the breeze. She reached around her swollen stomach, thinking of the wondrous creation that lay within.

'Will you be a free spirit?' she wondered aloud.

Her child kicked out in its slumber, sending ripples flowing over the hard bump of flesh.

'Excuse me, Highness?'

Violetta cried out at hearing the unexpected voice. Her chair began to topple back, threatening to send both she and her unborn child crashing to the floor. With a burst of strength, she managed to grip onto a side table, pulling herself to her feet just in time.

The chair she'd been sitting on met the floor with a resounding crash.

'Yes,' she panted, 'do come in.'

The door to the study opened wide, revealing a small, rounded face.

'Allistair.' Violetta smiled. 'What news have you brought me?'

The young boy struggled to look up at her. He looked every bit as anxious as he had under her husband's reign.

The Flame Queen

'Allistair, what is it? What's wrong?'

The boy's hands fumbled with the sleeves of his tunic. His eyes grew wet, red outer circles beginning to form.

'I'm sorry, my queen.'

Violetta did her best to appear friendly. She knew the boy had resented her former husband, just as she had come to.

'I have n-news,' he stammered, 'B-but, its n-not good.'

Violetta beckoned him close. She brought Allistair beneath the protection of her arm and guided him to an armchair nearby.

'Here.'

Allistair looked most nervous to be in her presence, but then a childhood of threats had most likely put him off royalty. He did his best to make himself comfortable, leaning back in the chair as he spoke.

'My queen, as you may have noticed, we have captured Prince Arlas.'

Violetta nodded. She wondered where Allistair was going with this when his lips peeled open a second time.

'We believe he knows who killed your father.'

While Violetta's face remained blank, her heart was thundering out of control.

'And?'

'The guards found evidence of ancient magic. The dark kind.'

Violetta's mind did somersaults. *Father's killers? Ancient magic?*

She asked herself if this were a dream, or if fate had truly been sealed for her foes.

'If it please you my queen, Lord Jork has demanded that his brother be drained.'

Violetta shuddered. There was no-one in all of Peradon that she would wish to be drained of their life force. When it came to an Immortal soul like Arlas, nobody knew the intended result.

'Lord Jork asked me if you'd like to be there when they—do it.'

The boy's tone possessed the soft quality of childhood, yet held linn in the face of his ruler.

Violetta stood, advancing once more toward the young man. She moved closer this time, embracing him as a mother would.

'It's okay,' she assured him. 'You can cry if you need to.' Allistair's eyes looked almost swollen with the way they seemed to hold back tears. Then, almost like magic, he choked down a sob and collapsed into her loving arms.

Violetta cradled the boy, allowing him to let the full force of his emotion out. She was glad to be different from his previous master. She provided an essential comfort that Allistair had failed to receive from Ryore. Such compassion was learned from her late father. It had been one of his greatest strengths and would also serve as one of hers.

Violetta raked her fingers through the boy's locks.

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'I do not wish to go to a man's execution.' She lifted his chin to find his bleary eyes staring into hers. 'Neither should you.' Allistair nodded his understanding.

'There is one thing I would like though.' She released her grip on the boy's chin, watching the flicker of life in his eyes. 'I wish to look into Arlas' eyes one last time.'



The dungeon gloom did little to conceal the rotting filth which lurked in its walls. Two guards stood either side of the entrance. They clamped sweet-smelling rags over their noses, in a vain attempt to ward off the profound stink which made the place unbearable.

Violetta entered, *at her own risk*, or so the guards said. She refused to be intimidated and would no longer shy away from the demons of her past. Even the scurrying of the rats that were known to frequent the cells could not deter her from the path she was leading. It was just another incentive for traitors to talk.

'Thank you both, but I think it would be wise for you to step outside.'

She nodded to the men either side of her. Their eyes glinted with an unspoken hope, but no sooner had she spoken, did they begin to protest.

'No, we couldn't let you alone, Highness.'

His comrade muttered a similar remark from beneath his rag. 'Actually, if it's all right by you gentleman, I'd like to take it from here.'

Xyhoni appeared from the arched entrance, his face set in a mask of authority. The guards darted another glance back to their queen. With a final nod, they began to shift. Violetta almost found it amusing; the way they paced their steps, hanging back every few seconds. She knew, as well as they did, that they wished for nothing more than to be free of the loathsome stench of the dungeons.

With the guards out of ear-shot, Xyhoni offered his arm to his queen. Violetta took it with a gentle smile and began to descend the steep stairway.

The darkness stretched out before them, broken only by the occasional flickering torch.

'Vi, did you not want Jermise with you?'

Violetta could feel Xyhoni's eyes on her. She chose to remain silent as she manoeuvred her swollen form down the roughly hewn steps.

'I don't want her down here.'

The queen's words were cold. Emotionless.

'But—'

'She's endured enough for the time being.'

Violetta hadn't wished to snap at him, but this was a topic that was best left alone. Xyhoni gave her a knowing look as though he sensed what she was doing. She had found herself creating a new mindset, one that could deal with their emotionally disturbed villain.

'Highness!'

Violetta floated through the air, tumbling faster than she could have imagined. Something seized hold of her

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arms. She stared down the remaining steps, a trickle of perspiration caught between her breasts.

'Are you all right?'

It was Xyhoni's arms that she had felt, grasping hold of her at the final moment before she would have fallen to her death. Violetta fell into his arms. Her chest tightened with a rhythmic pain as she sought to bring the breath back to her lungs. Her face rested a scant inch before his. They were so close that Violetta could have reached out with her lips and drawn him to her. She could feel heat radiating from him; waves of rolling desire that she would have been only too happy to indulge herself in. If only she could.

Xyhoni's eyes searched hers, wanting more. Violetta resisted. He looked like he wanted to ravish her, to press himself against her most intimate parts. Alas, Xyhoni had a duty to protect her. Violetta watched his lips quiver, breaking open to form soft spoken words.

'Vi.' He must have sensed her resistance as his hands withdrew from around her shaking form, to settle her back on the winding staircase.

'I need to tell you something.'

He reached out, brushing her cheek with his hand.

'Not interrupting, I trust?'

That voice. Violetta thought of the mother and brother she had lost when so young. Every one of her darkest memories seemed to burn in her mind at the sound of it.

Xyhoni supported her down the remaining steps, where he helped her rest against one of the cooler walls.

