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NORTHERN
Olden Ocean
AELITH
Jinglewood
APPLETOWN
MELODIA
Iven Forest
HAVEKIN
Tailen Forest
Gypsian Forest
VINDL
Endway Forest
DALEN HILLS
MUDBURROW
BAMBOO FOREST
Mangrove
Grazen Fields
VOXFES CITY
Imarus
VINE ROAD
LYRIN TOWN
Tremoren
Taylor's Farm
Kitty's Inn
PREISEN
Silk Bridge
Blood River
NEMDRIN
TIMBERTON
Glaze Forest
Sleepless Ocean
Ruba Ocean
Rorst Graves
Sunder Forest
Raiden Bridge
EMIN CLIFFS
TRUTERSON
PINE'S MANOR
Bison Ranges
VILLENA
AVERY
Estiria
FEATIN MOUNTAINS
Amerson Woods
PLEADA
HACELEN
SOUTHERN

CHILDREN OF
RIMA
SEEDS OF THE FALLEN
MIRIAM YVETTE

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Name Pronunciation

Gittle (Gih-til)

Matias (Mah-tee-ahs)

Oscern (O-surn)

Rima (Ree-mah)

Vinol (Vih-nul)

Villena (Vee-yena)

Wein (Whey-n)

Zorn (Zoh-rn)

Coin system

Gemstones: Highest value, amount varies
Gold: 50 gold coins and more
Silver: 25 silver coins = 1 gold
Copper: 100 copper coins = 1 silver

The line between light and darkness is finer than a thread of silk. You are either light or darkness.

So take good care of your light.

Lucan.

CHAPTER 1

LUCAN

Dawn's light had yet to unveil the darkened road. In the icy and bleak winter, the valley was bathed in blue, covered with brown, slushy snow. The horses' labored breaths streamed from their nostrils, steering through by the coachman's command. The wagon they pulled bore no shelter for Lucan or his companions, but it was better than walking through the aftermaths of a blizzard.

Any seasoned traveler would have thought twice before thinking about making the journey north. It was either the watchful eye of Skiar or sheer luck they ran into Fredrick, a wealthy merchant en route to their destination.

Fredrick wore a green flat-top hat with a large red feather sticking at the back. The hat was a symbol of the Red Guild, a union of traders who toured Vine Road to sell their wares.

For the entire night, Lucan hadn't talked to him much, but he looked the part of a wealthy merchant, although his gold rings could use some polishing.

The wind's chill took the moisture from his eyes. He rubbed them a few times because they stung whenever he blinked. His hands were still crusty, mostly from the blood he tried to wipe off over and over.

"I'm tired of going in circles with you, Fredrick." The coachman sat with his back slouched, either from his poor posture or bad habit. "You stay an entire month in Villena, and you suddenly believe those country folk?"

"Then answer me this," Fredrick said. He didn't seem to get the signal cues that his hired hand wasn't interested in conversing, but they carried on the debate, nonetheless. "Are we inherently evil?"

"I don't care if humans were inherently shitted out of a pig's ass." The coachman cupped his hands over the tip of his cold nose and blew hot air before he spewed more words out. "Vinol got into these shithole wars because of religious beliefs—now you're trapped by those Rimans."

While they went on and on, Lucan looked at the pale moons, endlessly shining their steel lights above, offering no warmth or comfort to his two companions. The blanket they shared was thin and itchy. Lucan didn't need it, as it only impeded his movements. Wedged in the back of the cart, Oscern could barely shift a leg. Taking up most of the space was Fredrick's trunks of wares, blanketed by tarps to keep the snow from damaging the wood. The iron clamp was painted gold, and the straps still smelled like polish. Each latch was locked, but it didn't stop Zorn from trying his luck to picklock them.

"How can you not believe? Those Villenan Maidens made compelling arguments." Fredrick was back at it, looping the conversation as if he didn't know how to keep his mouth shut.

"Well, women will say anything to tie your balls around their fingers. They'll fill your mind to weaken your will so you can follow their cause."

Lucan winced at those mere words. His broken heart was still bruised from the aftermath of his lover, leaving him for the group that nearly killed his friends. Restless, he decided to listen, just to see what they thought, as Fredrick seemed unwilling to back down.

"You can curse Skiar for doing nothing all you want. But we are creatures of darkness, the Demon of the Deep created this world."

"And that's how they get you. They instill fear in your weak-minded noggin." The coachman coughed up some phlegm and spat it into the snow. "Hell, there were no women who would raise their skirts for us. I'd seen livelier flies hump one another in a pile of dung than in that village they protect."

"If you'd gone to their temple, you'd have known the truth!" Fredrick raised his hands to the sky like he was some priest. "Our bountiful world, Pleada, was born in darkness. Its very nature

embraced the ravaging quakes, typhoons, and tsunamis. There was no haven in any corner of the world, not even under any dwelling created by man. Horn-bearing creatures terrorized and stripped humanity's hope. Victims of the malicious beasts lost their sanity and choked their loved ones with their own hands."

The long speech woke Zorn from his sleep. He opened one eye, eyebrows furrowed at Fredrick, who continued. "Ultimately, Skiar took pity on our world and sent down his celestial maiden, Rima. Her arrival brought upon a light we had never beheld. Her presence parted the clouds, where she stood among the mountains in her might."

"You're going to keep going at it, ain't ya?" the coachman groaned.

"Seems like it," Zorn mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

"As I was saying," Fredrick declared, slightly turning to them. "To combat her greatness, the Demon of the Deep summoned his loyal servant, Murella. But Rima swept over the darkness, bringing down the treacherous woman and forcing the Demon of the Deep to burrow back into his hell. The fighting was so fierce, it split the Hacelen continent in half, the spilled blood creating Blood River between the Northern and Southern lands."

"I thought it was called Blood River because the water looks red in the fall?" the coachman asked, his voice slightly changing to interest.

"A phenomenon just the same," Fredrick answered, pleased by his question. "Hacelen had suffered enough by the Demon of the Deep, so Rima didn't return to the heavens. The celestial maiden took the form of a woman and traveled to all the corners of the world, planting her Oak trees to calm the shaking core that dwelled within Pleada, bringing balance and peace to our lands."

The coachman smacked his lips, peering at Fredrick, then at the road. "You know, if some giantess roamed these lands, don't you think we'd have seen her footprints or what became of her?"

"You want proof? Rima has Maidens, women of light who tend and protect her oak trees and draw out the darkness. And the men who protect the village, their prowess keeps any ill-doer from their holy White Oak."

"And what became of her?"

"Who?"

"Rima."

"Rumor has it she met a man worthy of her attention and birthed his children. She succumbed to her human body and was put to rest in Aelith. To this very day, the Maidens say Rima's celestial lineage lives."

"What a crock of hornshit!" The coachman's raised voice shook Oscern awake. "It's been over a decade since that holy city fell, and you wanna know why? It's because belief in fables led to their own demise. Now, shut those flaps, or I'll have you go searching for firewood at our next stop." He yanked on his blanket and tucked the corners under his armpits.

Fredrick stomped his foot. "Well, it's your loss. I'll just give my focus to our new companions." He turned and looked directly at Lucan. "A good deed is sure to lead to a suitable reward. You lads would've been goners if we hadn't saved you from those bandits—not like me to stop for strangers, but I do recall seeing you boys in Villena."

"Uh…yeah," Lucan answered. They could have taken care of those criminals, but it was he who messed up in the end.

"Did your parents approve of you three leaving the nest?"

"We got no parents." He looked at his friends, awake and listening. "And we're not from Villena."

Fredrick's face contorted and molded before it scrunched over his flared nose. "Oh, I thought you three were Rimans."

"We *are*." The soothing voice on his right came from one of his companions, Zorn. He stretched his arms and released a long yawn, crinkling his narrow nose. "But that's not our home."

"Where did you strangers come from then?" It was hard to tell at night, but the merchant appeared to have formed an ugly frown.

"We came from Truterson." Oscern's deep voice could pull at the ears for being loud and clear. When they were still boys, folks would mistake him for an adult.

"My, my." The coachman had lent an ear to their conversation. "You're a far cry from home. Why the eagerness to hitch a ride to Vinol?"

Lucan didn't need to look to feel Zorn and Oscern stare at him. They already assumed by Oscern's answer that they were from

Truterson. Now it was up to him to answer this one. He looked at the cold coachman, beard neatly tucked under his tunic. "We were bored off our asses."

Zorn snickered, pulling Fredrick's eyebrows to deepen over his lashes. "Hey!" he snapped. "There'll be no foul language on this respectable wagon."

"Leave 'em alone," said the coachman. "They're just boys."

Fredrick grumbled. "Listen here. I agreed to take you three out of Rima's goodwill. But if you're troublemakers, and we run into each other in Vinol, we've never met, got it?"

"Why do you care about us?" Zorn delicately leaned his sharp chin on the back of his pale hand. "I thought Vinol was the city of opportunity, where all the merchants, such as yourself, fill your pockets with coins without regard for morality?"

Fredrick puffed his chest. "I'll have you know, pretty boy, that I'm a Vinolian and a respectable master of my trade. My coin isn't tarnished by gambling or blood."

"That doesn't mean the claims aren't true," Lucan said to support his friend. "I heard of the taxing, gambling rooms, masses of sex workers, and the hiring of mercenaries have helped keep the economy going and support the war."

"And who are you to question King Pann's decisions?"

"Leave 'em alone, Fredrick. Cheap women and coin are why the boys are here." The coachman's viewpoint shed some light on their motives. "Money has been calling these grunts from all the corners of Hacelen like a flock of seagulls to a fisherman's catch."

Fredrick harrumphed. "That's on account that they have some skill."

"You can rest easy with that one," Zorn said. "This isn't the first time we've taken a job that requires sticking steel to the gut."

Fredrick clasped his hands as if he was about to mutter a prayer, but instead, his face wrinkled with that same revulsion no form of religion could cleanse. "*You* boys kill?"

Lucan leaned his back against the wagon. These newly founded believers, they always have a way of annoying him. "Rima killed Murella to save the world. Why can't we do the same bidding?"

Somehow, that seemed to piss off Fredrick even more. "You are wolves disguised as believers."

Lucan scoffed. At that moment, he felt Oscern tap his leg, but he didn't hold his words. "You've only been to *one* Rima village, and you think you know everything."

"What would a little life-stealer like you know?"

"I know every village will hark the same tale about Rima conquering darkness and destroying Murella, but they have their own rules to what merits a Riman. Villenans don't value killing of any kind, even for defense. Now go to another Rima village and open your eyes again."

"Stop the wagon!" Fredrick hollered. Lucan nearly hit his head against the wood. "Get these delinquents off—I want nothing to do with them."

"You sure?" The coachman examined them again. "We haven't reached Lotter's Mountain, and the blizzard may come back."

"I'm sure they can make it to their destination well on their own if Rima allows."

The coachman shrugged. "Sorry, boys, but he paid me for the ride. Best get used to that sort of treatment in Vinol. Now get off my wagon."

Lucan made no qualms about it. At least he was kind enough to slow down. He hopped off and watched Oscern go next, stumbling on his last step. When the wagon picked up, there was a struggle. Fredrick was yelling at Zorn because he didn't want to leave without that itchy blanket. The drop of his back against the ground got him cursing, dusting the snow off his back.

"Nice going, Lucan!" Zorn shouted. "First, your stupid woman led us to an ambush. Now we got kicked off our only ride!"

Lucan picked up his leather travel bag and wiped it off. There was no point in addressing the matter. He didn't know his girl of two years would turn against him, not after they spent that night sharing their hopes for the future.

Oscern, an insightful, deep thinker, sowed his eyes on him.

"What is it, O?" From afar, he felt Zorn's jabbing stare.

"If you're not careful, that mouth of yours is going to sink you."

"Ha!" Lucan went to tie his leather scabbard around his belt. "My mouth? What about Villena? The Maidens can evangelize all they want, but if they skew Rima into making her appear like some goddess who never killed, we'll keep getting more fools like him."

"They revere her. And it's as you said, every High Maiden takes Rima's teachings differently."

Oscern's middle finger bore a black mark that Fredrick overlooked, etched on his skin like an obsidian ring. When a Child of Rima's powers was in use, the mark would emit a golden light.

"Maybe we can tell Villena to leave their passive lifestyle out of Rima," Oscern added.

"We don't *need* to tell anyone how to govern. We don't have that sort of authority anymore. Aelith is destroyed, and we're supposed to be dead."

Oscern's light eyes narrowed. The color always burned gold on the darkest night. "We were kids when Aelith fell, Lucan. Others survived—*we* survived."

"And look where that left us? We've been living like vagrants because nobody will hire you or Zorn for the mark you have. If we don't fight another man's holy war, we don't eat." Lucan flung his bag over his shoulder and followed the tracks of the wagon.

Dawn had not yet arrived to clear the damn way, and his boots were sinking into slushy mud. It was moments like these that reminded him that no power of his could influence the sun to rise faster, for the spring to melt the snow away.

Fredrick was right about one thing. Rima's lineage did exist. Her blood coursed through his veins, pumping through the chambers of his heart. He couldn't even know what the cold felt like.

But being her descendant changed nothing. The world was bigger than him and stronger. That's what Aelith's downfall taught him.

As far as anyone knew, he was a regular man with two friends who harnessed powers beyond compare. His celestial name, true form, and powers—all of it buried, to be lost and forgotten, as if he didn't exist.

"Just live," he said under his breath, echoing what his mother told him. "Just live."

CHAPTER 2

LUCAN

Spring
Three years later
Dalen Hills

"Just live," Lucan said, his voice muffled from having pressed his arm against his nose and mouth. Smoke clouded the trenches from the logs that burned an irritating chemical Vinol used against the enemy. He strode through the uneven ground, dirt clods crushed under the weight of his boots. His lungs wouldn't expand to draw in more air, and his throat was itching. The faces vacant of life stared as he passed them, and for a moment, his vision blurred.

Clanking steel and screams of the wounded whirled in a constant loop, creating the precise instruments to orchestrate death's wide-ranging melody, a composition that hearkened at his soul. The sword and spear were the brass, the arrows were the strings, and the painful cries of the wounded were the choir. The sounds were so dissonant they bled an uneasy feeling, a type of disquiet in his mind.

Severed arms marked a little trail uphill. The clean cut on the wound was the workmanship of Oscern's battleax.

The cough of another alerted him to the clumsy pacing of feet. It certainly wasn't Oscern. This person wanted his back to cleave into.

A kill was a kill, but inexperienced cowards went for the back, and the sloppy footwork proved it.

Rather than meet him, Lucan remained still. It was best if he allowed the enemy to think he was defenseless. When he stepped within his sword's reach, Lucan turned and severed the head. It was too easy, even for an Averyan soldier of short stature. The enemy's sword was too high in the air, and without a second to spare, his blade had met his neck.

Tired and shoulders slouched from swinging, Lucan sauntered towards the rolling head caught under the arm of a deceased soldier.

He moved the head with his blade, finding tears and terror frozen in the eyes. The stare froze him over, a stare he couldn't pry away until he upchucked his breakfast.

He heaved, plopping half-digested food and gagging at the stench in the air. How could someone so young be permitted to step into this hell and raise a blade?

Did he come because his gut was empty or because King Pann tore him from his family to serve in the name of honor? Lucan kneeled before him for a closer look. Soot smeared the boy's cheek and hands from the powder of the cannons. He was probably just a hired hand of the army, but then, what was he doing here?

Lucan wiped the moisture from his cheek and gently closed his eyes. He bit his bottom lip as he got up and paced from the body, using a dead Averyan soldier's back to clean the blood from his sword.

The boy didn't belong here. Was he saying that to ease his guilt?

He was no better. To stave his hunger in a prominent city, he worked as a mercenary. Profiting from the deaths of those he had no personal quarry with.

Damn Avery!

Damn me.

Fumbling down one of Meadow Valley's hills was another poor sod. He was an inch taller than the boy. He looked at his headless companion with gritting teeth. The boy raised his blade while Lucan kept his blade down. The stance was too wide. Already he could see how many times he could cut him down.

The boy suddenly halted. Those rage-filled eyes moved their focus to the person standing behind him. He shouted like a warrior and ran down, passing Lucan.

There was a struggle, some clanking of blades resounding from behind until it ended with a groan.