It took time for their eyes to adjust to the gloom. That's when Violetta saw him, the vile creature she was certain had caused her childhood to fall into chaos.

The cells were easy enough to make out in the gloom. They stood in a large block, pulsing with an unseen magical force. Only one could be seen occupied.

'Arlas.'

The prince's arms gripped the bars of his squalid prison. Violetta watched the cold iron pressing into his flesh and wondered if it hurt at all.

'*Prince* Arlas,' the prisoner corrected.

Violetta peered at him through the dark. He looked exhausted, every inch of his body dripping with sweat. 'Prince Arlas.' Violetta allowed her words to linger in the stale air. 'Enjoying the cells my late father installed?'

She saw him sneer as she closed the distance to the cell.

Arlas made for a sour-faced villain. His beady red eyes followed the slightest movement, his teeth (or were they fangs?) bared in a monstrous fashion. Little did their prisoner know that Violetta had invited his brother, Lord Jork, to watch the interrogation from the sidelines. She was sure that he was well hidden by now and ready to act as her official witness to Arlas' confession.

Violetta hovered before the cell, the rancid scent of the dungeons invading her nose.

'Highness, do you wish to interrogate Arlas alone?' asked Xyhoni.

Violetta stared at the man leering out at her. He gripped the bars of his cage with such intensity that his

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knuckles drained of what little colour they'd had. The same gruesome smile exposed the broken shards of his teeth that once a pearly white, had now faded to a dull ivory.

Violetta glanced back at her personal guard to find Xyhoni's eyes starting to glaze. She retreated a few steps from Arlas' cell, squeezing some courage into his hand.

'No, Xyhoni. You're fine to stand watch.'

Violetta rounded back on Arlas. He appeared to be lost within his thoughts, his scraggly mane threatening to strangle him if he gave it the chance.

'Arlas?'

A familiar tingling grew sharp in her veins. Violetta knew that it must relate to Arlas' powers, yet there was something overly familiar about this sensation; some important detail that she failed to recall.

The prince's eyes fixed on her swollen form. There was a hunger in those scarlet eyes that hadn't existed a moment ago. His frail body heaved for air, his tongue darting out to wet his lips, as though the queen would make a fine meal.

Violetta kept her eyes on the floor. Appearing weak before this monster would only give him an unfair advantage and she refused to give in to traitors. She reached out to Arlas' cell and sought the core of her magical ability.

'Tell me, what do you know of my father's death?' She clicked her fingers, summoning a ball of flickering flames. 'You do not intimidate me.'

Arlas' words cut through her like ice. She acknowledged the grizzled monster before her, his eyes having speared into points, which made her wonder what dark thoughts lurked in such a shadowed mind. Feeling brave, Violetta pressed herself up against the cell bars. The cool metal made her shudder.

'Well?'

The prince's eyes flashed up. A look of madness swirled through them as he studied her from head to toe. His lips curved as though about to speak. He sucked in a breath and spat at the queen's feet.

'How dare you!'

Xyhoni launched into attack. He drew his sabre, brandishing the polished blade in the prisoner's direction. Violetta swept her flaming palm out to halt her guard. She knew Xyhoni would be reluctant to stay his hand, but he did so anyway, muttering curses beneath his breath.

Violetta needed Arlas to talk. Her hand whipped back toward the prince as she poured more magic into the flames.

'I have been informed, as was my father apparently, about a possible connection linking you to my family's deaths.'

She paced along the front of his cell, watching a sly grin crinkling his face. His sharp gaze was like that of an eagle. No matter how exhausted he appeared, if he saw an opportunity to escape, then Violetta was certain he'd swoop down and grab it. How she longed to strike out at him, to simply be done with it and watch his blood envelop his skin.

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She brought the roaring heat of her palm closer, feeding her rage into the heart of the fire. A few stray sparks leapt out at the prince.

'Do you deny such allegations?'

Arlas didn't bother to dodge the sparks that came his way. He knew the queen was already losing her patience. Violetta herself could hear it in the tone of her voice. She sucked in a breath of the sour dungeon air, hoping to retain some measure of calm.

Violetta gazed into a set of ruby eyes that glowed within the dungeon gloom. The eyes of Air Magi had always perplexed her. Were they born with such devilish eyes, or did they develop them as some sort of penance? She couldn't imagine Lord Jork to be the evil type, so guessed it to be part of their natural birthright. It was Arlas' twisted smile that unnerved her the most. It stretched on for as long as the silence lasted between them.

'Answer the queen's question, filth!'

Xyhoni sprung forward, narrowly avoiding Violetta's flaming palm. His face was colouring, eyes flitting about with the strength of his nerves. Arlas didn't even blink.

'Why bother? We know that either way you'll have me executed. Suspected High Treason is never a light matter.' His eyes flashed to meet Violetta's. 'Is it, Highness?'

Those damned eyes stared straight through her. Violetta bit her lip. Ryore had been a different matter.

Everyone had told her so. He was neglecting his people and abusing his power. Xyhoni had even reassured her himself and his opinion of her far outweighed that of another traitor.

Together, she and Xyhoni glared back at the prince in his magic-lined cage, where he awaited Violetta's response. 'Caught a nerve, did I?'

His dry chuckle caused her palm to burn a vivid shade of red.

Violetta passed by his cell, her eyes trained on a discoloured brick in the wall. With her focus strengthening, she began separating her emotions from her speech.

'Let's try this again, Arlas.' Her eyes remained trained on that singular block. 'Did you intentionally cause the storm, which led to my mother and brother's deaths?'

She had him there. He knew it just as well as she did. The sounds of the prince's grinding fangs grated on Violetta's nerves.

'No.'

A single word. Violetta had waited years for any sort of truth on the matter and he dared to respond with a simple no.

'No, what?' she asked.

'No.'

Arlas irritated her to no end. She gazed into the fiery eyes before her, mimicking the flaming mass of reds and yellows that smothered her palm. She didn't think she would ever understand such a monstrous mind, for she

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had never been locked within a physical cage, a prisoner of her own wrong-doings. Arlas had.

Arlas held himself back from the sweat-streaked bars. 'Did you kill my father?' Violetta wasn't sure that she could stomach his answer. She imagined hearing her worst fears confirmed, the strain on her emotional state spewing flames into the air.

'Highness, be careful.'

Xyhoni's startled cry bounced off of Violetta's thoughts. She stared into the ruby red eyes of the traitor before her. Her own hatred reflected back at her. She took a deep breath to calm herself and watched the flames die down a ways.

Arlas still hadn't provided her with an answer. She brought herself closer to the prince's cell, walking into a cloud of his stale sweat.

'Do I need to do some persuading?'

Violetta brandished her burning hand in his direction. Arlas looked at her with disgust written on his gaunt face.

'Do your worst,' he sneered, 'but I did not kill your father. He was simply a means to other ends.'

Violetta's heart lurched in her chest.

'What do you mean?'

Arlas' smirk inched up a little.

'Tell me!'

Violetta needed to know. Just what had Arlas meant by giving such a vague answer? She glared at him and realized why they said looking a killer in the eyes could give you closure. She could see the evil within this man's

heart, could feel it within his blackened soul. Whether lying about her family or not, this being before her was wicked beyond words. He had to die. There was no other way.

Xyhoni helped Violetta up the final few steps. She was thankful to finally be out of the dungeon and its foul stench. The guards had already been summoned to her side.

'Yes, Highness, what can we do for you?'

Violetta paused to slow her racing heart, giving thought to the guard's words. She knew what she had to do. 'Alert the executioner. We have an Air Mage to drain.'

The two men blinked as they processed the queen's words. Before another word could be said, both were sprinting away from the room. Xyhoni pulled Violetta into a gentle embrace.

'Are you sure about this?' he asked.

Violetta looked away from his striking eyes. She relished the day that Arlas' influence would be gone from the world. *Soon*, she assured herself. She tilted her head up to meet Xyhoni's, craving the feel of his lips against hers. 'Yes,' she whispered, 'I am sure.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Violetta

Lord Jork met them at the dungeon entrance. Violetta saw that his face was paler than its usual self and leant over to envelop him in her arms. Jork's red eyes glared, the twins to his brother's. She locked eyes with him and stumbled back, her hands pressed to her sides by a coiled rope of air.

'Apologies, my lord.' Her hands snapped away from her sides as Jork dispelled his magic. 'I meant no disrespect.'

Jork didn't appear to be listening. His eyes had rolled part way back in his head, as though he'd gone to explore another world in his mind.

'My lord?'

Jork swayed on the balls of his feet, his dark robes trailing the cold stone. Violetta reached out once more in the hopes of steadying him.

'Don't,' cried Xyhoni. 'Give him a moment.'

Violetta turned to regard him, and nodded. She thought back to Arlas' interrogation and how he had refused to answer her questions. A tear trailed her cheek as she realized that without Arlas' confession, there were

no solid means by which to charge him. *There has to be a way to catch him out.*

'Child.'

Violetta darted a look toward her elder. Jork's eyes had returned to their usual state.

'If I may, I could sense my brother was not being honest with you.'

Violetta's face scrunched up. She had already guessed as much. Though she knew it was no fault of Jork's, she couldn't help but feel a little frustrated with his admission. 'If it pleases you, I know a way we could get him to talk.'

'As do I.'

All eyes turned to Xyhoni.

'You do?'

Violetta's question hung in the air, not unlike the stench that haunted the dungeons.

'Yes.' Xyhoni stepped forward, offering up his left hand.

'What are you doing?'

Violetta stared into the eyes she had come to adore. Xyhoni took her hand in his, inadvertently grazing over that terrible scar. There was no time to dwell on it as he drew her chin down to stare at his hand. When his right palm opened, her jaw dropped.

A glittering design had spread its way across the olive flesh.

'Xyhoni, it's beautiful.' Violetta reached out to trace the glowing pattern with her fingers. 'What is it?'

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'An alchemist's sigil. The true mark of an Earth Mage who is ready to begin dabbling in the arts.'

Violetta's eyes darted up to his own.

'When did you—'

'The other night. It started as a blinding pain and then, it was just there.'

Violetta wondered what this meant for Xyhoni. Would he be leaving her for his home realm and if so, when? She put her worries aside for the moment and tried to calm her rampaging heart enough to ask, 'You said you know of a way to get Arlas to talk?'

'I do.' Xyhoni darted a look at Jork. 'I have a feeling our elder has had the same thought.'

'Indeed, I have.' Jork swept closer. Violetta noticed that his hands were shaking.

'May I?'

He gravitated toward Xyhoni's hand. Pale, almost corpse like fingers brushed the sigil, before making full contact with Xyhoni's flesh.

'My lord!'

Violetta's hands flew to her mouth as she witnessed Jork's body convulsing in agony.

'No, my lord! You mustn't.'

'It's okay,' groaned Jork. 'I just need to test it.'

A shower of red and green sparks exploded between the two men. Jork leapt back, his hands weaving in intricate patterns to direct the flow of air away from him. Violetta shielded her eyes with one hand as the remaining magic fizzled out of existence.

'What was that?'

Jork panted with the effort of his most recent spell.
'The test told me all I needed to know.'

'And?'

Violetta wanted to reach out and shake him. She forced herself to resist such urges, knowing they would only lead to trouble.

'Xyhoni, has your master ever spoken of alchemy?' asked Jork.

Violetta felt her child kick from within. She pressed her hands to her stomach, watching as the lines in Xyhoni's forehead deepened.

'Alchemy?' she asked.

She stared at Xyhoni and saw him nod.

'Aemon has spoken to me of such things.'

A smile curled the top of Jork's lips. His eyes appeared to flicker between the two youths, as if assessing how much knowledge he could trust them with.

'Xyhoni, I want you to do exactly as I tell you.'

His bluntness surprised both Violetta and her guard as he pressed the tip of his finger to Xyhoni's chest.

'Take a message to your master.' Jork's words sounded somewhat forced as he strained to maintain the brief point of contact. 'You must go to him and ask for Sodium Thiopental.'

Jork's eyes came to rest on Violetta.

'Worry not, dear one. If we acquire this substance, then I guarantee you'll get your answers.'

Violetta rounded on Xyhoni, her arms outstretched.
'We've got nothing to lose. Please, do this for me?'

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She beckoned him to her. Knowing that anyone besides Lord Jork could be watching, she was subtle about placing her arms around him, a gesture of their close friendship.