When Lucan turned, the boy was on the floor. Standing over him was an insufferable face with his wiry, copper-colored beard, Major Rudra or Major Dickhead among the lower ranks who detest him.

"Lucan!" The confident fool wore no helmet, allowing his small eyes to squint at him. "Why didn't you take the boy down?"

Lucan spat at the ground and ignored him. A proper soldier of his stature was coming from his left, pointing his spear at him. Reach was a problem when it came to the sword, and Colonel Finsley reprimanded him for not picking up the preferred choice. It had nothing to do with pride, he just knew how blades worked.

The Averyan soldier parted his legs and thrust the spear. Lucan shifted back, aware of the feint of his point, moving up before trying to attack the abdomen.

"Thought you were clever, didn't ya?" Major Rudra was watching, amused that he almost fell for it.

Lucan kept his blade against the spearman, steadily circling him and watching his enemy focus on him. When the soldier's right knee bent for the next thrust, he moved in. The spear whooshed as he moved to the left side and glided the spearhead against his sword. Once it reached his crossguard, he deflected it to the side and struck the soldier's chest. He crashed to the ground, shuffling to his back while pressing the cut on his collarbone.

As Lucan readied his blade to end him, Major Dickhead stepped in and pressed his boot over the groaning man's wound.

"What are you doing?" Lucan asked.

"Give him a few moments to breathe." The tinted white part of the Major's eyes was yellow, like the abscess of an infected wound. He wasn't a drinker, but he must be suffering an illness—only a sick man would marvel at an agonizing man. "You easily intercepted this one, but why did you spare the other?" His flirtatious tone made his stomach churn. "Let me guess, young boys are your weakness?"

Lucan parted his legs and prepared for the next soldier to come up the hill. That boy didn't deserve his blade, but, of course, Rudra would be a tightwad about it. "The enemy is the enemy," he assured, giving him the attention he craved.

"Good. Just making sure we are getting our money's worth, you damned Rimans seem to enjoy idling around."

"I'm doing my job."

Major Rudra's eyes widened at the incoming soldier. Lucan bent his knees and swung his sword upward, taking his ax, turning it, and penetrating the enemy's back with his own blade.

"Puh." Major Rudra spat at the ground. "*Your* job is to look for Avery's Riman bastards who may degrade our advancement. Stop showing off and leave the war to us."

"That's why I gave you the boy," Lucan said. "He needed someone at his skill level to fight him."

Major Rudra plodded towards him, and his sword slightly went up. "I'll show you some respect, you little shit."

A hand gripped Lucan's shoulder and gently shook him. "Sir Rudra, don't ruin your mood on my good friend here. He's merely pulling your leg." Zorn. Already kissing ass. "*Clearly,* he's afraid of hurting boys. He's traumatized, you know, with us losing our village at a tender age."

The grip on Major Rudra's sword loosened. If there was one person who had more leverage over the Major, it was Zorn. The Major had a soft spot for him and watched him like a sick man. "Yes, that's what I thought." He gave the young soldier he dropped a sneering look and left.

"Lucan," Zorn said, watching Rudra holler at the soldiers nearby, fist clenching as he left. "What the hell are you doing? The enemy is retreating, and here you are picking fights with Major Dickhead."

Lucan moved Zorn's hand off and went up the hill. "I checked the east region. It's fruitless. There's no Child of Rima to fight." He didn't need to see if his friend followed him. His boots barely touched the ground. Zorn's ability to levitate over any surface won many surprises from the enemy, as the last thing they wanted to see was his friend floating like some ghost with a spear in hand and a dagger on his belt.

"Care to explain what happened?" Zorn still carried the same energetic voice he always had. The sharp tongue he hated. "You trying to get us out of a job?"

"Major *Dickhead* was picking a fight," he defended. "Saw a boy who looked at him like he had done something personal to him, so

I let him try his luck." The young soldier he took down flashed back into his mind. "I don't think they were from Avery. They were too young and poorly dressed. Something tells me they worked in the cannon department."

"And now he's dead, but we're the ones who need to deal with this shit, slaving away for coins." Zorn's hands firmly rested on his waist.

"Hey, I don't spend coin on company half as much as you do."

"Precisely why I need this job. Sex workers are expensive—" His voice fell short.

Mounted on horseback, a lone soldier approached them. He had to be the last poor fool who didn't hear the call to retreat or saw it was too late.

"You surrendering?" Lucan called.

The rider charged at them. "You mercenaries picked the wrong side."

Zorn sped towards him, gliding in the air, hand neatly on his dagger, with his spear in the other. The rider raised his halberd. The weapons alone would have decided the fight, except the foolish rider thought Zorn was going to meet him head-on.

Zorn swept under this horse's legs and struck at the belly. He could be unseen by how craftily he moved. The rider attempted to recover, but Zorn had already finished him with his spear.

Nothing but the dead and haze on the battlefield decorated the trenches. Even as he counted the dead corpses across Meadow's Valley, he could still hear clattering steel and men yelling.

"Lucan." He recognized that deep voice from the sea of stares. Since they were enlisted, Oscern's broad shoulders grew more muscle than Zorn and his combined. His tight black curls were braided and wrapped into four sections, where gold trinkets and clips moved his braids into abstract shapes. "You said you were going south. That must be why Major Rudra went looking for you."

Lucan passed him. "Anything else you want to point out?"

Oscern covered his nose. "Worry instead about the stink you have. When was the last time you washed your ass?"

Lucan shrugged and flicked bits of dirt off his shoulder. He stepped on horse dung and didn't care to wipe it off.

Oscern's stare softened. "Having those nightmares again?"

"No, just something that happened on the battlefield."

Oscern patted his back. "You're so crude. Bottling up like that is what may be causing those dreams."

"Doubt it." Lucan looked to his right. "Where did that dimwit go?"

"Zorn? Probably digging the dead's pocket to clear his gambling debt." Oscern nudged him to keep walking. "Come, let's report to our commander and get our pay."

The encampment was just outside the Gypsian Forest. Where the nomadic travelers were so weary of outsiders entering their forests, they fenced the place up. Among their forests were Grandi trees, conifer trees that contested the height of castles, swaying in the distance.

From afar was a tiny foretaste of the kingdom the Gypsians had the rotten luck to have as neighbors, Vinol. High city walls with its back against the sea. The only reason Vinol never bothered the Gypsians was that they needed their medicine, so it would be a risky business to enrage them.

Lucan dusted what he could off his trousers, picking at any lint the naked eye could see. Colonel Finsley was adamant about his soldiers looking presentable. The Vinolian soldiers came and went, picking up their pay before them and retreating to get washed, perhaps cool their throats with some beer, while they had to wait. Some didn't pass him without giving him a threatening look, which Lucan returned with the same steel gaze. They were on the same side of the war, but Skiar, three years of service and they still distrust him?

When it came to those xenophobic soldiers, Zorn ate any good or negative attention. His friend always lacked common decency and thus invited many fights—depending on how much he had to drink—he could handle his own.

Colonel Finsley stepped out of his tent and caught them standing by. He approached them, hand always on his scabbard. He was an old fellow who was a veteran of war and one he often looked up to. He had seen every twist and turn the enemy could make. The only problem was his blind loyalty to Vinol.

Coming behind him was that damned copper-haired asshole. His stare scooped over Oscern and met him. His frown deepened, his

focus switching from him and Oscern as if Zorn would appear behind them.

"You men have been under Vinol's banner for how long?" Colonel Finsley asked.

Oscern let his hands rest on his hips. "About three years, sir." He was so tall his back drooped from how often he hunched to stay at everyone's eye level.

"And have we not been hospitable? Bringing three young men into our country and joining our ranks?"

"You've been more than hospitable," Oscern continued, this time with a curt bow. That or he was hunching again. He couldn't tell sometimes.

"Then please explain why Rudra saw you, Lucan Greystone, permitting an enemy to get through you?"

So, that flat-lipped pucker fish opened his mouth. "I didn't see him, Colonel."

Colonel Finsley didn't look convinced. It was his attention to detail that must've made it easy for him to read a bullshitter. "I know you're not a Child of Rima, Lucan, and you've kept up with your friends for this long. Ace was right when he vouched for you and your companions, but you know better than to let the enemy pass you after a call to retreat."

If he made it this far, it was because his swordsmanship had gotten better. With all the noise, he couldn't fully use the ability that made him see beyond normal eyesight—not that it would be useful. "We've been here for a week. Sometimes, I can't tell who among the battleground is dead or standing."

It seemed to be enough because Colonel Finsley turned to Rudra. "See? The lad did not see him."

Major Rudra grumbled and barked. "My eyes did not betray me. He knew the enemy was coming at me!"

"Boy," Lucan corrected. "King Galrug's army may have retreated, but they didn't make it far by the backs of thirteen-year-olds. They were Vinolean, your people, Colonel."

"What are you saying?" said Colonel Finsley.

CHAPTER 3

LUCAN

Major Rudra's jaw hung, and after coming out of battle, those crusty lips could catch flies. What made him think he didn't have the audacity to rat him out? Because of him, young blood forever stained his hands.

"Lucan." Colonel Finsley's patience was wearing thin. "I don't like to repeat myself.

"Right." Lucan straightened his posture. "The first boy I took down was covered in soot, similar to the boys who help transport powder to the cannons. My guess is they grabbed some weapons off the dead while Avery retreated. The second boy swept past me and gave me the suspicion that perhaps there were ulterior motives, and that person was Major Rudra."

"You're lying…" Spit hung from Major Rudra's bottom lip. His face had gone beyond the color of a chili pepper, and the corners of his lips were foaming. "Those little rats had no business coming into a man's war!"

Colonel Finsley raised an eyebrow. His glare then shifted to Major Rudra. "You *knew* they were underage?"

"Colonel."

"And if they were as young as Lucan claimed, you could have taken that boy down easily." The Colonel rubbed his temple. He didn't seem surprised but rather annoyed. Major Rudra's face went red, hands balled into a fist. That enough confirmed his suspicions. "Those boys will be inspected, and if they're Vinolean, you'll have a talking to straight to my superior, your father. Now leave my sight at once, Rudra."

In one huff, the Major left.

"What a careless fool." Colonel Finsley stared at the charred battlefield. He composed himself by straightening his posture. "Avery has tested His Majesty's patience by bringing the battle close to the city, and for that, we will pay them twice fold."

"How do we go about it?" Oscern asked.

"Their call to retreat is the start of a successful campaign, and if we continue to win, they'll be forced over Lotter's Mountain." Colonel Finsley tiredly gave them the same pay, each bag of coin weighing the same. "Get some rest, but do not leave the city."

Lucan jumped when another hand came up behind him to pick up his share.

"A pleasure as always, Colonel Finsley." Zorn sang.

That sneaky mud runner!

The Dustbowl was a cabaret in Vinol's lower and oldest district. Being every soldier's payday, every inn or tavern in the city was at full capacity. For entertainment, there were gambling rooms, the succulent food of every imaginable dish in the region, and most importantly, cheap booze and cheap rooms to rent on the second floor. Patrons from the upper class mostly came to taste the exquisite meals or the women of the night who were eager to give attention.

"I say we stay." Oscern's thumb was fumbling over the other, eyes searching at the crowd. "Colonel Finsley sounded serious about our next campaign."

Lucan dropped his tankard down. Foaming beer glided off the rim. "We agreed to hit Mudburrow after we were done with this battle, not *another*." It was when he was out of Vinol that his mind could feel still and not spin like it had on the battlefield.

"We're better off waiting a few more days to see when Colonel Finsley needs us." Oscern gave him a steady look. "But, of course, you have the final call."

Lucan lowered his gaze. There was no point in looking at him like that or talk like he didn't have a choice. When was he going to realize that? The old ways died when Aelith fell.

On rare occurrences, the other survivors they ran into had no better life than theirs. If the fever didn't take them, it was their addictions or the trauma of what they witnessed. But now that home was a ruined blotch on the map, his pride succumbed to his drinks and, when he felt empty, the company of women.

"We will stay." Zorn snatched a turkey leg from one of the passing servers and plopped onto the chair next to Lucan. "Colonel Finsley can't call on us for all of Vinol's battles, and the more time we don't work, the more coins we spend. It's stupid, really."

"Don't count on it," Lucan said. "King Pann wants Vinoleans to win the war by their merits."

Zorn chomped on the meat and grinned, showing bits of the white turkey between his teeth. "But if he didn't, we'd have enough money to buy some land—maybe start our own pub?"

Oscern grumbled. "I highly doubt it when you two don't know how to save money."

"I have enough," Lucan refuted. "More than Zorn."

"That's because you don't have a life, and I'm an expensive man." Zorn grazed his hand over his fine vest. "What's wrong with playing a few games and looking good?"

"Getting into gambling debt."

"I don't owe *that* much!"

Just as Lucan was about to snap back, a hand massaged his shoulders.

"There's my wavy-haired stud." That singing voice was Tabetha. She covered her nose and scrunched her face. "Uck. You stink like shit."

Lucan looked at his boots. "Oh right."

Tabetha then fluttered her long lashes and sang. "But how I missed you."

Lucan raised a single silver coin between his index and middle fingers. "You mean you miss this?"

Tabetha reached for it, fingers spread out like spider legs. Lucan threw it at Zorn, who caught it. Tabetha blew air out loudly and smacked his shoulder. She abandoned his side, attracted by the coin like a bee to pollen.

"Oh, Zorn." She gently brushed what little she could of his short blond hair. "Did I ever tell you how lovely those blue eyes look on your pretty little pale face?"

Zorn raised his eyebrows and went for his drink. "Oh, that's a new one."

"And did you know *you're* the most gorgeous-looking man when it comes to these two brutes? Oscern is a stiff looker, and Lucan is a little ugly."

Zorn almost spilled his drink and laughed. "Yeah, I know, now move aside." He had already embarked on a staring match with his usual pick, a man similar in his age and build.

Tabetha gave Oscern a curt nod but never gave him that sort of attention.

In terms of nightly company, Lucan and Zorn did what any single man would do, but not Oscern. It had to be his faith and or the fact that Delilah ensnared him.

"Speak of the devil," Lucan whispered.

Delilah was a short little thing with frost-blond curly hair and child-rearing hips. Every time she stepped into the room, the men would stand and bow. Forget King Pann and his royal family. She was the only regal queen who kept another woman's husband happy, but no man ever remained committed to her because she had three mouths to feed. With a body like hers, she probably made enough coin, but Vinol wasn't a paradise for cheapskates. Everyone needed a place to stay, and according to Oscern, her oldest, Rohm, was attending a respected school.

Oscern tucked his fists under the table after the first man won her favor with a bouquet. It was dreadful to watch his friend go through this again. Oscern's powers prevented him from feeling any physical pain, but whenever Delilah left with a customer, Lucan could see his friend die a little.

Zorn flung the coin back. Lucan caught it and put it back in his pocket. He chugged his tankard empty, noticing the grime under his nails. "I do need a bath."

Tabetha clapped her hands and skipped toward him. "Then I'll happily join you and get you nice and squeaky clean."

"Not tonight," he said, rising from his chair. "I'm tired, my feet are sore, and I just want to sleep."

Tabetha locked her arms around his. She wasn't taking no for an answer. From the way she looked at the other women, she didn't want to risk losing a customer, her meal for the day.

Oh well. Business is business. Before he left, Delilah was sneaking behind his friend.

"Hello, Oscern." Her chirpy voice must have trickled down his back because he straightened it. "You having the usual tonight?"

"Yes," he said, clearing his throat.

Her lashes flickered when he caught her gaze, and her glossy pink lips smirked. Oscern kept his head straight, but the slight bite under his lip showed he was nervous.

Delilah did nothing to seduce him. She would sit with him and talk, Skiar knew what the hell came out of Oscern's mouth, but he knew how to make her laugh.

A man grabbed her waist and lifted Delilah. Her little boots kicked as she giggled. It seemed they had already made an arrangement, as only a paying customer would take her in that matter.

"Pick up your feet," Tabetha said, guiding him up the stairs.

Lucan followed, cursing the same outcome repeat itself. Zorn was right. Oscern needed to sleep with someone, anything to get over that siren. At this point, he was open to just knocking him unconscious and having Tabetha lay next to him so he could think something had happened.