'You must leave now,' she whispered, 'I don't think I have many days until the baby is bom.'

Xyhoni regarded her with sad eyes. Violetta knew how loyal he was to his post. Something changed about him in that moment. It was as if his feelings began to bleed out of him, threatening to envelop him in their dangerous embrace.

Violetta's eyes couldn't help but linger on his full mouth. She recalled just how much she adored his touch and wished that he would hold her close. She leant into him, whispering so that only he could hear.

'I really do appreciate all that you do. *My Xyhoni.*'

Her last words caught Xyhoni off guard, prompting a thin, sad smile to flutter across his lips.

'I will depart at once, Highness.'

He swept into a bow before the two rulers, his gaze to the floor as he strode away.

'Until we meet again,' he called.

Violetta didn't want him to go. She wished she could be more open with him, to show their affection in front of her citizens without the risk of untimely death. She saw Xyhoni pause in the doorway. He twisted round, his eyes trained on her alone. There was a look of urgency upon his face that had her rooted to the spot.

With little warning, he strode back to her and drew her up against him in a scandalous manner.

'I shall be swift,' he whispered, his fingers running through the silk of her hair. Violetta's body flooded with warmth. She dared to let the moment go on, to give in to her baser desires. Xyhoni bent forward, his voice barely more than a whisper. *'My dearest love.'*

A sudden bout of coughing broke them out of their trance. Lord Jork stood watching their every move. For a moment Violetta trembled, afraid of what his Lordship would think. She stared into his crimson eyes and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Jork smile.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Violetta

Several days had passed since she had questioned Arlas and Violetta felt no release from the tension that burned within. She didn't know what Jork was up to, instructing Xyhoni in such a way, nor was she sure if she wanted to find out. The name of the compound he'd mentioned had sounded familiar. *Sodium Thiopental*. She ran the syllables over her tongue, hoping this would somehow be enough to uncover its meaning.

She would soon learn that Xyhoni had been true to his word. He strode into the royal gardens where Jermise was coaching the queen on the birthing process, as per her new doctor's request.

It was the first time in weeks that anyone had seen Violetta's confidant. She was much quieter than how she was remembered and appeared to startle at the slightest of movements. However, today was a good day and they'd both thought it good for her to get outside.

'Now remember to breathe, Highness.'

Violetta nodded. She sat resting on a low bench with her legs spread out before the rest of her body. Her

stomach was well and truly swollen, the first thing anyone noticed nowadays.

Xyhoni appeared in the distance, framed by a maze of red rose bushes.

'Ladies.'

Violetta's heart leapt at the sight of him.

'Xyhoni.' A delicate smile wanned her features. Her attention was drawn to something clutched in his hand. 'What do you have there?'

'I return today with our gift from King Aemon.' He offered a fine leather pouch to the waiting queen.

Violetta restrained herself from kissing his cheek. She accepted the tiny pouch from him, her cheeks pulled up at the comers as she peeked inside.

'Wait!' Violetta fished around inside the pouch. 'Xyhoni. I think we have a—'

Her eyes zipped back to her personal guard, to find him holding up a tiny vial.

'—problem.'

Xyhoni gave her a rare smile. He held the vial out for the queen to see, before pocketing it within the folds of his tunic.

'Jork will be pleased.'

He gestured for Violetta to pass him the pouch. With it back in his grasp, he dug his hand in and muttered a few well- chosen words.

'Our instructions,' he whispered.

Violetta saw Xyhoni's hand retract from the pouch with a lumpy roll of parchment to hand. She couldn't understand how it had managed to fit inside. Regardless,

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this too took up residence within Xyhoni's garb, reassuring Violetta that it would stay safe.

'So, there remains only one question.' Xyhoni brought his quivering palms to meet hers. 'How do we use it against Arlas?'

Lord Jork ambled forward to meet them, having waited at the entrance to the dungeons as requested.

'If I may.'

Violetta saw the parchment withdrawn from Xyhoni's tunic, only to exchange hands with Jork.

The lord held it close as his eyes skimmed over the aged sheet.

'Sounds easy enough to administer.' He handed the parchment back to Xyhoni. 'And where is the item that Aemon has sent us?'

Xyhoni dug through the folds of his clothes.

'Here, my lord.'

The small vial glittered within his palm. He offered it to Lord Jork, his face pinched as though expecting to be dealt a blow.

Jork's gnarled fingers swept the vial away, where he regarded it with narrowed eyes. Violetta leaned forward for a better look when she felt her breathing begin to change. 'Xyhoni?' Pain radiated through her pelvis, as though her insides were being pulled taut. 'Xyhoni!'

'What is it? What's wrong?' Xyhoni's eyes studied her pained expression. 'You're not?'

Violetta met his eyes. They were such a beautiful colour; they reminded her of her favourite tree. If only she could be there now.

Xyhoni shot Jork a look that, in her delirium, Violetta failed to read.

'My lord, I suspect the baby is growing restless.'

Jork glanced down the length of the young queen.

'I worry that you're right.'

He studied the parchment in Xyhoni's hands, before storing both it and the vial within his robes.

'Quick now, we must see to Arlas before the baby decides to arrive.'



Violetta's condition had grown no better. With each step she took, another wave of pain sapped her strength. Xyhoni had done his best to lead her down the steep steps without folly, but there was no preventing the inevitable.

Violetta found herself hoping this would be her last visit as she listened to the harsh click-clack echo of shoes against cobbles.

Jork had returned to his previous hiding place, in order to view the events undetected by his brother. Before entering the secret passage down into the dungeons, he had placed both the scroll and the vial in Xyhoni's hands.

'Remember young man, just a few drops. Violetta will need to see the letter, or she'll be at great risk.'

Xyhoni led Violetta back to Arlas' cell, where they stared at the traitor in his squalid prison. If possible, Arlas

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looked worse than before. His silver hair dangled in matted threads, his fangs peeping over his leathery lips, tipped with something that looked like blood. And his eyes. They looked almost wild.

'X-Xyhoni. P-please, show me the s-scroll.'

Violetta was struggling to get her words out as another wave of pain rolled over her.

Xyhoni extracted the yellowed parchment from his tunic and unfurled the edges as best he could. Violetta felt the pain begin to ebb. She studied the parchment before her and saw that the message was written in an elegant hand, its words practically begging for the recipient's attention.