"Ease up, Lucan." Tabetha squeezed his arm. "No matter who she sees, Delilah has a soft spot for that hunk of muscle."

"Hard to tell after she just went with a customer."

"She has little mouths to feed and tries her best to give them the life she couldn't have, and that costs money."

"Oscern *has* money. He could give her a steady lifestyle for her and her children."

"And no woman is going to wait for an indecisive man."

"How admirable."

"Yeah?" Tabetha mocked, not sounding convinced. "And why won't he take her—oh wait, I know, she's not a Riman."

"It's more complicated than that." It didn't mean Oscern didn't try to convert her, or at least, consider a giant celestial walked the land.

"Complicated how?" Tabetha winked at the clerk who managed the upstairs rooms. "By taking him to that fortune teller so he can get over Delilah?"

Lucan shrugged. "I still don't like that she befriends him and hurts him just the same."

Tabetha rolled her eyes. "Lucan, you're just as bad. You don't know when a good woman is standing in front of you, and you can't blame it all on Marca."

He stopped before reaching the first step of the stairs. "Who told you about Marca?"

"Zorn."

"That weasel."

The conversation ended there, and he couldn't be more than relieved. Tabetha meant well, and sure, maybe Delilah felt something for his friend, but this was beyond Marca or Delilah not being Riman. The normalcy of life wasn't something he or his friends saw in the future. That's why Zorn liked to talk about buying land but never saved a coin for it, why Oscern and Delilah had a strange relationship. After witnessing everything they love engulfed in flames, why would anyone want to return to such a life? Settling down was just disguising what was always plain in sight.

Destruction could take them at any time.

CHAPTER 4

ELENE

It took two days of rumbling winds and rain before the sky cleared. The afternoon sun was high, but not a chirp of any bird could be heard on Vine Road. The working anvil of several blacksmiths chipping at hot metal hushed their songs. The rough-looking men who rested under the shade of the trees were not traders, nor were they passing by. More Averyans have made it to the North, conscripted by their king to siege the regions that hardly saw battle.

To keep the blacksmith's stare from lingering, Elene stayed near Fior and his mighty legs. He was a black draft horse that didn't second guess when to steer the wagon even after heavy rain. Helping him push the load was Ivory, their gray horse with white pigments. With difficult paths or sudden noises, he needed blinders and encouragement, and because of the sinking mud, they almost got her father's four-wheeled wagon stuck in a ditch, but with encouragement and Fior pulling the burden, they were back on the road.

Elene hummed to fight their droning efforts of clanking metal. One of the Averyans lingering by opened his flask and gave it a drink. The thought of drinking spirits didn't help her pulsing headache.

"You alright?" Her brother, Wein, walked near her when the next blacksmith passed by.

Elene grazed her hand up the back of her neck, picking up her new habit of measuring the shape of her head.

"Elene?"

"I'm fine."

"Good because we're resting once we're halfway through Grazen Fields."

"Really?" She gave him a look. Wein was above the average height, and the green hat with the red feather made him look a few inches taller, as it would to any respectable trader of the Red Guild. "I think you're just trying to avoid the inevitable."

"Maybe," he said, half smiling. "But I hope you came up with a reasonable excuse because gambling and alcohol will not help your case."

"It's the truth, ain't it?"

Wein shook his head but said nothing.

That night, they sat around the campfire. Finally, some silence, no blacksmith, no talk of the war, and no Lyrin Town to worry about. Wein went to feed the horses, a job Elene often did if it wasn't for her headache. Gourd joined him, just in case anything happened.

Father wouldn't let Wein leave Melodia without hiring protection, and because Rüfus and Pete were his childhood friends, they often tagged along. Mother thought three guards were too much to pay, but Gourd, who was a new member of their group, charged less than Rüfus and Pete, but only because he wanted an excuse to leave Melodia.

Elene massaged her temple, barely standing the fire's light.

Rüfus passed his bottle of mead for her to take. "It will help with the hangover." He gave her a wink. "Just don't go overboard like you did last night."

After giving it a swig, she returned the bottle and wrapped herself in her cloak even more. "Damn me for not bringing any pain relievers."

"Hope you learned your lesson," Wein said, returning from his task. When he sat next to her, she looked at his hair with envy. He was six years her senior, but he was more like a twin. They thought alike, said little, and enjoyed being on the road. Wherever he went, she was there to go.

The sound of hooves was plodding on the soil.

Rüfus dropped his bottle and swiftly took his sword from his belt. Pete and Gourd did the same, leaving the campfire and asking whoever was approaching not to come near.

Elene went to her feet and peered at who it could be, but Wein had his arm out, keeping her behind him.

The shadow became a man on horseback. Behind, they could hear the group who followed him. He stared down at them, visor open for them to look at his eyes.

"Gentlemen." His eyes squinted at her but moved over to her brother. "Quite a lovely night to have after so much rain, isn't it?"

Wein's posture stiffened, as if the question paralyzed him. Maybe it was because while their friends had spears and combat training, they had only their daggers to defend themselves. Her brother always wanted a guard's job, but as the only Harrow son, he had to choose the family business.

The armored man's stare narrowed. Their silence must have pinched at his nerves. "Where are you heading? Clearly someplace secured, but you don't look like Appleton folks."

Pete turned slightly to Wein, who nodded. "We're from Melodia."

"Ah… Rimans." The dark, brooded man turned to look at his men. "Sorry to startle you, good folk. Didn't know you were locals."

"We're resting until dawn's first light, but we can leave sooner if you wish." Wein kept his arm over her, still in a protective posture.

"By all means, take your time, gentlemen. Seeing your destination is through those Grandi trees, you will be of more aid to me. King Galrug will launch his army in these lovely Grazen Fields, and they will be very thirsty. The Beaven River, as you know, travels richly in Appleton and breaks closely through your mountains. But water cannot fetch itself. Seeing your Rima's trees can be violent against ill-willed trespassers, may I speak to your Head Maiden, so I can establish an agreement? You'll be paid on account that you support our cause."

"Melodia has no Head Maiden," Gourd answered. "It's managed by a cleric." Gourd was a redhead with cloudy tight curls. He was a petite man and the youngest Melodian guard, as they celebrated his nineteenth birthday yesterday.

"But we can pass on the message just the same," Wein added. "Who do we get in contact with?"

"You won't have trouble there. Expect a flourish of tents upon these very lands this week." He waved his hand, and the horses that

were hard to see started to move. "Ah, and before I go, gentlemen. We do not take lightly to Vinolean sympathizers. Consider that my one and final warning. Goodnight." The man and his horse left, following the noise of his group.

Amidst the silence, Rüfus was the first to lower his sword. "The entitlement of Southerners coming into our lands and ordering us around."

"We got the Vinoleans to blame for that," said Pete. "Imarus and Tremoren are ant kingdoms compared to Vinol and Avery, and seeing they closed their gates last month, there's no one to safeguard these parts."

"Alright we get it. Now let's all get some shut eye," said Wein. "We have a vital message to deliver.

"You can't possibly think I will get some sleep after that," Gourd said. "It's as my father feared. King Galrug will soon want to make us all Averyan."

"Over my dead body," grumbled Rüfus.

Wein dismissed their concerns as he hardly let his emotions run him. "It won't be the last time we see another Averyan soldier, so start keeping those thoughts to yourself."

Elene spent the remainder of the night staring at the way home. Folklore often surrounded forests that effectively kept most city folk from visiting. Trees grew fast and plentifully near Rima's White Oak, and to some, that was a bad omen. Some say the forest was the portal to another world, others that it was the gateway to hell. That creepy, crawly things linger in the dark to take travelers or the firstborn child of neglectful mothers. But any person who spent their life surrounded by a forest as she has would find quite the opposite. Hidden in the lushness of plants were little stories, voices of a forgotten world. On hard times, it was the home to wandering bears and packs of wolves that claimed the continental drift of the mountains. In the spring, the foxes and beavers borrowed its beauty. No matter its tales and life-giving atmosphere, it was not the world Elene imagined herself to be in.

Her world was a land of the sunflowers she grew, where she would push back her green prison with their crispy gold leaves honorably facing the sun and in the late summer seeds to harvest.

The way through Iven Forest was a more dirt than the cobblestone road it once was. Droplets of water covered the ferns, which were rightfully taking the moisture for themselves. Many who wandered off the road could easily get lost in the Grandi trees. To prevent this, the temple clerics hung various lanterns of different shapes above them. Star-shaped ornaments, gold mushrooms crafted out of wires, to glass orbs flowed with the breeze. The Maidens bathed them in light so that even in the day, their light would guide the lost.

Wein was carrying a long face, back almost hunched as he rode the wagon forward. From the concerned look on his face, he was probably thinking of that Averyan soldier, or he was still burned out from having to travel to Lyrin Town for the fourth time. Leaving Melodia for weeks and trading his wool was a demanding job. Though she never stepped into the town, she had seen buyers on Vine Road badger him with questions and test the fibers from length to length. No matter how well they appeared, someone was always uptight or unhappy.

"Did you notice?" she said, nudging Wien's arm. Anything to turn that frown into a smile. "That Averyan thought I was a man."

Wein looked at her and groaned at the state of her hair. Like Father, Wein's hair was as dark as hers, but like their sister Terra, he got Mother's beautiful blue eyes while she got Father's dark brown eyes, no different from Fior's. Although anything her black steed had, she naturally admired.

Rather than some gate to enter, two white pillars marked the entrance to Melodia. The major roads were made of brick from every shade of red. The central market was busy, lined with vendors who sold their farm tools, produce, and handmade goods. The roundabout road and crowded buildings. Their only tavern, Sundale, was the perfect place to play some dice and drink their cool beer.

The two available inns were made with dark grey bricks, with white window panels and red shutters. Pansies grew from their window box, nodding in the breeze.

Elene only ever stepped inside an inn once, and that was to help her father deliver the innkeeper's order of wool blankets. The wallpaper, the smell of a home-cooked meal, the dark cherry wood

stairs that led to the rooms. If only she could see what each room looked like, what it was like to be serviced for a night's stay.

"Come on, men, the sooner we talk to him, the better we can prepare," said Pete, turning to the Avenue. "Cleric Aaron is going to tighten security after this."

"Until our next trip." Rüfus winked at her again, and she only smiled.

"Hopefully, your Pa will change his mind about you being a guard," Gourd said to Wein, offering him hope.

"Say hello to Corie for me," Elene said, waving as he left.

Wein clicked his tongue, leading the horses up the hill. "Father will never change his mind. Something is always happening back home. Mother buying things out of impulse, or another hired hand leaving Melodia to work in Lyrin Town."

"That's why we're lucky to have you," Elene said, patting his shoulder. "He knows that."

As Fior and Ivory continued up the road, a group of middle-aged women walked on the sidewalk, carrying an arrangement of flowers. The one in the middle was Melodia's flower and tea shop owner, Mrs. Brel. The moment she stopped, her gossiping friends did the same.

Wein stopped the horses so they could safely cross. He nodded at them as a greeting. Instead of a 'thank you' or 'hello,' Mrs. Brel grabbed her shawl and covered her face, eyes unwilling to lock on her as she hurriedly crossed the street. The other women did the same, catching up to her but not before giving her one last glance.

"They act like I'm Murella herself," Elene muttered.

"You don't make it easy for them." Terrific. Wein had to be in a bad mood to be giving her his peace of mind.

"Why ask a stinkbug to have a change of heart when it's going to spray the moment it gets angry?"

Wein didn't respond, but at least she got a smile out of him.

Not far were two guards, hands resting neatly on the hilt of the sword. They were speaking to a tiny old woman in long robes with a blue sash. The trotting horses must have caught her attention as they passed them because she glimpsed at them.

"Elene Harrow!" she called, waving at them. "Just the doll I wanted to see."

Wein stopped the horses and released a long, sorrowful sigh.

"I'm sure she just wants to talk about Terra," Elene encouraged.

As she got closer, the old woman's eyes widened from the same shock Mrs. Brel had. "Skiar, what has happened to your hair!"

"Good afternoon, Maiden Derli." Elene grazed her nails over her short hair. "I trimmed it."

"Blessed Rima, that is no trim, and you have chosen the wrong time to do such a terrible thing."

"It was out of my control. Lyrin Town has some crafty dice players—ouch!" Wein had pinched her arm. "What I meant to say is I grew a fever and was in a bit disturbed state. In my delirium, I cut my hair to cool down."

Maiden Derli's eyes narrowed. "Of course, I'll pretend I didn't hear what you previously said. Anyhow, I was on my way to visit your parents."

"Please, join us," Elene said, stepping down to give her seat away.

Wein stared ahead. Turns out it wouldn't be a brief chat after all.

Maiden Derli nervously took her seat while Elene shuffled to the back.

As they continued, more stares followed, eyes gaping at her hair. The town was behind, and the country road opened. The closer they got to their father's property, the more nervous she was getting.

"A wrap will have to do," Maiden Derli had been staring at her, smiling. Her hair was braided at the ends, held up, and tied by cerulean seashells. "A nice head wrap with my essential oils will help grow your hair back and full."

"Oh, I wasn't—"

"It will also keep those eyes from staring at what you've done to your hair."

Wein cleared his throat. He was telling her to go with it. After all, who says no to Melodia's matchmaker and oldest Maiden?

"Thank you," she said. "I'll think about it."

Wein brought the wagon to a stop, close enough to the house. A farmhand who had been carrying stacks of hay went to meet him. He helped unstrap the horses so he could bring them to the barn.

Elene hurried up the porch. In finding the door locked, she knocked. While Maiden Derli caught up, she started to wipe her

hands on her dress. Wein was passing the peach tree, hands deep in his pockets.

The sound of boots followed. Upon opening the door, her mother smiled at her until a few blinks revealed her surprise. Her stare then moved to Maiden Derli, and the door widened. She turned and shouted from the stairs for Terra to come down. "Elene, go get your father."

Seeing her mother was thrilled, Elene hurried to the stables. Wein was heading to the country road. "You're not staying?" she asked, loud enough for him to hear.

He turned and shook his head. "I want to see what Cleric Aaron is going to do. Keep me posted."

In the barn, Fior and Ivory were back in their stalls. At the working table was a tall man with broad shoulders, nailing what looked like new wiring for their fence. Her steps didn't waver him, so she got closer. His full beard was groomed neatly with no stray ends. Most of his peppered hair was coming from his widow's peak and combed back where he tied it with a simple knot. His loyal dog, Pepe, was resting by his feet.

"Excuse me, master." Elene deepened her voice to sound husky and stomped her boots as if to mimic a heavy man. "I'm looking for some work."

"You found the right place," he said. "I lost all my hired hands and…" His eyes moved to her, and his lips hung.

Elene meant for him to take her joke and for them to laugh, but his words sunk into her chest. "Father—what happened with the workers?"

"What in Skiar have you done to your hair!"

"Ah, you see, I lost a bet," Elene smiled. "So, I gave them my hair as payment." She was near blaming the powerful spirits that made the room spin, but she tucked those words under her teeth. "Ah, and before you say anything, Maiden Derli is here!"

Father took a deep breath. He took her arm like he often did when she was away and gave her a tight embrace. Elene breathed hay and spices on his vest.

When he released her, he frowned at her hair. "I thought you liked your hair long."

"And I cried all the tears I could when I chopped it off."

Father's stare fell. "Really? Thought you don't like Lyrin Town…."

"It happened in the campsites," she corrected.

Slightly moving his head back, he flicked her forehead. "Let's go see what the matchmaker has for us."

"And the hired help?" she asked, taking his arm. "What's become of John and Nader?"

"Moved to Lyrin Town. Just like the last guy who's here."

"Do you need me to help?"

A look of concern swept over him. "You already herd the sheep and prep the wool. You help enough."

Mother served tea in the living room. Everyone sat appropriately with father and mother, taking the main seat by the fireplace. Across was Maiden Derli, seer of the soul, or so people said, who managed sacred Vows of Marriage.

Mother held Father's arms while her younger sister, Terra, stared at her bald head with flat lips and wide eyes.

Maiden Derli laid her blue cloth over the table. It wasn't silk, but the fabric had a type of sheer against the light. Sewn into the center was a sun, with its rays of light stretching to the end of the cloth. The bag she placed on top was made of brown leather, with the outline of Rima's White Oak burned in the center. From the shape, it looked like she was keeping marbles but instead laid across her collection of pyrites or fool's gold to the untrained eye. The rest were grey and blue stones, polished enough to reflect their faces.