In an Earth-coloured ink read the following words;
*To her Highness Violetta Flame,
I hope this day finds you well. Your father certainly would be proud
of all that you are seeking to achieve.
As requested, I have concocted a batch of my finest Sodium
Thiopental, otherwise known as the truth telling serum. You should
know that there is no need for this batch to be ingested. Once it
touches a person's skin, the effects will be immediate. I know that
the answers you seek will give you great peace of mind and so I urge
you to use this with caution.
Take care of yourself, for you are far more precious than you may
realize. I bid you luck with drawing the truth from Arlas' lips and
hope that this remedy sheds some light on your troubles.
Have courage,
King Aemon Earth.*

Violetta's eyes flickered from the page to the figure in the cell beyond. Arlas' skin collected sweat, the whites of his eyes now terribly bloodshot.

Violetta felt her legs quiver as another wave of pain came and went.

'It's time.'

The unique ring of metal sounded in the air. Xyhoni slipped the queen his sword, but not before he had extracted the vial and coated the tip of the sparkling blade.

Violetta approached the cell with Xyhoni in tow. The mild tingling that could usually be felt in Arlas' presence had begun to wane along with his powers.

'Arlas, I trust you are well.'

Arlas eyed the blade gripped in her right hand.

'For insurance's sake,' she lied. 'You don't mind, do you?' Violetta smiled, not overly caring if he did.

'Insurance, you say?' Arlas' eyes became no more than slits as he leant back from the bars to study her face. 'Is something the matter, Highness?'

Those crimson eyes sliced through her. Violetta kept her face blank. *He's just attempting to rile you*, she told herself. *Ignore his taunts. Just get close.*

Violetta felt uncertainty flow into the fore-ground of her mind. She readied herself, Xyhoni's sword jutting out from her palm. She had learned a lot in Ryore's company when he was alive; about the cruelties and desires of certain types of men. With that in mind, she'd decided on how best to proceed. *Flattery it is.*

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It's a shame we had to dirty that handsome face of yours.'

Violetta gave Arlas a shy wink. She cocked her hip to one side as she walked, swaying ever so slightly to catch Arlas' eye.

'You know, I do wonder about you.'

She glided forward, pressing herself up against the bars. Although Xyhoni remained deep in the shadows, Violetta was certain that his teeth were on edge. Nevertheless, she had to power through. She owed her family that much.

Violetta kept Xyhoni's blade in her hand. She angled it up against one of the bars and drew herself up to the prince's eye level.

'Tell me Arlas, just how long would you have waited to kill me?'

Her voice was smoother than the finest silk, her modest cleavage spilling over the top of her dress. She watched as Arlas' pupils began to dilate. The sight of her flesh, with her hair slicked down her lower back, was proving to work to the queen's advantage.

'Kill you?' Arlas was having difficulty in regulating his breathing. Violetta noted something off about the tone of his skin. It almost looked like it was made of stone, similar to that of the cobbles which lay behind.

'What makes you think I'd want to harm you?'

Arlas lingered by the bars of his cell as though aching to pull Violetta close. Without warning, he dove upon the sweet impulse. Pale hands lashed out towards her throat.

Violetta was quick. She brought the sword whistling through the bars, slicing into Arlas' wrist.

Arlas stiffened with a startled yelp. No sooner had Violetta scratched his skin, had the prince's body began to shudder. His face was blank, save for the crimson gleam of his eyes.

'I'm sorry it had to come to this, but you gave me no choice.'

Violetta retracted the blade. She noted a subtle change in Arlas' eyes, the way his pupils shrank, as if in fear.

'Now, you will listen to me.' Violetta cringed. The pain within her was near crippling. She forced herself to stare into the eyes of her prisoner while she waited for this wave to subside.

Arlas continued to stare. Violetta braced herself against the bars of his cell as Xyhoni's sword clattered to the ground.

'Having trouble, are we?' sneered the prince.

Violetta panted hard through the last vestiges of pain.

'Not...anymore,' she breathed.

Arlas' jaw began to stiffen.

'Now tell me, did you have any part in my family's deaths?' The prince darted his head away from her, his lips curling in obvious disgust.

Violetta staggered the length of Arlas' cell. She needed answers. Her hands flew to her burning stomach in a vain attempt to halt the returning pains.

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'Answer me, now! Did you, Prince Arlas of the Air Realm, have any part to play in the deaths of my family?'

Arlas' lips quivered. They appeared to pop open and closed, as though doing their best to retain their secrets. From the fresh sweat on his brow and the way his fangs bit into his lip, Violetta could tell that they hadn't long to wait.

A ripple of electricity seized Violetta around the waist. She bent double, her breath coming in ragged pants. 'Xyhoni! It's time!'

Tears flowed down the young queen's face as she struggled to right herself in the presence of her foe. She caught sight of Arlas baring his fangs, his scarlet eyes gleaming like never before. With Xyhoni's help, she leant forward, resting on the bars of Arlas' cell. She hoped this would be the moment her family were avenged.

A snake like hiss split the silence. Arlas trembled as the breath finally released itself from his lungs.

'Yessss!'

'Excuse me?' Violetta gasped.

She struggled to call on her power, to ward Arlas off, on the chance that he should lash out again.

'Yes, yes! All right, I helped!'

Violetta needn't have gasped at Arlas' answer, yet she did. After so many years of silent torture, it was only now that she finally felt some relief. She was not the guilty party here. This creature leering back at her was. He was the one who had taken her family; her mother and brother, before her father too.

A muffled thump sounded close by, revealing the veiled figure of Lord Jork.

'You snake!' He lunged toward his brother's cell, those same red eyes spitting fury. 'My dear, please accept my humblest apologies.'

Jork rounded on Violetta, where he fell upon his knees, begging her forgiveness for his brother's sins.

'My lord, please get up. There is nothing you could have done.'

Violetta clutched the collar of his dark robes. With as much effort as she could muster (avoiding his sallow skin in the process), she helped to bring Jork back to his feet.

With Arlas' confession out of the way, Violetta had no problem with letting him speak.

'You think that you're so high and mighty, well mark my words, you are ignorant fools!'

'Enough!' Xyhani grabbed his sword from Violetta and raised it up before the prince's face. 'If I were you, I would refrain from speaking so much as another word.'

Arlas' lips split into a grin.