Maiden Derli was an expert in reading stones, a divine intervention she says was gifted to her by Skiar. It was just lithomancy to Elene, something the women she befriended at Lyrin Town would do to make a quick coin, but here, it decided the fate of anyone who made a Vow of Marriage.

"The stones have spoken to me, and they have called out the Harrow family." Maiden Derli said.

"Not to intrude on your announcement." In Father asking, Mother went to squeeze his hand. He shut his eyes and continued. "But you haven't told us which of our daughters the rocks called upon."

"That's why I'm here." Maiden Derli picked up the stones and held them with both of her hands. She hummed to them and rocked forward and back.

Elene, who wanted to laugh, looked at Terra, who responded by silently saying the words, 'focus.'

Maiden Derli dropped the stones, and everyone jumped.

Two stones tumbled and rolled off the table, but most were touching the thread of the sun rays while a few were in the gaps. Maiden Derli nodded, seemingly aware that she understood.

By that stare alone, it looked like Mother's eyeballs were going to pop off and roll on the table next. Meanwhile, Father listened soberly.

Elene's heart skipped a bit when Maiden Derli focused on her. "Your eldest daughter, Elene Harrow."

Mother's glowing skin went pale. "Pardon?"

"What about our youngest, Terra?" Father said calmly. "Have they said her name?"

"The stones have chosen only Elene." Maiden Derli said with a smile, contrasting the tension in the room. It had gotten so quiet a sheep was heard bleating in the distance. Suddenly, the Maiden seemed to have read the room. "Are you Harrows displeased by the stone's fortune?"

Father glanced at Mother, then at Maiden Derli. "This is the second time for Elene, so I want things to go right to be certain her years of waiting are not for naught."

Maiden Derli chuckled, her shoulders relaxed, and she picked up the stones. "You're a good father, Matias. If Skiar wills it, everything will go accordingly."

"But she's well-seasoned for her age," Mother said matter-of-factly. "Terra is twenty-one and has given her Vow of Marriage the moment she turned eighteen."

"Not all is lost, Mrs. Harrow." Maiden Derli picked up the two stones that rolled under the chair. It was rude not to help her, but they couldn't. Only she could touch them. "Your young Terra will have her time, I will see it through, but we must press our focus on Elene as she will take the stage at the Engagement Ceremony."

"And what are we to do with Elene's…" Mother looked at her hair again before looking back.

"I have an oil with my own special ingredients that will help her hair regrow." Maiden Derli slowly got up. "Now, if there isn't anything else, I will take my leave."

With a brief intake of air, Mother went to the kitchen, heels hammering the hardwood floor.

"You really think that will help her condition?" Terra said, interest piqued by the mention of the oil. "Because I would like my hair a tad bit longer."

Maiden Derli smiled. "The oils were taken from Rima's White Oak. It is not something I can give for vanity's sake."

Father turned to Terra, who avoided eye contact by fluffing out her dress.

Mother returned with the jarred peaches they picked last summer. It seemed the walk did her good, there was no protest in her eyes, or perhaps it was buried underneath, kept tight like her sealed jars.

While she and Father escorted the Maiden out of the house, Elene groaned and sat on the seat. "Sorry, Terra."

Her sister sat on the sofa's arm panel, arms crossed. "Forget that. I want to know why, in all that is good, you cut your hair like a boy?"

"I got a fever."

Terra rolled her eyes. "A fever…*really*?"

"*Really*."

A pair of stomping feet returned. By the sound alone, they passed Terra and came toward her. Just as Elene turned, a sting crossed her cheek and shot through her right eye socket. The hand didn't hit her there, but her eyelid shut like it had.

Father, who stood at the entrance, escalated his voice that very moment.

"No, Matias, don't barge in." Mother's glaring eyes never moved from her hair. "You will apply the oil Maiden Derli will give you."

"I never said I wasn't." Elene's voice cracked. Her throat had pinched all the way through, and her body was burning, hand still pressed against her sizzling cheek.

"And you'll wear a turban to cover that awful look."

"I'll think about it."

"No, you *will* wear it."

She could only sit still and listen to her heartbeat in her breathing. She was beyond Terra's age, and yet Mother treated her like she was nine.

"Norma, leave it." Father's deep voice came like a breeze. "Elene is free to decide how she wishes to look."

"And look what your coddling has done, Matias. She repaid us by tainting this family with her transgression. Your youngest daughter will never find happiness. She'll be old before Maiden Derli finds a proper suitor."

"I'm not short of suitors," Terra corrected softly as if not to agitate Mother. "I can annul my Vow of Marriage and find my own husband."

"That's not the point of this discussion." Out of frustration, Mother brushed her brown locks back. "Skiar is punishing us because Elene broke her first Vow of Marriage."

"Mother," Elene said calmly. That name. Always with that name.

"Rima's White Oak is suffering because you wanted to take matters into your own hand, because you thought you could decide when—"

"Enough!" Elene exclaimed. "I'm tired of hearing of Rima, of Skiar. You can't appease what doesn't exist!"

Another slap crossed the same cheek. This time Elene's upper teeth dug into her bottom lip so she wouldn't whimper. Terra was covering her face, heaving. Before Mother could give her another, Father went in between.

"No more Norma."

"Matias."

"I said no more!" Father took Elene's arm and walked her out of the house. The place she would still call home if she didn't ruin things.

Down the porch, he encouraged her towards the stables. "Take Fior with you. You'll be wise to wear a head wrap from here on, or your mother will be beside herself."

"Father… I'm a grown woman—I don't need to be treated—"

"Not a word. No more excuses. Go!"

Elene fled to the stables. She grabbed the halter from the wall and rushed to the stall belonging to Fior. As soon as she got inside, he moved from the hay feeder and in her direction, allowing her to

place the halter. After securing it, he reached in and nuzzled the side of her cheek. No matter how much she pretended she was fine, her shoulders were still shaking.

Placing the pad first, Elene aligned the wool blanket over it. The saddle had the girth and cinch ready, leaving her to just lay the saddle down. Tears streamed down her cheeks when she reached to bring the cinches under. Fior gave her back a little nudge, and she hiccupped from his touch. His left ear bent as she gently slid her hand down the bridge of his nose.

After securing the saddle, making sure it was aligned with the back of his shoulder, Elene mounted him.

Outside, Terra sat on the wooden bench under the peach tree, her focus centered on the direction of the noise coming from the house. There was nothing her younger sister could say, nothing she could do to stop their parents from arguing.

This was on her.

In one 'hup,' Fior sped her out of the family property. His powerful legs steered through the country road, her skirt blowing with the wind as he picked up speed. His ears bounced while his pitch-black hair swayed in every direction, its darkness glistening in the sun.

Vance, a cleric and Child of Rima, was up ahead, talking to a couple. His haughty gaze only worsened the acid she felt in her stomach. Because of what she did, Father lived his days looking over her shoulder, and Mother was no longer proud of her. Wein wouldn't need to find some excuse to camp for another day like they did in the Grazen Fields. Then there was Terra, her poor sister. She always talked about her wedding day, but Elene had become the obstacle to her happiness.

Tears clogging her view, she looked toward Melodia, where Rima's temple stood above all the other buildings. The stone tower bearing its white bell rang. By now, Camilla and the other Maidens were inside, singing for Rima like they did every afternoon.

Anything she did was never good enough for them. Everyone who knew of her transgression made her feel unusual, like a creature, caged and repulsed by its captor, and if they let her see the light of day again, it was to remind her that even the foulest things can breathe.

"No," she uttered under her breath, focusing on the road home. "They're the animals here, not me."

CHAPTER 5

LUCAN

Summer
Three months later
Lotter's Mountain

Colonel Finsley called for the rest of his army through the vicious cliffs of Lotter's Mountain. It was the most dangerous path on Vine Road, and their only rest was at the top. But overconfident travelers and traders erected dozens of graves with their wagons and scattered bones becoming their headstones.

The mountain was a treacherous seven-mile hike up and a seven-mile hike down. Like any chunk of rock with steep sides, there were always the risks of climbing and exhaustion for those who didn't have the lungs for it.

Lucan made it to the rest stop with the rest of Vinol's soldiers, but he was alone. Because Oscern and Zorn were the useful ones, they were deployed a week before him. Stuck with Major Rudra, he followed along in silence. The people at the rest stop were tense and forced to camp another day because Rudra wanted a clear path down the mountain.

As they descended, the surrounding mountain peaks around them howled from the wind, swimming through the crevasses. The high altitude nearly led a few soldiers to faint, and with the constant fog roaming throughout, the lack of visibility was a misstep from leading them to their doom.

Some were met with a not-so-lucky fate. Major Dickhead got into an argument with a family who made it halfway up, three hours from the rest area. After Major Rudra told them to turn back and go down. The husband implored otherwise, asking his soldiers to make room as the way back was already a death sentence. While he stood his ground, his wife and children waited with anxious eyes in the cart.

Lucan rubbed his stomach. He could still hear the cries of the family when Major Rudra commanded that they be tossed over, leaving the husband to watch. The look of every soldier, even the ones who followed his command, carried the same exhausting look as his. Nobody tried to reason with the major—the bastard had no value for life. And even if Lucan had tried, he would have done it sooner out of spite for him.

When the mountain was behind them and feet were back on the grounded road, there was still enough daylight to spare.

Colonel Finsley's encampment had moved up north towards a Riman town called Havekin. From what Lucan could pick up from passing soldiers, the battle seemed to have shifted because the campsite moved north.

"You bastards set camp and rest," Major Rudra announced, giving Lucan the stink eye. "But no wandering off where you don't belong."

While traversing through the camps, Lucan stopped two of Colonel Finsley's foot soldiers. "Have you men seen the Riman children?"

"Saw one of em' with the Colonel's scouts. They should'a been back 'round this time."

"Maybe bandits took 'em," his friend mused.

That damn blizzard from three years ago returned, Marca faking her being kidnapped, him fighting through bandits to reclaim her only to end up surrounded by her people. The months of heartache and the suspicion of women he grew over the years all started in this region.

"Spacing out again?" That high-and-mighty voice. Zorn snuck behind him again. His armor had wear and tear, but he looked unscathed. "We pushed back the enemy some." Zorn must have noticed sense his worry and led him down the tents. "Avery moved

their forces to a bustling place called Lyrin Town. I started to help weaken their defenses, only…"

"Only?"

"I ran into a Child of Rima. He had some strange ability because he vanished right before my eyes."

"You sure you weren't just seeing things?" Avery had hired plenty of Children of Rima before. Most were unbelievers, skeptics who lost their way but found a way to make money just like them. Unless Zorn had the upper hand, they wouldn't have retreated so suddenly, not when they were meant to strike each other down.

Zorn gave a long yawn. "Eh, maybe it was in my head—I did drink a few before we set out."

"A bit careless, don't you think?"

"Hey, you're not the only one who's tired of this three-year gig. Anyway, the sooner we get this over with, the sooner I get paid."

"You act like you're not putting your life on the line every time we come to battle. And what if that flicker you saw wasn't a Child of Rima but a bystander? Then how would you have taken care of it?"

"Balls, you're worse than I thought. You seriously need a vacation."

"Yeah? And we should've been on the road when we got the chance, but you wanted to make more blood coins."

Zorn released a high-pitched laugh. "Stop acting like some old war veteran. Your average soldier has seen trifold than us."

"Forget it." Lucan bumped his shoulder with his to get him out of the way and went to search for the big guy.

That damn Zorn, even if he explained, he still wouldn't understand. Death was an omniscient presence that left lasting effects on those who were hypersensitive. The first time he felt its touch was when Aelith fell. At first, he grew numb to the tug of every departed soul. But not when it happened before his eyes, like that boy he killed or the family Major Rudra tossed over Lotter's mountain. The soul ripping from countless bodies tattered his own, leaving him suffering the nights with a cold sweat.

Oscern stood among a group of scouts. His armor needed some repairs. It seemed whoever he came in contact with was trying to strike at his helmet or side. Layers of steel covered him and for good

reason. Strength and not being able to feel pain was an impressive ability but a dangerous trait if overlooked.

Seeing his approach, Oscern gestured him to follow away from the ears of others. "Avery's men have camped out not just in Lyrin Town but across Vine Road, all the way to Silk Bridge."

"Really?" Lucan crossed his arms and chuckled. "Major Dickhead said we should've won by the time we came down the mountain."

"Not by a long shot. Those Southern snobs prepared themselves far better than Vinol's men. We're heading west tonight to the expansive field, Grazen Fields." Oscern came to a full stop and observed the expanding lands ahead. "The forest nearby has giantess trees."

Lucan's stare narrowed. "Is there a Rima tree standing among them?"

"No, it's probably just another settlement, but it's good that Rimans won't get caught in another religious war."

The cooks rang their bells, calling for tonight's rationed food. Oscern went to get his share before Lucan stopped him. "Let's go to the tent. You could be suffering a wound you're not aware of."

Oscern grumbled. "I'm fine. I don't feel any leak."

"Oh, you mean like that time you forgot to mention that a Carpet viper bit your pinky? You endured it for hours before we noticed your hand turning purple?"

Oscern rubbed the back of his neck. "I told you I'm fine."

"Tent. Now."

"Skiar," he said. "Zorn was right. You need a vacation."

"Don't mention that cheeky bastard."

What remained of the sun sank on the other side of Pleada. More units of soldiers went to meet the heat of the battle, the ground thundering with their steps. It was still unclear who prompted the attack. They were a fair distance from the Grazen fields before Colonel Finsley started sending more units forward.

"Riman," a soldier said. "The Colonel wants you."

Sweat dripped down his neck, and his feet were still sore from the climb. The summer night burned like midday, and the torches lighting the way didn't help. With what little light showed on the ground were flowers that had not yet been battered and stomped. By morning, not a single petal would survive.

Zorn and Oscern had already met with the Colonel. He was holding his side, assisted by medical aid. "Those bastards want to strike in the night, then so be it." His stare moved to them. "We wouldn't have been successful undetected, not without the use of those powers to hold over us. You know your jobs. Kill any Riman bastard who dares use his powers against my men." With the help of his aide, he mounted his horse and left.

Avery must be adamant about claiming the West if they got another Child of Rima under their belt.

Zorn covered his mouth as he released a long yawn. "Say, think I can sneak back in the tent and get some shut-eye?"

Lucan elbowed his stomach, leaving him with little room to breathe. "This is serious. We got Children of Rima to confront."

"And this region has uneven terrains," said Oscern. "Bigger than we've ever seen—we could easily be separated and run into another enemy unit."

Zorn took Oscern's arm to hold his composure. "You scared?"

"I'm cautious."

"Alright, let's spread out." Lucan tugged at his steel-plated armor. Underneath was his mail and simple tunic. "We can't lose any more time."

Zorn started levitating from the ground, giving his two cavalry sabres a few turns. They were forty-four inches long, and each weighed over two pounds. They used to belong to Ace, but seeing they traveled this far west, he must have decided to bring them. "See you two in the morning."

"Wait," Lucan said, halting him and Oscern. "Take care. Both of you."

"You always say that," groaned Zorn. He reached over to scratch his short blond hair. "We're not kids anymore. We can defend ourselves, ya know?"

Lucan smiled and nodded. Assholes they sometimes were, but they were all he had. Oscern joined the north party, Zorn took the south, and Lucan stayed in the center.

He met the battle, joining the foot soldiers and clashing with the enemy. Any spare moment he had, he searched the crowd for a glowing mark on the middle finger. Even with the gloves on, the glow could sometimes pierce through leather and gauntlets. It was a shame there were no rogue Maidens who participated in these campaigns. They could detect the powers of any Child of Rima in half the time. They either thought the occupation was beneath them or were too noble to take jobs like these.

A Vinolian soldier stumbled toward him. "Sorry!" he stammered. "I'm nervous as hell."

"It's alright," Lucan said.

"I'm Rex." He looked like a typical foot soldier, a shaken one in this case.

"Lucan."

"Saw your gifted friend go up that hill. The big fellow? Think he found those Children of Rima?"