'If you were me?'

Violetta stared at the scene unfolding before her. Even in the presence of friends, she couldn't help but feel alone. Her family were gone and it was Lord Jork's brother that was to blame.

Fury began to ignite within her, sending power zipping up from her core. With a fierce cry, Violetta brought her arm arcing over their prisoner's head.

The Flame Queen

'Prince Arlas of the Air Realm, for the crimes of High Treason and multiple counts of murder, I hereby sentence you to execution through draining!'

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Violetta

The darkness consumed her. Violetta remembered sentencing Arlas to execution, but anything after became a clouded blur. She blinked her eyes open to find herself lying within her chambers, the bedsheets pulled high across her chest.

'Xi—'

A burst of lightning silenced her. She gazed across at the window where the curtains had been hastily drawn.

Violetta needed to know what was going on. She lifted herself into a sitting position. The moment she attempted to stand, a terrible pain rendered her still, leaving her panting, her sweat-slicked flesh clinging to the bed-folds. Violetta wanted so badly to move. Every inch she turned, the pain only worked to tighten its grip.

Another flash of lightning came from beyond her chamber window. Violetta's eyes flitted about. *What do I do? Oh, gods, help me!* She didn't bother to admonish herself. Speaking of such things was trivial when it felt like your pelvis was being tom apart.

With the next wave of pain came a blood-curdling shriek.

The Flame Queen

'Highness?' Xyhoni's voice filtered through the screams. 'You're awake!'

Violetta shot him her best glare. She couldn't recall how she'd gotten there. She searched the emerald eyes above her, hoping they could provide her with the answers she sought.

'Xyhoni, the lightning.' She shuddered as her body relaxed. 'What's happening?'

Xyhoni squinted down at her, his brow furrowed in the centre.

'Lightning?' Something cool brushed against her forehead. 'Vi, you're burning up. I sent for the doctor when you collapsed. Just wait and I'll get someone to fetch them.' Xyhoni's face disappeared from view.

'No,' Violetta croaked.

She needed him with her. The pain was almost unbearable, pressing down into her more intimate parts. Still, the lightning continued to flash.

Violetta's mind raced. She strained to shift herself out from the cloying covers, thankful for a sudden delay in the pains. 'Xyhoni, where are you?' she whispered into the darkness.

As the pains began to increase once more, Violetta stomached a large breath and with all of her strength, urged herself forward. Her body rolled itself out of the sheets, a victory in itself. The trouble came when she couldn't stop rolling. The young queen tumbled over the edge of the bed frame, howling for someone to come and help her.

The pain ignited as she crashed to the floor. Violetta's side had taken most of the impact and was sure to result in a lasting bruise. She groaned into the thick carpet beneath her. Inch by inch, she used her hands to push onto her front when a sudden gush made her freeze in place.

'Xyhoni!'

Her personal guard stumbled back into the room, flagged by a flustered Lord Jork. Violetta dug her teeth into the soft flesh of her bottom lip. The pain was building too quickly. In his panic, Xyhoni threw formality aside and resorted to the promise he'd recently made.

'Vi!'

Both men knelt, to prop her up against the frame of the bed.

Violetta's head met the firm oak. When she leant back, she was able to taste the blood that pooled in her mouth.

'We're here,' Xyhoni reassured her.

But something was troubling Violetta. *The lightning. Why can't they see it?*

When the pains began to subside once more, her lips parted and she let out a gasp.

'W-where is the d-doctor?'

Violetta cupped her hands around her stomach, straining to suppress the fluid that was evacuating her quivering form. 'It's okay, we'll be okay,' she whispered.

She stroked her stomach with a tenderness that made the men stare.

'Vi, we seem to have a bit of a problem.'

The Flame Queen

Violetta turned to meet Xyhoni's gaze.

'What do you mean?'

At that moment, the chamber door swung open, revealing the dishevelled figure of Jermise. Her confidant's hair was a mess of frizz. Jermise had obviously risen mid-slumber, yet she wore a small smile.

'My lady.' She strode forward with a calm countenance and knelt beside the fragile queen. 'By the looks of her, she is almost ready to push. How far away is the doctor?' Jermise turned an accusatory gaze on the two men.

'That's the problem, they never arrived.'

'What?'

Violetta peered up at Jermise through a veil of pain. In her confidant's hands was Lord Jork's gift.

'Jermise,' she begged. 'Please, the ball?'

Violetta thought she might cry with joy when Jermise handed the item over.

'May it bring you strength, my lady.'

The wave of pain that threatened to slice through her lessened, now no more than an errant throb.

Jermise turned back to face Xyhoni.

'Where is the doctor? This is urgent!'

She was giving the men an earful.

Violetta held Jork's ball close, taking her time to inhale deep breaths. She darted a glance across to Xyhoni, to find him already facing her.

'I'm sorry. Nobody can get a hold of them,' he cried.

Jermise looked about ready to tear her hair out when Violetta let out a sharp scream.

'Good God!'

Jork rushed to the young queen's side. Violetta felt like she was about to explode. Although the pain was lessened by the healing powers of the ball, she could still feel the immense pressure building within. Jork leant forward to feel her forehead.

'Tell me,' she wheezed. 'Have they—executed Arlas?'

Jork appeared taken aback. He placed a hand against her skin in a futile attempt to comfort her.

'I was told he is to be executed at dawn.'

The great lord whipped his hand away, clearly feeling the burning effect of her touch. Without another word, he began to roll up his sleeves. It was only when Jermise asked as to his intentions that Jork let slip a sentence that would halt her in place.

'I'll have to deliver this baby myself.'

It was like the room had frozen. This was a moment in time that would remain preserved for the rest of eternity. Jermise's eyes moved to study Jork before Xyhoni joined her wide-eyed gaze.

'You?' they cried.

Violetta watched Jork's eyes turned to familiar slits.

'Forgive me, my lord.' Jermise cut in before Xyhoni could. 'But, is this really your area of expertise?'

Violetta could hear the doubt in her confidant's tone.

Jork eyed her with a devilish glare.

'Whether you believe it or not, I actually delivered my younger brother.'

The Flame Queen

Jermise's mouth clamped shut. Violetta watched as her confidant struggled to part her lips. Trembling fingers reached up in a desperate attempt to prize them apart.

'Now then, if you'll be so kind as to not doubt my skills.' Jork darted another glance in Jermise's direction. Her lips separated, leaving her to huff in frustration as she exited the chambers.

During her brief absence, Jermise had sent for several maids, while Xyhoni helped Lord Jork to prepare. The young women came and went in swift succession, all hoping to get a peak at the queen. While they may have longed to watch the spectacle in full swing, Jermise had managed to shoo them away. Violetta needn't be bothered by them, with their leering eyes and dark grins.

The queen was thankful when the young girls left. Violetta knew they meant well, but the way they glanced at her made her feel dirty. She heard them whisper about who the babe's father was, exchanging hushed laughter behind their hands. The only one who hadn't was Kaitlyn.

Jermise glanced back at the exhausted queen, who for now was resting upon her bed. Xyhoni had helped to lay her down where she continued to pant through the spiking pain. Bowls of hot and cold water were brought to the bed, alongside fresh towels and a dozen wash cloths. Jermise dunked one into the cooler fluid. She wrung it out and sat at the bed side, dabbing Violetta's skin.

'Mmm.' The queen managed a weak smile. Her eyes had drifted shut, but she knew who was there. 'Thank you.'

'We must keep you hydrated,' warned Jermise.

Violetta lay back, allowing the cool feel of the cloth to take her away when the pain speared into her loins. She clutched Jork's gift close to her chest. Nothing happened. The pain continued to rage through her and felt like it might crush her lungs.

'Get it out!' she screamed.

Jermise pulled her close, cradling her like you would a small child.

'Violetta, how bad is it?'

The queen's body went rigid. It felt like a hot knife was sweeping through her insides.

'Get it out! Now!'

Jermise bathed the rag anew, ringing it out when the chamber door opened.

Jork entered wearing surgical gloves, Xyhoni following in his wake. When Xyhoni spied Jermise helping to undress Violetta, his face flushed scarlet. He turned, whispering a few words to Jork, before leaving the slam of the chamber door to announce his departure.

Violetta looked to Jork as she let slip another wail. 'Pay him no heed,' he told her. 'Most men cannot stand the sight of a woman in labour. They don't know what to do and therefore feel helpless to stop the pain.'

At that moment, Jermise set down her rag and began fumbling about with a large towel. She turned to Jork, her lips pressed tight.

The Flame Queen

'Here, help me with this.'

With Jork's help, she managed to spread it below the queen.

Violetta's limbs strained with the agony of her child's impending arrival. She wished Xyhoni had remained by her side. She felt like her body was being tom asunder and began to sob into the edge of the towel.

'Come, my lady, deep breaths,' cooed Jennise,

'No. Not yet.' Violetta's desperate whimpers filled the chamber. 'I need—Xyhoni.'

Jermise stepped in to mop her brow, lending her strength as she fought the growing pain.

Jork leapt into action at the sound of Violetta's scream. Her face scrunched up, muscles contracting.

'That's it. Now push!' he cried.

Jermise allowed the young queen to squeeze her hand.

Violetta struggled to breathe through the pain. Her panting grew heavy as she pushed down, her chin resting against the top of her chest. Her body seized, sending Jork's ball tumbling onto the floor.

'I...can't!' She wailed.

Lord Jork could be seen readying himself below her. He stroked Violetta's leg, cheering her on with words of encouragement.

'Yes, you can!' He scooped up the ball and laid it beside her. 'Hold onto my gift and push! I can see the head!'

Violetta's face was streaked with tears as a burning pain took hold of her loins. She pushed against the rising pain and felt something emerge between her thighs.

'Here it comes!' cried Jork.

Violetta struggled to draw a breath before she resigned herself to the sweet agony of birth. With both hands resting on Jork's ball, she relaxed her body and gave one last burst of force.

Thunder screamed in protest, mimicking the powerful release that exploded throughout Violetta's mind and body. She had never experienced anything like it. Her body contracted in the strangest way. She was vaguely aware of something slipping out from between her thighs before her world was enveloped by darkness.

'Vi?'

'Highness?'

Violetta felt something cool and soothing against her forehead. She blinked her eyes open, registering the dim lamp-light of her bed-chambers.

'What happened?'

Her voice was groggy and out of sorts.

'Highness! At last!'

Jermise's faced greeted her. Her cheeks were flushed, her fiery locks spilling across her face in damp strands. Nevertheless, her lips formed a smile.

'You passed out a few minutes ago. We've been trying everything to bring you round.'

The familiar voice of Lord Jork came from somewhere down below. Violetta did her best to raise herself up on her arms. She winced as a sudden pain cut

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through her groin, not unlike a knife being jabbed into bone. She felt the air heat up around her.

'Jermise?'

Violetta's eyes were wide with fear.

The young queen turned to peer beyond her shoulders and felt the blood drain from her face. Two enormous wings curled around her trembling form, enshrouded by the blazing fires of hell. Violetta reached out, trailing her fingers along the edge of one. They were such a beautiful, yet frightening display of her own power. Their flickering flames were hypnotizing, yet failed to burn a single patch of skin.

'It's all right.'

Violetta's head jerked round to face Jermise. She stared at her confidant, whose eyes were tearing up, yet the queen appeared no closer to understanding how her wings had come into being.

'When did they appear?' she asked

Jermise glanced in Jork's direction before returning Violetta's stunned gaze.

'Shortly after the thunder.'

She heard it?

Jermise had offered to say little more on the matter.

She passed Violetta several flame-proof pillows, helping to prop her up in the bed, along with her blazing Phoenix wings. The young queen lay there, her vision dotted with spots of light. She tried to remember why she was in bed in the first place.

'There there now. You're all right.'

Jork appeared to be fussing with something at the foot of the bed. Violetta felt her interest pique. *I want to see*, she thought. *I want to see—my baby?*

Jermise stroked the queen's hand, which had balled up into a fist. She whispered words of comfort and praise, letting Violetta know that she'd done well.

'That's better.'

Jork's words were muffled as he came into view. He smiled at Violetta, taking in the sight of her flaming wings before stepping aside to reveal a second figure.

'Xyhoni.'

Violetta's personal guard towered over the foot of the bed. The colour had since returned to his cheeks, his eyes glinting with what appeared to be pride.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' she asked.