"Maybe." Six months ago, they ran into one who could bend metal at his will. He tried to do this with their blades and crush them with their armor. Luckily Oscern was the first guy he locked onto. Seeing him not flinch because he felt no pain was the shock they needed to get to him.

A blast started to break into the unit. Cries echoed, and bodies flew from the impact of canons. Rex and the others ducked for cover while Lucan moved from the direct line of fire. At that moment, an Averyan soldier swooped his blade at him. He barely had enough time to block it before he created a distance. Another clash, and he moved further back. Each time, the soldier would raise his sword a little higher. When he saw more than he needed to. He thrust his steel under his armpit. The enemy dropped against the mud and muffled a painful cry. These Averyan soldiers, if they had been under Colonel Finsley, they would have been discharged for not putting on mail. Not that it mattered. His sword had a thin enough point to sink through.

The smoke from the cannons came down, fogging the battlefield. It lacked the metallic sulfuric scent, nor did it give off that hint of

pepper chemicals Vinol liked to use. He brushed through the smoke until he realized there was nothing to see.

Everything was pitch black.

A force knocked him to the ground, and at that moment, he was able to make out patterns. His helmet was taken—his armor and mail ripped off. Blinking allowed him to peer at the night. It would've been pitch black if the moon hadn't shone its light. The air was clear, the heat slightly cooler. The battle was still in motion, but it felt like he was far away.

As he rose to his feet, a steel boot kicked his stomach. His lungs quickly fought for air. There were shuffling of feet and whispers until one mumbled, 'Let him see.'

Rex. The nervous Vinolean soldier he spoke to was there, standing upright, with a cold pair of eyes. The other wore an orange tunic over his armor. By the face alone, he had never seen him before, but the look about him made him uneasy.

Coming from the shadows was a very familiar face, his sword in his grasp.

Major Rudra.

Lucan chuckled to himself and picked himself up. "What is this… some kind of assassination attempt?" Oscern was right. Open the mouth, get a bite.

Major Rudra smiled. "Oh, Lucan…you're not worth the coin, but after some consideration, I've taken it upon myself to replace you with better talented fools."

Lucan patted his side. His dagger was taken too. "Very smart, Major Dickhead. You hired Children of Rima to fight Children of Rima." He rubbed his neck and turned, searching for something to defend himself. "But I think you should've just killed me—"

Rex and the other took his arms and forced him back to his knees. Seeing this made Major Rudra approach him. "Sure, I could've spared you, but I want to enjoy seeing that stupid smile of yours beg for my mercy." His steel boot lodged his face.

His jaw shifted, nearly dislocating from the force. The men who held him down let him go. Lucan wiped the blood from his lips. "Did Colonel Finsley agree to this?"

"The Colonel will think his good little boys died fighting for King Pann."

"You two are going to fight a fellow brother in the faith?" A sting pained his eyes again. Lucan rubbed them and stepped back. His powers were affecting his eyesight, that much he understood.

A whistle sounded off, and the ground was getting shaky. Before his feet sank into the soil, he rolled back. The man in the orange tunic stared at him silently. He had some influence over the terrain.

The pacing of feet was coming at him. He raised his gauntlets as the sword fell and gripped Rex's blade. The man in the orange tunic came from his blindside and kicked him to the ground.

Major Rudra's laughter echoed. He must be watching from a safe distance, marveling at his wretched state. "How will the blind Riman see? How will he move when he gets buried alive?"

That was a good enough to solidify his suspicions. Orange tunic could open the ground with a whistle, and Rex could blind him at will.

Lucan fled in the opposite direction, the uneven ground nearly sent him stumbling, and any rubbing of his eyes didn't improve his sight.

Hovering over them like the mountains were the Grandi trees, the cool breeze it exhaled helped him focus. He could flee there, but how long before they caught him?

The rumbling of a wagon forestalled his dilemma. A man in robes who was no soldier pulled the reins and brought his donkey to a stop. He stood from his seat, raising his lantern outward, eyes widening at the surrounding sinkhole. Suddenly Lucan couldn't look away. That attire, the oak leaves sewn into his coat. He was a cleric! He had forgotten there was a Riman village nestled within.

A whistle from behind vibrated the ground, causing the terrain to rise and fall, mimicking the ebb and flow of the ocean. Dozens of sinkholes opened, giving the cleric little room to escape. Whatever he hauled on his carriage was in many barrels that rolled and fell into the gaping holes. He tried to move his donkey back, but the ass resisted, whining from the shock.

Lucan crossed through the narrow edges of two sinkholes that seemed to be opening, as if drawing in air. Before the next whistle, he grabbed the cleric's robe and yanked him off his wagon. His donkey and wagon tumbled in while they stepped back onto solid land.

Rather than flee, the cleric screamed, shaken from what he had witnessed.

"You need to get out of here." Lucan tugged him back to his feet. "Hurry!"

The cleric nodded and fled, turning from where he came from.

A sharp pain crossed his back. It stung like hell, but he tackled Rex to the ground. His eyes were burning again, but Lucan only worried about the sword. He plucked the blade from him and drove it into his chest. His vision was coming back little by little.

Rex didn't cry. He gurgled blood, fingers digging into the soil than the blade Lucan stole. "You…" His eyes widened, and tears started to come out. Lucan tried to wedge the sword off, but the soldier took his arm—stopping him. "I know who you are… burn me, please… don't leave me like this."

Something opened inside Lucan and carved out his right torso. He stared at the blade, smeared with his blood. The sword peeled back, and he wailed. His blood dripped on the dead soldier as he heaved for air, hand gripping where the hot liquid poured out from.

Another whistle. The ground underneath rose like a tide and trembled. Lucan steadied his shaky knees.

Major Rudra held a red-stained blade. He made a fair distance after he stabbed him. The blood loss slackened his movements. Any chance at fleeing was gone now, he had to confront this head-on, but he collapsed to the ground again.

The man in the orange tunic was staring, content, and no longer intimidated by him. Had he lost too much blood? Was it over for him?

Major Rudra stepped around the sinkholes. When he got close, he gripped his hair and raised him to his knees. A flat tongue ran up his ear, leaving a pungent odor. "Not going to put up a fight?" Major Rudra snickered. "Don't worry, once I tear your insides out, your friends will join you—and that Zorn, I'll play with him a little, and if he begs just right, I might just keep him."

Something cracked inside Lucan. He confronted Major Rudra and gripped his face. "What did you say!" He shoved his thumbs into his eye sockets, and the major screamed, nails digging into his arms while fluid ran down his cheeks. "Say those words again!" he

growled. “Say it!” His thumbs wedged through, plucking his eyeballs out.

The whistle came, and for a moment, it was his breath racing against time.

No master, no payment, no orders to kill Oscern and Zorn.

Lucan gripped Rudra and took him into the mouth of the dark vortex.

CHAPTER 6

ELENE

The Harrow Farm

A lamb snuck through the fencing and into the front yard. Curiosity left the little ball of wool searching the field alone until it started to bleat. It took a few minutes before it realized its mother stayed close, watching from behind the fence she couldn't squeeze through. The lamb bleated once more and ran back in and stayed close to its mother.

The wind swept over the branches, tickling the air with the warm fragrance of wildflowers. Underneath the aroma, Elene tied Corie's red curls with the spare ribbons she kept in her pocket.

Theo had pulled her hair by accident, or so he said. He and the boys were playing catch, throwing the ball further so only the good players could stay in the competition.

Corie hummed under her breath, she had been swinging her legs, eager to rejoin the game. "Come to me, my haven, see me sing your…" She cleared her throat and suddenly stopped.

"What's wrong?" Elene asked.

Corie looked up, her big brown eyes lightened by the afternoon sun. "Mama says I'm not going to be a good singer."

"Really?" Elene placed a hairpin on a stubborn lock. "I didn't know you liked to sing."

"She wants me to join the junior choir next year, but Maiden Nessa said I need to improve."

Elene smiled. "Well, if it makes you feel better, I can barely call the herd back home."

Corie slumped her shoulders. "But I want to wear their cute dresses—and the only way I can wear them is to be a good singer."

"Alright, well, maybe you need to take your lessons more seriously than coming here to play with the boys."

Corie inhaled and exhaled. "Maybe."

Elene focused back on looping the last ribbon. Seriously, Corie was just six years old. She paused when she noticed Theo running towards them.

"Miss Harrow!" he called. "We found another corpse by the river—"

Corie hopped off her lap. "Let me see!"

"Not so fast." Elene put away her extra ribbons in her pocket and hurried to the Beaven River. She told them not to play near the waterway, especially not without her supervision. The current was slower and kinder but was wide, nearly running half a mile across. It could pull them to the center or worse, take them if they didn't pay attention.

The boys kept a safe distance, whispering to one another.

Elene approached with caution. Stuck in a glob of mud was a body looming by the shore. His fingers had wedged through the soil and froze over. With the cuts on his arms and face, he must have fallen near Appleton, where the Beaven River was fast and had many sharp rocks.

As she crouched for a closer inspection, there was no sword on his belt, but he could have a dagger hidden in the front. Her neck stiffened at the thought of what the other side would look like. The last soldier that washed up had maggots growing out of his nose. Bits of his copper beard were missing.

Taking one shoulder, she moved the body to its back.

Against the sun, the droplets of water gleamed from his face and trailed down his neck. Warm and light freckles gently scattered over the bridge of his nose. His brown hair had bronze and amber undertones, damp and peppered with mud. Stitched on his collar was a coat of arms, a two-pointed shield bearing the roaring lion with two stripes in the back.

"He's a Vinolian soldier," Elene confirmed to the children.

Corie bravely approached the body. Her red curls were undone, bouncing as she leaned toward him. "He smells like my dead rabbit."

At that moment, the soldier went to grip his chest. Seeing the corpse move with life, the children screamed.

The soldier's eyebrows scrunched together. "Hush." He squinted at the light until one of his eyes opened, bearing a silver look. "My head is pulsing."

Elene grabbed the fabric scissors from her tool belt and stepped back, the point aimed at him. "State your name, and explain how you got to our river," Elene said. He shut his eyes and parted his mouth, drawing in air. "Hey, I'm talking to you."

He gulped the blood that leaked from his purple lips. "I must be dying," he mumbled, staring blankly at the soil. "This must be what the cold feels like." Did he not see her? He sounded like he was talking to himself. Perhaps he was in a state of delusion from the stream of blood that the water took.

"Should we help him?" Theo asked, worry running down his face. "I don't want him to die."

To children, it didn't matter that a corpse had washed up before, they had the heart to care for anyone, but that was dangerous thinking. They assaulted one woman after Avery's soldiers visited their Sundale. A Vinolean soldier in Melodia was worse. "Just because we found one who breathes, it doesn't mean we should pity him. Look what that war has done to our town. Instead of visitors, we have killers like this one looming around."

Corie scowled and spat, her snot nearly hitting his face.

The soldier grimaced. It seemed to revive him as he gave her a sharp look. "You little brat…"

The children withdrew, screaming again, but Elene stood her ground. What would become of her family if everyone discovered him here? What would become of Melodia if he brought more of his comrades? "I'm sorry, children, but you know what we must do when a threat enters our village."

"We hug them!" the youngest of the group said.

"No, not to killers." The soldier mustered every strength to look at her, squinting at the sun that shone behind her. If she was going to act, she needed to do it now. Her heel pressed against his shoulder and slowly guided his back to the river. His hands gripped her dress

but lost their strength at that moment. It seemed like his muscles had ceased to function. What remained of his blood, the river was taking for itself, drawing red from his torso and the gaping wound on his thigh.

"I'll help!" Theo said, taking him by the ankle. Another boy joined and grabbed his wrist.

"Wait for me," Corie said, rolling her sleeves to her elbows. "I want to send him off to Skiar too!"

"St-stop." The soldier resisted. His elbows helped him move closer to shore.

The river's cold current was ready to take him. The current raised his weak limbs while his body had no strength to stop it. "Cease, you fucking little demons!"

Corie gritted her teeth. "Did you hear what he called us?"

Elene hankered her boot against his shoulder. "Go in peace."

"What are you doing!" A familiar voice cried. "All of you, stop!"

The soldier raised his head in search of the new voice. Elene forbade him, pressing her heel against his shoulder further. "We got this taken care of."

"Pa!" her sister cried. "Wein!"

Elene gave Terra a sharp look. "What are they going to do? He's a Vinolian soldier!"

"*He* is a *human*," she said. "As my eldest sister, I expected a better example from you." She then waved at the children to scatter them. "Let go of him before I tell your parents what troubles you were about to commit."

The children released the soldier and moved back. Rushing down the road was her father and Wein. As they grew closer, their surprise fell into concern.

"Does Terra know?" Elene stayed in her position, her skirt was raised, and her boot hankered on the soldier. Seeing who had gone up to their shore, they began to see the problem as she did.

Wein rubbed the back of his neck, looking at their surroundings as if that Averyan soldier was watching. "If *they* find out we're harboring a Vinolean soldier, they're going to treat us as the enemy."

Terra's eyes widened with surprise. Her attempt to rescue the soldier faded.

It was such a lovely day to be suddenly hit with such a serious decision, but Elene saw no alternative, nor would she allow her family to sink their hands in the blood of a stranger.

"I'll do it," Elene declared. Her reputation was tainted already while theirs remained salvaged.

The soldier looked at her. He had heard enough. Certainly, he understood this was not her choice to begin with.

Father went to the shore and bent to look at the soldier. He looked at his collar, seeing the coat of arms. "All will be well if Skiar wills it."

Elene looked at her father. "You can't mean that."

"Have some pity, Elene. He's helpless at the moment, and we're no one to choose his end."

"But—"

"He's shivering, Terra. Bring me clean towels and our thickest blanket. Wein, come, we must carry him to the wagon."

Her brother slowly approached the intruder. He didn't seem eager to help, but he wasn't against it.

"Father," Elene said. "Cleric Aaron told us not to harbor anyone—have you forgotten what happened to Lilian?"

They ignored her and together lifted the soldier. He drew his head back in pain, hand pressed against his chest.

"Skiar, he doesn't look too good," Wein said.

"No shit," the soldier answered.

"Got a mouth there, don't you?" Father said, carrying him from the river. "I think he'll be fine."

Elene followed, arms crossed as they went back to their home. With a mouth like that, it was a guarantee her family was making the biggest mistake of their lives.

Father, who carried most of the burden of the slumped body, faced her. "Elene, make room in the back of the wagon."

Elene didn't pick up her feet. She caught her father's sharp stern look and breathed out in defeat. Ivory and Fior were attached to the wagon. Wooden chests of fabrics were going to be sent to the marketplace. She took them down and cleared the back.

Her mother came, informed of what had happened. "Matias, are you sure this is a good idea?" At least one person agreed it was a risky business to take in the enemy.

"We're taking them to the apothecary, or do you want us to treat him here?"

"No, get him out of here."

Terra came in with a wool blanket and wrappings. She hopped on the wagon and helped their father and brother lay the soldier in.

"Keep your hand pressed on his wound," Wein said, looking over at her. "Elene, we need you to wrap the wound on his leg."

"I'm not going with you," she answered, moving under the peach tree.

"Elene, not a word from you," her father said, climbing the seat. "Get on, now."

On the road into town, the wagon's shake made him grunt. To keep him from fretting, she had tied him down. Terra looked surprised but slightly disgusted that his blood had stained her dress.

"Oscern…" he breathed. "Zorn."

"We're almost there," Father heard him. "Just don't speak."

The wagon went into motion. With Father to lead them, Fior and Ivory were picking up the pace.

"Come on, Ivory," Father encouraged. "You can keep up."

Ivory was a beauty with his almost silver hair, but she felt more attached to Fior since they purchased him and his mother when he was a foal. After the last raid, Father had stashed enough money to buy Ivory, but he and Fior were different in personalities.

Elene focused back on the wagon. Terra's cheeks were getting redder. The soldier was awake, staring at her. He reached and touched her hand. Terra jumped but didn't pull back.

"Name?" he asked.

"Terra," she smiled.

"Where are… we, Terra?"

"Melodia." Her gentle blue eyes settled on him as she pressed against the open wound with less disgust.

The town's apothecary was in a separate building just behind Rima's temple. After explaining what occurred, the guards allowed them to go through their gates. Terra had gone ahead and reached the apothecary to call for Giasone, the town's reliable healer.