A hint of laughter burst from Xyhoni's lips. He circled the bed, trailing his fingers along the soft sheets before finally lacing them through her own. He took a moment to gaze up at the mass of flames that arched out of her back. 'They look awful, don't they?'

Violetta hung her head. A moment later, she felt strong hands gripping hold of her chin. Sparkling emerald eyes appeared in her vision.

'No. They're incredible. I don't think I've ever seen such a beautiful mother.'

Violetta could see Jermise rolling her eyes in the background, before affording her a small smile.

Lord Jork was insistent on pushing Xyhoni aside. His lips were pressed into a warm smile as he gazed at a small bundle clutched in his arms. It was wrapped in a

The Flame Queen

fluffy crimson towel, which obscured whatever lay within.

For a moment only, Violetta noticed a strange glow. It was a pale blue and appeared to envelop the tiny bundle before disappearing altogether. She shook her head. She must have been imagining things.

Violetta rolled her ball to one side of the bed, just as Lord Jork edged forward with the tiny bundle. Violetta's hands began to shake. *Is that my baby? Why isn't she crying?* A dozen worried thoughts filled her mind. She glanced over to Xyhoni, who gave her a reassuring nod.

'It's okay,' he mouthed.

Violetta turned back and found Jork towering over her. He offered out the wriggling bundle, his smile faltering for a moment as he glanced up at those wretched wings.

'Go on. It's all right.'

He helped to settle the crimson wrappings within her arms, before prompting her to unfurl the towel.

Violetta would have done anything to have stilled her hands. With trembling fingers, she reached inside. The layers unfolded with the greatest of ease. When they finally slipped away, Violetta felt her heart stop.

Within the ruby folds lay a babe of surpassing beauty. It was swaddled in the lower half of the fabric, nuzzling against its soft cushioning. The queen's face broke into a smile. The babe blinked open a pair of enchanting green eyes, so large and perfect that she hadn't any words to describe them.

'They're beautiful.'

'A girl,' Jork interjected, 'Just like you said.'

Violetta's cheeks already hurt from smiling. She felt the sincerest form of love rush through her, so pure and exquisite a sensation. There were no words to describe the feeling of completion that came from holding her first born child; a child who had risen from the flames of her hatred and now, her love.

'But, she's not crying?'

As though on cue, her daughter's lips pursed open, pushing all of her strength into her first wail.

Violetta cradled her newborn to her. Scraps of memories rushed back to her, of her own mother rocking her to sleep one night. She gazed down at her perfect child. Unashamed of her tears, she leant in and nuzzled a rosy cheek with the tip of her nose.

'I promise that I will never leave you,' she whispered. Violetta reached out to stroke her daughter's satin-soft skin. 'Hi.'

She glanced over to her side, to find that Xyhoni had traded places with Jork.

'Hi,' she replied with a grin.

Xyhoni knelt down, offering his hand for Violetta to hold. 'Oh, Xi, she's perfect.'

Violetta's skin tingled at Xyhoni's touch. He leant into her, planting a kiss upon her sodden brow.

'Just like her mother.'

Violetta felt her smile widen. Her gaze flitted between the two recipients of her love. If someone had once told her that she could feel this happy having inherited her father's throne, Violetta would have

The Flame Queen

thought them wrong. Not now. She could see what she had been missing.

Her gaze lingered a while on the man before her. What she would have given to chance one sparing kiss. All she'd ever wanted was the freedom to live her own life and now she was so close, after all she'd been put through. If she could only have Xyhoni, then as far as she was concerned, her life would be complete.

Neither Jork, nor Jermise said anything in response to the pair's loving gaze. Violetta counted herself lucky. Anyone else would have betrayed their secret, but not them.

Jermise stepped forward and took her turn to peer in at the newborn babe. Violetta saw her confidant's eyes glisten as she beheld the tiny princess.

'They're beautiful, Vi.'

The queen's heart glowed at her comment. She gazed from one pair of emerald eyes to another. These were the eyes that had sparked true love.

As Violetta turned to regard her child, she held Xyhoni's image in her mind. With her little finger, she traced her newborns perfect skin. She could hardly believe that this little miracle before her was real, or that she had stemmed from such a cruel father.

'So,' Jork called from the end of the bed. 'Do we have a name in mind?'

Violetta gave a weak nod.

'Yes.' A single tear clung to her cheek as she gazed once more into the eyes of Xyhoni. 'Her name is Elinor.'

Dax Munro

A sudden burst of lightning filled the room. 'And she is a gift of the gods.'

To some, she is a symbol of danger:

A Demoness of the flames.

To some, she is a symbol of hope:

A Goddess of the light.

Earth Realm:

Ruler: King Aemon

Race: Elves & Sprites

Season: Spring

Abilities: Manipulation of earth and plants, alchemy, transmutation.

Flame Realm:

Ruler: King Eagan

Race: Humanoid (warm hair and dark eyes.)

Season: Summer

Abilities: Summoning of molten flames, fire shape-shifting.

Air Realm:

Ruler: Lord Jork (Lords are as Demi-Gods.)

Race: Pale humanoid creatures (Vampyric.)

Season: Autumn

Abilities: Manipulation of air, forcefields, healing of magical and non magical injuries, ability (in rare cases) to affect the weather.

Frost Realm:

Ruler: Emperor Jugan (C-N-4), Emperor Ryore (C-N-7+)

Race: Humanoid (pale, dark hair.)

Season: Winter

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Abilities: Summoning of frost and ice, manipulation of water and snow, Seers specialize in curses and ancient forms of old magic (one is born roughly each decade.)

Universal Greeting: Pressing your palm to that of your guest.

Each realm has taken to this style of greeting, save for the Air Realm as no physical contact is permitted with an Air Mage. These Mages possess such strong powers that they cannot risk unnecessary contact with others, or it burns their very flesh.

DAX MUNRO



British Novelist Dax Munro has always been drawn to the epic fantasy genre, with its magical worlds and mythical beings. However, Dax also finds it hard to stay away from the darker genres of fiction such as mystery and horror.

As a child, Dax struggled to relate to her peers at school and often felt lonely until she picked up a book.

When away from her trusty Chromebook, Dax enjoys art, social psychology, nature, retro video games, and Horror films.

Her favourite past time of all is curling up with a good book and a rich coffee as rain filters in through an open window.

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I hope you enjoyed your time in Peradon.

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