Father and Wein carried the groaning soldier to the back, following the snake-like path in the garden shaded by plum trees. To

their right, the temple resonated with the prayers of Rimans, who had visited the church.

A white-haired man in a white dress shirt with rolled sleeves gestured for them to enter. He wore a blue wrap around his arm, which signified his profession in chemistry.

Giasone glanced at his son, who was his assistant. "Bring my clear vials with purple corks from the storeroom, as well as alcohol, needle and thread, and scissors.

The soldier resisted the vial, mumbling what the liquid contained, but the apothecary made him drink it.

A new face entered the room and caught his breath. Cleric Aaron wore a white buttoned shirt with brown trousers. Everywhere he went, he carried that awful robe decorated in oak leaves that signified his status in Melodia. His eyes widened when he saw the soldier. Aaron grasped his hands. "Brave young man. Skiar has answered my prayers."

"You know him?" Father said, surprised by how he took the news.

"This Vinolian soldier saved my life two nights ago."

Elene dropped her gaze and gulped hard. Father, Wein, and Terra were looking at her.

"I'm sorry, but it is too crowded," Giasone said. "The strong medicine he needs might cause hallucinogens, and the noise in this room isn't going to help."

"Of course, he's in your hands now," Cleric Aaron was the first to head out.

"Is Camilla here?" Terra asked, following his steps down the garden. She seemed eager to talk to her friend. Since the soldier saved the cleric, she looked like she was beaming with pride, more so now that she played a part in saving the man she tried to kill.

"You'll find her inside the church," he answered, gesturing Father under the shade of their plum tree. Elene meant to join them, but Wein stopped her.

When the cleric wanted to talk to him, they weren't allowed to eavesdrop. Giasone's assistant started closing the yellow stained-glass windows to keep the noise down.

"See?" Wein said. "All is well if Rima wills it."

"Please, I can't breathe the air of this place." She stomped past her father and the cleric and left the garden. Her hands were still red, they soiled into her skin and cracked.

She did nothing wrong. It eased her consciousness if she chanted it. She had never taken a life, but he was a soldier.

He was the killer.

CHAPTER 7

LUCAN

Aelith

Lucan pushed through the boys who tried to block him and swept the rolling gold ball from going under an elevated home. In one thud, the alarmed voice behind agitated the snow that layered the roof, causing it to fall over. Lucan leaped back, still holding tightly to the ball. He ran from the boys not on his team, trudging through layers of snow, and nodded from the breeze.

Zorn was behind, using his powers to speed up to him, his hands reaching to take his ball.

"Lucan, over here!"

Hearing his friends close, he shut his eyes, spun five times, and flung it at Oscern. When he opened his eyes, Zorn had taken it in mid-air and ran with his team. It was their first good game in the snow, and they were eager to win.

"You cheat!" Oscern shouted. "We said no use of our powers!"

"You must've said that when I wasn't paying attention!" Before taking off, Zorn proudly waved at his older sister, Nati, who had sat down to watch them play. She had just ended her shift guarding the temple. Her short hair was honey blond, enough for him to see the star-shaped earrings she never took off, even during work.

"Spread out!" Lucan shouted.

The game was to throw the ball to the target while having the risk of giving it to the opposing team. With Zorn cheating, they needed to make every opportunity count.

His team covered some of the empty gaps while others stood with the enemy.

Zorn stuck his tongue out, mocking them before he shut his eyes and spun. He threw the ball overhead, enough for his team member to catch it.

Seeing another successful move, the snow started to melt around Lucan. If powers were allowed, then he was going to use his.

A woman in silver robes with a gold band around her waist moved his attention from the game. Underneath her hood was a veil with gold stitching. Her eyes warmed when their stare met. The locks of her hair moved by the breeze.

"Son," she said softly. "It's time."

Lucan quit the game and went to his mother, who opened her hand for him to take. He wanted to say goodbye to Oscern and Zorn, but they were absorbed in the game. He took his mother's hand instead and walked with her.

The paved road was laid with Molar stones, emitting a blue hue whenever they stepped on them, lighting the way day or night.

"You were about to use your powers, weren't you?" Her silver eyes looked down at him. "I felt it before the snow melted around you."

"Yeah, but they don't know which." He looked at the long necklace that dangled, bouncing with each step she made. The accessory was shaped like a leaf, with tiny diamonds surrounding the amber pearl. He frowned, aware of the person who gave it to her.

"Do you miss him?" she asked, her voice soft but deep.

"What's there to miss?" An absent father is hard to look back on, and when he did visit, he was a blob in his eyes, a blurry, shaven face with a head full of white and grey wavy curls. Occupied was how the Maidens described him, choosing not to explain why his father looked much older than his mother.

"Come on now, didn't you two have a swell time fishing?"

"That was two years ago," Lucan corrected. "And he… he looks at me differently, not like how Zorn or Oscern's dad looks at them."

His mother smiled softly, but her eyes showed a hint of sadness. "He's never been good a sharing his feelings, but we are always on his mind. We are his everything."

Lucan chose to eat his words. He didn't want to ruin his mother's confidence in him. In his absence, his mother filled the gap by sharing the adventures they shared in their youth and his courage to take down any threat against Aelith.

Home was nestled behind their temple. Waterfalls fell from stone walls, high pillars of light against the smoky fog. Every morning the light from the windows would hit their home and illuminate the whole area with a golden hue.

In the temple's sanctum, the Maidens went on their knees and presented his new robes. Gold-colored thread contrasting an ivory fabric, hand-sewn by them. The moment he put them on, he heard the blast.

The blast that changed everything.

The light in the sky fell into darkness.

Before the Maidens tugged him away, Lucan gripped his mother's necklace. Her head bowed as she reached to unclip it. Lucan begged her not to go, to let him stay at her side. The strength in her eyes softened for him like they always did but held a bit of sorrow.

"Forgive me, Lucan, but this is going to hurt." She snapped the necklace, leaving him gripping it against his chest. Her Maiden Dagger was against him, aiming at his neck.

"Mother?" he panted. "What are you doing?"

Five Maidens surrounded him and sang. The others pinned him to the ground. The dagger tore the right side of his neck, scorching not by light but by the dullness of the blade.

Lucan screamed, but his screams weren't as loud as the Maiden's call to plea.

Something in him changed. He felt himself shrink, and his heart, which was often still, started to race. He squirmed while his mother held him, eyes open as he fought for breath. One of the Maidens hastily presented him with a mirror. He looked different. He was not the boy he remembered. His robes were gone, and a scar had run up his neck and down to his chest.

"Mother," he said, gulping, finding even the taste in his mouth tasted awful. "What's become of me?"

"This is your new identity, Lucan. Keep your celestial name secret, do not avenge us, and do not tell anyone where you came from."

"Head Maiden!"

His mother picked up her dress and rushed for the exit, nodding at the ten Maidens who remained with Lucan.

"Where are you going?" Lucan shouted.

His mother spun back, her eyes glistening with tears. "Listen to me Lucan. The line between light and darkness is finer than a thread of silk. You are either light or darkness."

"I know that!"

The back of her hand brushed his cheek, and her smile could barely hold beneath her quivering lips. "So take good care of your light, Lucan. Don't give your celestial name away."

"Decima!" A Maiden shouted. "We need you!"

"Change him and be quick about it." His mother's hood fell over her face, and her veil shifted side to side by her quick pace.

"Wait for me!" Lucan shouted.

"Don't seek vengeance, son." The halls echoed her voice. "Live, just live!"

The Temple Maidens tore his ceremonial robes and flung them into the fire. They hurriedly rushed him into a pair of itchy trousers and a worn, smelly tunic. They ruffled his hair and took away every silver bracelet and earring he wore. His mother's necklace they tucked in his shaky fist.

When Lucan was taken out of the temple, everything had become a blur. Weapons were clashing in the distance, Rimans were screaming, and the rocks that stood overhead were engulfed in flames. Lights of powers belonging to the men shot in every direction, all while Aelith's soldiers tried to defend the innocent.

Amidst the pit of fire, he saw the devil for the first time. A beast covered in black fur, with horns protruding out of his temple. He stood like a giant would in the fairy tales, except he slouched more like the drawings of a troll, with thick red claws that scraped their holy stone.

Out of his hands, he rained fire from the skies, and whichever he directed, they broke the foundations of many homes, *his* friend's homes. A group of Maidens met him. Their light shot from their daggers and pushed him back.

"Hurry," the Maiden whispered, leading them away. "We must get to the Oak tree as soon as possible."

Lucan resisted again, finding his body was weak, that his powers would not work at his command. "Release me—I want to be with my mother!"

The daggers of light faded, and the beast shifted his focus on them. The arrows that rained over him were from the temple's tower, where a team of archers fired. The raging power coursed out of the beast's hands, crumbling the tower into pieces.

Without wasting time, the beast conjured the same blast.

Lucan covered his face and plummeted to the floor. He felt the fire's heat sweep over him, followed by the screams.

Darkness took him until another scream brought him back. His lungs had shrunk, shortening any room to breathe. He struggled with weight pressed upon him, wiggling out until he realized he was touching limbs, and the strings of ember were burning hair. He squeezed through robes, through vacant faces.

A tight grip took his wrist, and he faced a Maiden, half of her face charred as the other green eyes stared back. "Hide." The light in her eyes faded, and her head dropped.

When he made it out, he met a hill of Maidens who shielded him. The debris that burned contrasted their frozen bodies.

"There you are." A woman snatched him from the ground and took him up the steps.

Lucan slapped her arm and tugged back. "Let me go!"

"It's me! Nati!" Lucan turned, finding the armored woman was Zorn's sister. She smiled at him and headed up the hill where Rima's Oak tree lived. Following closely were maidens guarding Nati's back.

Young and old, these shadows in the sky tore them apart. Children were ripped from their mother's arms. Dozens of Maidens left their family and went to protect the temple, their songs drawing out the hand of darkness that wanted to reach him.

As more guards gathered, the fight intensified, and for a moment, Lucan thought they would win.

This was Aelith, after all, the holy city, Rima's resting place, but the more the fire burned, the more trees that could protect them were charred black.

Cloaked shadows crawled from the ground to reach him before a Maiden from the sanctuary drove her dagger through his chest. The light that swam inside obliterated him.

"Where is my mother?" Lucan pulled against them, realizing that Nati intended to hide him. "No, I will not go!"

He wiggled his shoulders to free himself, but before he could inch away, the tree opened, shining its light. Inside were a bunch of boys and girls huddled together. Zorn and Oscern were there, and they pulled him inside but not calling him by his name.

"Nati!" Zorn shouted.

"Stay inside, Zorn." Her stare moved to Lucan. "You look like a regular boy now. Keep it that way. Whatever you do, do not give the darkness your celestial name."

As the oak tree cloaked them, they were locked, breathing and whimpering. Zorn had his hand pressed against the tree. On the other end was his sister, her hand against his. "I love you, Zorn." She took her sword and ran downhill, joining the others.

"Stop crying," he told them. "Stop crying, or I won't be able to see a thing!"

Oscern closed in on him, his gold, glossy eyes glimmering. He whispered his celestial name, asking if it was him.

Lucan bit his lip so he wouldn't let himself do the same. He hoped and prayed to Skiar he was spared one power.

The voices were lowered now, enough for him to concentrate.

Oscern covered his ears to give him that extra padding. Lucan shut his eyes and opened a new view of what his mother called their third eye. There was no extra eyeball as his sight came from within.

In one leap, he saw Aelith from a bird's view, black smoke rising from every home. The remaining Maidens dispersed, and their faint cries fell afterward. He swept down and moved from street to street, body to body, until he saw his mother facing the beast.

"I see my mother," Lucan whispered to the others.

"Where is she?" a boy asked.

"With the devil… the Demon of the Deep—has to be!"

His mother and a few maidens, those creatures that belonged only in his nightmares surrounded them. She stood without a tremble, and there was no fear in her eyes, even as the beast's claws were raised to her neck.

"Communities normally expect to see a man when they're raided, not a beast such as me, and yet your people handled themselves well. That is before I overcame them."

His mother observed the dark shadowy things that wouldn't reveal themselves to the light. "What have you done to my husband?"

"Your husband's search has led him to me." The beast closed in on his mother's delicate face. "Surely you can conclude the outcome of our meeting?"

Mother's eyes never faltered in weakness. The devil raised his hand, dispersing his army of shadows. "Slaughter the rest, but spare her kin. I wish to see the child alive."

"There's no kin," his mother said. "Kneeling before you is the last."

"If that were true, your Maidens wouldn't have thrown themselves as shields. Now tell me, where did the child go?"

His mother's stare swept up and met him. Her glossy eyes peered at the beast. "You will never win."

The claw swung without warning. The head rolled from Mother's body, her head ornaments and beautiful hair spread across the floor. Her eyes were half-open, dazed at the pool of blood leaking from her dismembered body.

"Mother!" Lucan awoke, panting and clinging to the bedsheet. He was back in the room, the apothecary they brought him in. He pressed the back of his hand against his forehead and stared at the ceiling. That dream. Always with that same damn dream.

He kept the window cracked before going to bed, so he could listen to the insects that roamed the garden. A sweet fragrance swept in, bringing in summer's heat. Now and then, the girl who saved him, Terra, and a Maiden named Camilla would come and check on him. Sometimes it was other Maidens who grew a habit of peeking through the window before giggling away.

Lucan slowly eased himself off the bed and slipped into his boots. He grabbed his walking cane and went outside. If he was ever going to get his strength back, he couldn't do it by sitting there. The slightest pressure on his left leg was lessened when he shifted his weight to the other. He couldn't recall how he got the cut on his leg, but he suspected it happened after he and Major Rudra fell or when the running river took him. Either way, the stitching wasn't as bad as the one on his chest, but worse of all, his necklace was gone. His

stomach churned at the thought of losing it from the fall, of how tightly Major Rudra clung to him before the river took them both.

The apothecary's building was empty, so he made his escape to the front, where a garden opened up.

Melodia's temple was a stone masonry building with relic architecture that mimicked Aelith's temples with its purple glass-stained windows. The interior had various cavernous rooms. The navel or house of worship had two floors, both facing an altar where the Maidens would sing their afternoon song, *My Haven*. There was a third floor with many rooms, and the fourth was restricted to clerics and Maidens.

Lucan breathed through his pain and continued towards the exit. The bountiful large garden had several walkways. Buds of wildflowers and tall grass shifted over the trees. A small pond with a bench for visitors. The noise ahead was the congregation leaving the temple. Service was held every three days and only in the afternoon.

At the iron gates, Cleric Aaron was talking to a group of men. He met eyes with him before returning to his conversation.

"Good to see you putting those legs to use." A man had taken notice of him. His wife was holding his arm. She had darting eyes with a pinched smile on her lips. She was a tall, slender woman with an updo and the tightest corset he had ever seen brace a woman's abdomen.

"You know me?" Lucan asked.

"My son and I pulled you out of the river."

"Oh," Lucan said, loosening his posture. Maybe he knew where his necklace had gone.

"I'm Matias Harrow, and this is my wife, Norma. The young woman who's been bringing your meals is my daughter."

"Terra?"

"Lunch is waiting, Matias," Mrs. Harrow interrupted. "I'll wait for you at the wagon."

"Would you like to join us?" Matias asked. His wife stopped in her tracks. She seemed to hold her breath.

"That would be great," he answered. The woman couldn't make it any more obvious, but this was his chance to see where his necklace went and see Melodia.

"Wonderful, just watch your step." Together they made it to the front. Cleric Aaron was waving his attendees goodbye. Waiting at the seats was Terra. The surprise in her eyes widened as he climbed up the wagon with Matias holding his arm.

"Lucan, where are you off to?" Cleric Aaron had caught up with him.

"Just treating him to some lunch," Matias answered before he could reply.

"Have room for one more mouth?" the cleric asked.

"Why, of course," Mrs. Harrow said, the frown turning into a sharp smile. "I will sit in the back."

"No need. I've wanted to talk to this young man when he wasn't under medication." He pulled on his red collar and smoothed his hand down his vest. Cleric Aaron was a slim man with not an ounce of muscle on his bones. Compared to Matias, who had to be a solid six feet tall, the cleric was short, but he had this energy about him, he was expressive, with fast feet, or perhaps he was just noticing how slow he was.

The carriage went into motion, and at Mrs. Harrow's instruction, Terra went to sit between her parents.

"You'll have to forgive me for not paying you a visit," said Cleric Aaron. "There have been several discussions regarding your arrival. There was a lot of fear that we had taken in a Vinolian soldier. I had to assure them we were taking every precaution. We burned your clothes, any trace that you worked against Avery."

"Are your people loyalists?"

"We support King Galrug's army for the sake of peace. They only requested our water, but then they started to visit our town. I tried to keep the order, even offered to deliver the water they requested so nobody would get hurt."

"So that's how I ran into you."

"Precisely."

Such agreements were typical, the big guy telling the little guy what to do, or else they burn and loot their land. They could only do so much anyway, Riman villages were independent communities. To some degree, the Grandi trees must've offered protection, and the guards he had seen patrolling the temple looked fit, but they were no army.

Brushing his limited views of the unknown community. Melodia itself looked like an orderly place, like any nestled little town with its clean sidewalks and little shops. Most of the men wore slacks with straps over their tunics or vests. The women wore corsets and long ruffled shirts. Their skirts were long, and the heels of their boots click-clacking against the sidewalk.

From afar, the Grandi trees surrounded them like a protective wall. Behind were mountains, the peaks had no snow, but he imagined how it would look in the winter.

Cottages passed by, and children played in the open yards. Lamp posts in every corner surely lighted the place. The bustling noise was here and there, but it was alright. This place had what he lacked, blue skies and fresh air, not the pungent smell of the city.

"I see you're taken by Melodia," Cleric Aaron noted, smiling.

"I haven't been to the countryside for a while," he admitted.

"Yes, I imagine Vinol is quite a place to see."

Sure, their high buildings can easily make one forget how grand the world really is.

A passing group saw him. In their eyes, he saw curiosity. Among the few were looks of skepticism, weary of newcomers.

Eventually, the paved road was behind, leaving them passing through a wide country dirt road engraved by the shape of the wheels. The place opened a boundless view of grassy planes and hills with cows grazing in the distance.

From a distance was farming land, neighboring homes standing miles apart. Matias took the road that took them under the shade of the line of trees, their light flickered through the shifting leaves and sank into his pupils, but he didn't blink.

This place was just like the songs, a nestled little haven.

The trip stopped when they reached a two-story farmhouse covered by oak and peach trees, its pink petals blossoming over the green yard with an old brown picket fence.

Mrs. Harrow and Terra went inside while Matias brought the horses inside.

Bits of dry grass swept past him, carried by the breeze. Matias brought the horses inside the stables. A peach tree in front of the home crookedly hung its pink blossoms over a wooden bench.

Behind were the stables and sheep on the road that had to be their property.

Behind the property was an expansive land, sheep bleating in the distance. Leading them was a woman, only he couldn't make out the person as she was leading them further back.

"Thank you for saving my life, young man. I must say I was given a scare when I saw that Child of Rima open up the ground—"

Lucan pressed his hand over the stitches on his chest. That man and his whistles. He was still alive, out there.

"You must still be shaken from the wound. Giasone did say you got metal poisoning. That must be why you were often out of it."

Lucan blinked, realizing he wasn't listening to the cleric's babbling. "Uh, yeah, must be."

Terra called them from the porch, smiling at them. "Wash up. Lunch is ready."

The men went first, but Lucan took his time, watching his steps for any uneven ground. Terra was waiting for him, her light brown hair flowing against the wind. Her blue eyes had the same sparkle as that day. She dressed as elegant as her mother, except she chose colors with warmer hues. A white top with a brown corset with a yellow dress.

"Want a tour of the house?" Terra asked.

"Sure." He'd forgotten how graceful women outside the city looked.

Terra opened the door for him, smiling corner to corner. The first thing Lucan saw upon entering was the painting that hung over the wall table. Thick brush strokes made up what looked like a Rima tree, similar to the one from Aelith, humbled and small in comparison to the Grandi trees.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" Terra said. "My pa is a collector of artisans. He'll come home with sculptures and little handmade trinkets from his trips on Vine Road. This one has been hanging on this wall for… well, I can't seem to remember." She brushed her brown locks from her face and nudged him. "Let me show you our living room," she spun to the right towards an arch entrance that led to a wide room with green plush seats and a large, decorated rug. The place smelled expensive. The walls were covered with bookcases, and oil lamps on the wall accentuated the area.

Terra swung her arms, her boots lightly stomping to the far back towards the chimney breast with an alcove to the right side. A table and chair stacked with handkerchiefs. On the wall were shelves decorated with balls of wool yarn and thread. "This is where Ma does her needlework. I help when I can, though I sometimes find an excuse to get out of it."

A strange sculpture took up the middle space of the fireplace. It looked like the carving of a drake and a duck staring at one another.

"Upstairs is my room," Terra continued, leading him back to the front where the staircase was. "After Wein moved out, I got the big room next to the washroom, oh, and get this." Rather than lead him upstairs, she went right and down the little passageway. "That's our storage room, where we keep all of our fine fabric, but over here." She opened the door, revealing a bathroom, toilet, and all. "We have an indoor toilet."

"Huh."

"Huh?" Terra repeated, baffled by his reaction. "Some still have their outdoor privy, and the temple still uses a cest pool, but Ma got Pa to pay a handsome price to an expert from Appleton so we can have this."

"Vinol has that sort of stuff," he said.

"You have been around." Terra spun to the front, hands planted on her hips. "Well, it's a big deal here. No more digging up holes or hiring a night man to pick up our waste."

The front door opened, and a dark-haired man stepped inside. His eyes were the same shade of blue as Terra's. He blinked a few times, his focus narrowing on him. "What is he doing here?"

"What do you think?" Terra answered. "He and Cleric Aaron are joining us for lunch. Come on, Lucan—oh, and that's my older brother."

"I'm Lucan," he said plainly.

"Lucan… Lucan what?"

"Lucan Greystone."

He frowned. "Wein Harrow." If Matias was the one who pulled him out of the river, then Wein here was the son who helped him.

Matias returned from the dining room. "There you are." He paused when he noticed his son. "What is it, Wein?"

Lucan passed them to follow Terra to the dining room, but with a cane, he could only go at his own pace. He dragged his steps a bit more just to hear the conversation Wein didn't hold long for.

"The captain of the guards is holding a sign-up for new recruits tomorrow. I think with this war going on, it's time I help keep Melodia safe."

Matias gave a long, tired sigh. "We can discuss this privately, but not in front of Aaron and our new guest."

"And if another Vinolian comes? What excuse will we have then?"

"Not now Wein."

It seemed the Melodians were still cautious of his arrival as they were of Avery's army.

Lucan went to sit at the dining table. There was potato soup, sandwiches, little raspberry-filled pastries, and tea. Wein sat, not hiding he was in a bad mood.

Cleric Aaron smiled. "Your son really wants to be a guard, Matias. Why not let him?"

"He can try after he settles down, but right now, he knows our trade is important."

"Trade?" Aaron said. "Are you Harrows short on coins?"

Mrs. Harrow blinked a few times and looked at her husband while Terra gulped her lemonade.

"We're fine," Matias said. "But these Avery soldiers have taken our customers. With all the hired hands I employed in the Spring and Summer, it'll be difficult to make any sales until my son returns to Vine Road."

"Not to worry, Matias, soon this regional war will soon blow over." It was a rather callous response from the clergy, but the family didn't carry on that conversation. "Now Lucan, you must tell us about you. My daughter said you are some mercenary for hire?"

Mrs. Harrow's spoon went halfway before she placed it on her lips. Her dagger-like stare left imprints on his thoughts now that his occupation was realized.

"That's correct," Lucan answered, keeping note that he should sound calm. "Been living there for about three years, give or take."

"So, you're not a Vinolian soldier," Matias answered. "But you chose to fight for them?"

"It's a job opportunity," he answered.

"Quite a selfish one, don't you think?" Mrs. Harrow answered before he could continue. "Taking lives for coin. Rima would not allow such a lifestyle in our respectable village."

"Protecting life comes at a cost. Rima had to kill to stop invaders from taking over the first Rima villages, did she not?"

Cleric Aaron smiled. His troubled look was washed over by his words. "So, you *are* a Riman. I suspected so when you saved my life, but I didn't want to ask without being certain."

Interesting. Lucan took a bite of his sandwich. He must not have stayed enough to see the entire fight of how tightly he gripped Major Rudra when he jumped into the gaping hole. This was great.

"Your sacrifice to save a stranger isn't something a regular mercenary would do," Cleric Aaron continued. "So, I want to offer you a deal, one I hope you'll be pleased to know." Lucan stopped chewing and looked up at him. "No good deed should go unmet, so I'd like to offer you to stay in Melodia."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

Terra chuckled, leading her mom to give her an ire look.

Cleric Aaron didn't seem offended by his swift response. "Are you sure? You seemed to be soaking up Melodia as soon as you left the temple grounds."

"Haven't left the city in a while, that's all." Maybe he should have kindly refused his offer without sounding so detached as Oscern had when Delilah offered to follow her to his room at no cost. But some things are better off being cut short.

"Is it the pain again?" Matias asked. "That was quite an open wound they stitched up."

"I was thinking of my friends," he answered. "I don't know where they are or if they're still alive."

Cleric Aaron drummed his fingers on the fine white cloth. "They're not loyal to Vinol, are they?"

"Not one bit." Lucan slowly tapped on his side to test the pain and winced. "Look, if you want to pay me back, lend me a horse so I can find my friends."

"Not in this condition," Matias said. "Since that fight, Vinol moved back east, so I don't think your friends would be anywhere near."

"And you would be foolish to think you can leave the village without putting us at risk," Wein added. "Avery is still roaming these areas. We can't risk them asking questions about how you got patched up."

Damn, and after three years working under Vinol's flag, the enemy knew his face well.

"Are you guys really secured?" Lucan said, taking in the man's words. "I didn't see many guards walking this place, at least not from how many I counted from my window."

"The mountains here are grand and wrap most of Iven Forest quite nicely." Cleric Aaron gave his lemonade a drink. "We've had our ups and downs, but Rima's White Oak has protected us."

"White Oak?" Lucan scrunched his face. "There's one? Right here?" Such a tree couldn't be overlooked, as Rima's tree stood taller than Grandi trees.

Cleric Aaron smiled. "Ours is normal size. She's a sister branch from the one that once hailed from Aelith."

Lucan clutched his chest. His heart was racing so hard it brought his wound to ache.

"I think he needs to go back to Giasone," Terra said.

After the pain resided, he breathed deeper this time and washed down his uneasiness with the lemonade. The tangy and sweet refreshment nearly made his left eye curl. "I'll stay," he said.

"Wonderful!" said Cleric Aaron.

"But I will need a sword of my own and a dagger if you could spare one—can't exactly function without protection."

The cleric gave him an assuring nod. "You don't need to look so afraid. You are our guest here. Everyone has heard your good deed from every home."

"Are you sure about that? Last I remembered, a woman and her horde of minions tried to send me back to the river."

The cleric's stare moved to Matias, who swiftly apologized. "That was Elene, my oldest daughter. Avery's mistreatment of our people had made her extra cautious of outsiders. She's made aware of her mistake."

Cleric Aaron clapped his hands. "Well, Lucan, eat up. Once you get better, we can talk about how I will repay you."

"If you ever need someone to talk to, my home is open to you," said Matias. "It's the least I can do to right the wrongs of my daughter."

"Thanks," Lucan said. "I've been meaning to go back to the river where you found me."

"Easy!" Terra sang. "It's just down the property, I'll show you!"

"Wein will take him," Mrs. Harrow interjected, dagger eyes crossing the table toward her daughter.

Lucan went back to his food, chewing slowly, taking in the reality. He was useless until he could get better, and it would be weeks before he got back to Zorn and Oscern. They'd been apart before, King Pann had sent them to different regions of the Southern, but this time neither knew if they were safe.

CHAPTER 8

LUCAN

The temple's nave was filled with Melodians for the afternoon service. Lucan sat in the front seats keeping to himself. Since it was near ending, he started reading the Holy Scriptures Aaron gave to him. The first few pages felt like letters of instruction on how to care for Rima's White Oak, what Maidens can do to cast darkness out of the hearts of the soul, and how the men could use their powers to defend their community.

The section that mattered the most was about the world's origin. Pleada was, in all nature, a place of darkness and home to the Demon of the Deep. Skiar's light being so grand, swept past Pleada. It took the slightest touch of light to nurture life, from the tiniest of insects to the largest animals, and among them were humans.

The harp played, and Lucan looked from the text. Maiden Camilla, Cleric Aaron's daughter, started to round the children together. A choir of little girls lined up facing the crowd. Among them was that little minion with the red curls. She stuck her tongue at him before turning her back to the Maidens.

Lucan smiled and stuck his tongue back. The girl furrowed her eyebrows and did it right back.

"Corie!" Maiden Nessa said, clapping her hands. "Focus."

With Camilla leading them, the choir sang *My Haven,* a staple for every temple service.

Lucan closed the scripture and gave the choir of girls a listen, with Maiden Nessa leading the song.

Come to me my haven and
bathe in the light

Where in darkness we have
crept, you freed us from despair

Come to me, my embrace and
wrap me with your divine

Sing for me the skies, where
your white oak has no bounds

Fear can decay, but evil will
not prevail

Hear no mistake and listen to
our song

Come to me, my haven and
bathe in the light

Resonating voices receded his lingering pain. Maiden voices had a healing effect that worked better than any medicine.

From his peripheral, Camilla was peeking at him, but when he caught them, she would smile and look away.

When nobody visited the church, she kept him company, strolling with him in the garden and sharing the temple's history. Being her age, they could carry on more interesting conversations than her clergy father.

Among the congregation, Terra was waving at him. Mrs. Harrow was reserved about letting Terra talk to him, so he flirted with her with his eyes, giving her his attention whenever she passed by and heard her giggling when he did it.

After service, Lucan couldn't bear another night in his room or the taste of the Giasone's pain relievers. He left the temple to start his walk around the marketplace. Because of his wound, he was

forbidden from going to the tavern. Lucan followed their rules only because his stay caused some Melodians to divide.

Like yesterday, there was a strange silence on the road, or was it the lack of singing birds? Vendors were open, but only the locals purchased their items. As Matias said, Avery and Vinol's war affected his business and everyone else's.

The shop next to him opened its door. An old woman stepped out to lock it. She was muttering to herself until she noticed Lucan staring at her.

"Oh, were you coming to buy some of my cakes?"

"Uh…" Cake sounded nice, but he had no coins to buy any and lived off the charity of the temple's food.

"Got some nice chocolate cake," she peered at him again and frowned. "Heavens, you're that man…"

Lucan retraced his steps back to the temple. Maybe it was too early to show his face. The last thing he wanted was to cause a scene if the old lady screamed.

Maiden Camilla stood by the steps. Like most Maidens, her attire was nothing like the modern women who wore their corsets or puffy-sleeved shirts. The base color of her floor-length robe was gold. The V-shaped top slightly revealed her lower chest. A gold belt with sparkling yarn was looped around her waist multiple times with a brass emblem neatly in the front. On the shoulders were extensions of sky-blue silk that flowed as she moved or the wind teased.

Keeping guard of the temple was Caspian. He wasn't much of a talker, and from how often he wore those gloves, he was obviously a Child of Rima.

"There you are," Maiden Camilla said, studying his steps. "If you can bear the wound, would you like to see Rima's Oak? Father said you've been eager to meet her."

"I'll endure the walk," he answered.

Caspian grabbed the hilt of his sword and led the way. It seemed like his job was to also play guard for the maidens, as anywhere he saw them, he was around Camilla, Nessa, or the other Maidens. His gift was unknown to him, nor was he interested in asking. By that look, he was probably confident or embarrassed to show it.

"How's your wound?" Maiden Camilla followed a fair distance from Caspian so she could keep up with his steps.

"Still stings." Maidens could heal most of the ailments of Riman Children, but he dared not ask. Since it required a special prayer, asking for it would raise suspicions.

The forest's entrance was marked by two white pillars. Lucan pressed his hand against the pillar, bits were cracked by the elements, and others seemed like a large force broke the pieces off.

"Coming?" From his stay in the temple, Camilla didn't seem burdened by her role as Maiden, at least from the conversations they shared. Her mother was Melodia's former Head Maiden until a raid of five years ago ended in hers and many deaths.

"May I ask something personal?" Camilla said in a soft tone. Under the sunlight, her dirty blond hair lightened. "Why are you a mercenary?"

If she was digging for information, she was going to be greatly disappointed. Everything about him, even his first and last name, was a lie. "I was a mercenary's son."

"And he encouraged you to become one? What did your mother say?"

"My mother died when I was young, and my father was in and out of our lives." Just like that, the truth crawled out and needed to be buried again.

A clear meadow surrounded a small glittery lake. Ahead was a low-standing stone bridge. Four Maidens tended to the tree. One was sweeping the bridge, and another was using a pole with a net to keep the lake clear of leaves.

"Is that how you met your friends? Being a mercenary, I mean."

"Why do you ask?" Maiden Camilla seemed to want to continue this conversation when he just wanted to see Rima's White Oak.

"You must really care about them." Her stare dropped. "Father and I can hear your screams at night, calling for Zorn and Oscern." Lucan gulped hard. He didn't know that was happening in his sleep. "Anyway, with dreams like that, you should've thought twice before picking up such a profession."

"Everyone has to carry some baggage we don't like dragging around." The words he wanted to carry out, the explanations all fell with one look.

Rima's White Oak stood with a stocky trunk with horizontal limbs. Severing through the ashy gray bark were the streams of light

that pulsed within. The wide-spreading branches were upright, open to stretch to the sky. The slightly blueish-green leaves. It was the middle of summer, but already he could see immature green acorns.

"Wow." Camilla's eyes widened with surprise. "You're so taken aback by our Riman tree you lost your tongue."

Lucan blinked from the view and caught her smiling. "Yeah…"

Could she blame him? Of the few surviving villages and Oak trees of Rima. This one. This one reminded him of home. It was in Aelith that Rima planted the first tree, and it was small compared to the Grandi ones that surrounded every Riman village he visited. Seeing it now, he had forgotten how delicate the appearance was, like a child but bearing strength.

"It's just like a regular White oak," he dared himself to say.

"I know it's not as impressive as our neighbors in Havekin," said Maiden Camilla. "This Riman tree is believed to be a daughter of the first oak tree in Aelith."

"Right, Cleric Aaron said that."

"You forgot?" Maiden Camilla chuckled and turned. Her face fell still, bringing him to notice the person who startled her.

A man in dark red robes was walking towards them. His dark grey hair fell over his eyes, deep wrinkles surrounding his smile lines. His eyes narrowed, peering at the oak tree and back at him.

"Lucan, this is Vance," Camilla said, clearing the tension he felt between him and the man. "He's a Child of Rima who works closely in the temple's records." Lucan nodded at him, but Vance returned no friendly gesture. "I better go. I'm sure Vance needs me for something."

"Don't mind him," the voice behind them was Maiden Nessa. "He's like this with everyone." She was all freckles, from her cheek to her chest and shoulders. Her hair was a soft amber, half braided and pulled to the side.

"Camilla said he works at the temple, but I don't recall seeing him."

Nessa shrugged. "He's not a people person and likes to lock himself in the basement where the records are kept." She passed him, nearly bumping his shoulder. "Here, we don't share other people's transgression, much less with strangers, but he is cautious of men like you, as hired mercenaries do ill will."

"I don't attack innocent people." No wonder Camilla asked him why he was a mercenary, but word had already spread out. "And I certainly would never attack a Riman village."

"Alright, I was only asking, needed to know if you would say anything different in the presence of our oak tree, but I'm quite pleased with your reaction."

Lucan looked back at Rima's White Oak with her glowing white lines. He thought seeing it would bring back the pain, but his heart felt light by the visit. Aelith's White Oak survived the fire, but seeing her daughter gave him hope she was in good health.

"Come, I'll escort you back to the temple." Nessa nodded at a passing Maiden and headed back to the bridge. "By the way, the Lovetts are getting married this weekend."

"Don't even know them." Lucan followed, nodding at the maidens who looked at him and seeing them furrow their eyebrows and look away.

"Aren't you going to attend?"

"Why should they care if I go or not?"

"Because every marriage needs to be celebrated, especially marriages made with a vow."

Lucan didn't chime a response. That was dangerous territory for him, but it seemed Melodia had matrimony on a pedestal. In Vinol, nobody cared who did what as long the laws weren't broken. He spent enough sleepless nights strolling the town to notice a few guards leaving Melodia. From the look of their smiles when they returned, they were hitting better taverns and probably enjoying some company.

"I'll go," he said to avoid the topic.

"Great." Maiden Nessa suddenly took his arm and leaned towards him. "I hoped Terra didn't ask you?"

Her touch shifted him back. The guards were watching, and he rather not impose on a Maidens reputation. "Relax," she said, suddenly chuckling and moving away. "I know my place. I was just… pulling your leg." She tucked her hair delicately behind her ears and glanced at him before staring straight. "I'm glad you'll be attending. Vinol is a treacherous immoral place. We want you to embrace our way of life here and the sacredness of unions, not the temporary."

Lucan chuckled but bit his inner cheeks when Maiden Nessa gave him an apprehensive look. If only she knew how much temporary companionship entertained him.

On his way to see the Harrows, his eyes stung at the one who had to be frying peppercorn in oil. The whole town was cooking, leaving a breeze of spices, one overpowering the next house. Even alone, he expected suspicious glances from the locals, seeing he was an enemy of Avery who washed up in their town, but he got shy smiles and assuring nods.

A large tent took over most of the countryside's open field. His strides were now longer and surer than ever. Before he got near the Harrow's porch, Matias waved him over from the stables. Upon hearing his name, Terra stuck her head out of the door and smiled. Her bright cheeks and grin captivated his attention.

"We're going to the temple to attend the ceremony," Matias said. "You're welcome to join us."

"We're not going on foot, are we?" He just left there. The walk back may revert his improvement.

"Didn't know you were funny." Matias patted his shoulder and went to tend his horses. His fatherlike gesture left him staring at the stable's gloomy entrance.

Matias must have warmed up to him sooner than he thought and more so now that Terra was approaching him without her mother's watchful eye.

Terra had left the house, smoothing her hands on her apron. "Everyone's pitching in for the wedding," she said, inviting him to the bench under the peach tree. "We Harrow women are dividing the work to make our late grandfather's tomato star soup."

"*Star* soup?"

"Yeah, a big pot of it to feed many mouths. I cut the dough with a star-shaped cutter. Mother prepped the ingredients from her garden and boiled the eggs. Elene is charged with putting them all together with her seasoning." Terra smiled and poked his chest. "Say maybe you can try your luck and get me a bowl."

"I don't think that's a good idea." He hadn't seen that woman since she nearly sent him to his doom.

"She won't let me in the kitchen after I told her how careless she could be." Terra clasped her hands, begging him with those big eyes. "Pretty please?"

Lucan hauled his feet to the porch, hardly willing to see her face again, whatever she looked like. He only recalled she wore something over her head that dangled over her blurry face.

Matias did say she was aware of her wrongs, so maybe their interaction could be different.

Back inside the Harrow home was the same sophisticated feel of the place, with fine vases, paintings, and nice furniture in the living room. These folks lived pretty well.

Lucan followed the aroma of boiled tomatoes to the kitchen. Without announcing himself, he peeked inside. A woman with a redhead wrap was occupying the place. She wore a green corset top with wide straps. It pinched at her waist, but not like her sister and her mother. Underneath was a white shirt cut at the shoulders, showing her sun-kissed shoulder blades. Her maroon-colored dress skirt looked heavy, and the stomps of her brown boots shuffled them about.

Turning from the woodstove to the counter, she did a double-take.

Seeing her face to face, he was finally able to clear the blur, curly eyelashes, wide almond-shaped eyes, skin as tanned as Matias, full sharp eyebrows, and plump lips that seemed to form a frown.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

And just like that, her features crumbled before Lucan's eyes. "Terra sent me."

Elene huffed and grabbed a flat tray filled with seasoning. From the colors, it looked like an anthill of cayenne pepper, turmeric powder, and cloves of garlic. Without looking at him, she climbed the wooden ladder by the stove so she could look into the large iron pot.

The ladder creaked from the pressure of her wobbling legs, trying to balance herself and the metal tray of spices and herbs.

Lucan went to balance the tray, but she moved it out of his reach.

"I got it," she stammered.

"Are you sure?"

"I *said* I got it."

The tray swayed, and the mountain of seasoning slid to the end. One misstep and she could drop it and, if that ladder gave out, fall into the boiling pot of soup.

Lucan took the other end and kept it even. Seeing his help balance it, she focused back on the pot. "Pour it in nice and slow," she instructed. "If you pour too much, the broth will bubble."

The pot was at least four feet high, and with his average height, he could barely see how much was going in.

"Careful!"

The red pasty broth rose to the rim. The next thing he knew, steaming broth dripped under the flames. A spray of seething drops got his arm, and the disturbed flames spread out. The tray fell, and Elene hopped off the step stool. Her right boot nearly slid under, but she caught herself when she reached for the counter.

Lucan rubbed his arm where the boiling water got him. Elene remained hunched over, massaging the back of her hand.

"Did you burn yourself?" His question didn't prompt an answer. She was breathing, back crouched from pain. "Hey." He grabbed her right shoulder, but the moment he touched her, her shoulders stiffened.

Elene revealed the wooden ladle she took from the counter and raised it against him.

CHAPTER 9

LUCAN

The ladle against his knuckles sounded like the percussion of a wood block. But to the nerves, there was nothing Lucan could do but shake his hand as if the effort could take the pulse away.

"All I did was ask if you burned yourself!" he barked.

Elene's eyelashes fluttered, and her upper lip rose to sneer at him. "And you killers have no respect for one's personal space."

"What did you call me?" He never thought he would hear that word used against him, not since Marca. She could call him whatever she wanted but this strange woman? Matias got it wrong. This irritable woman wasn't sorry. Not one bit.

Elene climbed the step stool again and stirred her soup with the same laddle she whacked him with. It took a mountain of patience to choose silence, but he kept a fair distance, from her reach and the stove's fire.

He watched, rubbing his knuckles and blowing air where it stung. Inside, he was scorching just the same, his will breaking. Who did she think she was?

The creaks from the step stool endured, suffering her weight. Rusty, loose nails barely held it together. The grooves had deep grey stains, and the corners were damaged with splinters. Elene used the third step to reach into the pot and mix her soup with ease. Not once did she flinch at how the legs wobbled. Anyone who valued their life could see the old, rickety thing should be thrown out, or better yet, used for firewood.

When she tried to reach for a jar on the shelf, Lucan bit his inner cheeks. She went on her tippy toes, causing the shift of her weight to creak the hollow parts. At this point, he might as well watch an avalanche unfold. Elene was impractical to danger.

No.

She was a ham-handed, unmindful woman, lacking dexterity and any self-awareness.

After grabbing what looked like a jar of dried herbs, her gaze shifted slightly, jabbing him with an annoyed look like she heard his thoughts before turning back to her cooking.

From the looks of it, she wanted him to leave. He could do just that. He had debated on when to do it a hundred times already, but the dangers of that unsteady step stool kept him from leaving, waiting for that inevitable tumble.

"Hand me the bowl of minced onions, then we can talk." Now and then, Elene would give the soup a few tastes, keep the comments to herself and stir. Lucan gave her the ceramic bowl of freshly cut yellow onions. She poured them in and mixed them. "Alright, what does Terra want?"

"Your sister wants to try the soup."

She chuckled and stirred the pot some more. "Not even two weeks, and you're already her servant." She peeked at him, her dark eyes moving up and down, measuring him from head to toe. "You better line with the others, although it looks like you're out of luck. Terra likes tall men."

"I suppose you want me to look disappointed?" If other men found her sister attractive, could he blame them? And what was wrong with some innocent flirting?

"Give me a clean bowl from the cupboard behind you." She said it like it was the hardest thing to say.

Lucan did as she instructed, trying not to throw some sarcastic response. This was Matia's home, and he was under no right to get out of line. Once he gave it to her, she poured the tomato star soup and handed it back. While she stepped down, she handed over the silver spoon, but not without giving him a hard look. "Just so we're aware, I'm doing this for my sister, not for you."

"Oh, because I didn't just assist you?"

"Just leave."

Lucan stormed out, biting his inner cheeks, bowl in hand, and with his knuckles still pulsing. That woman was lucky he didn't open his mouth. There was a spill of words he could have said to really knock her off that step stool. But when the temptation was there, Oscern's warning would circle back. Open your mouth, get a bite.

Terra was still sitting on the wooden bench, watching Matias take the horses out, wagon and all. Her smile widened when he presented the bowl. She placed it on her lap and used the spoon to move the star-shaped dough around. "Good to see my dear sister didn't burn them."

"Is it that important?" He still rubbed his tender knuckles. "Isn't there going to be enough food for everyone?"

"Well, many prospective suitors are going to give my star-wheat soup a taste," she said with a smile. "Anyone can buy the dry star wheat, but making them fresh will give a lasting impression."

Lucan grimaced. "What's with this place and marriage?"

"Pardon?"

"I've been to many Riman villages, and this one is strangely keen on marriages."

"Well, you only have to see where Melodia is located. Though we are safely protected by the forest, this long war has increased the delinquency in our region. We've had thieves and deserted soldiers try to take our town."

"That has nothing to do with marriages."

Terra's back straightened, probably from seeing how unconvinced he looked. "Wedlock is sacred here. I'm sure you've noticed that there aren't many Maidens and Children of Rima in Melodia. Since they could only pass their powers to their kin, you would think we would have more, but not everyone born with such gifts is going to settle here, and our belief is archaic to people like Vinol. Unless we convince people to take root here, there may not be enough of us to protect Rima's oak tree."

"That must be why Cleric Aaron asked me to stay."

Terra covered her face and giggled. "Maybe."

"And you want this kind of life? Getting strapped to just one man?" She was good at getting him to go into that troll's kitchen, which just made her that much more attractive.

"Why not? A girl can't flirt with every man forever." Something caused her eyes to widen. "That reminds me, you were looking for this, weren't you?" She sank her hand into her pocket and revealed what made his heart flutter.

A necklace sparkled against the light. The single shape of a leaf, twinkling. Lucan took it, surprising Terra with his quick reflexes. The chain had some damage, but stronger links mended it together.

"Where did you find it?" He put the necklace back on and tucked it back under his shirt. "I thought I would never see it again, and you fixed it too."

Terra smiled wider. "Oh, you know, I found it lying around the river—" A curse from the kitchen stopped her, and she began to laugh. "Sorry about my sister. She's been under a lot of stress recently."

"And who's the poor fellow that married her?"

Terra's smile dropped, and her arms locked. "Actually, she was recently chosen to be engaged."

"You're not happy?"

"Well… yes… only..." Terra rubbed her shoulders. "Sorry, I shouldn't be gossiping about my own sister."

"What harm will it do?" he said. "Once I leave Melodia, I'll certainly forget that one."

Terra leaned back and laughed again. "I'll just say this." She leaned toward him. Her touch against his arm was soft, head tilting sideways for him to drink her blue eyes. "This isn't her first engagement." She glanced at Matias, seeing he went back to the stables. "Pa has been understanding, but with her age and being engaged a second time over me, it really upsets my ma, but what can we do?"

The barn door closed, and she gasped. Matias was locking it. His dog, Pepe, faithfully following his side. "Terra, I think I hear your mother calling," Matias said. "We'll be late if you don't get ready."

"Coming!" Terra gave him the bowl and darted to the porch. "See you at the wedding."

Matias whistled Pepe to the back, where an open field with hills stretched. The dog instantly ran, joining the sheep that grazed in the distance. When Matias returned, he climbed the wagon seat. "You ready, Lucan?"

The bowl was still in his hand. Seeing it now, Terra didn't even give it a taste. "I better return this to the kitchen," he told Matias, hoping he would say, 'Don't bother, leave it there,' but Matias had climbed down to adjust Ivory's blinders.

Back inside the Harrow home, he could hear Terra's steps, thudding the ceiling and Mrs. Harrow telling her to hurry up. The dining table was too neat to leave a bowl of soup, he had to enter the kitchen. Seeing that damn ladle in her hand brought back the sore in his knuckles.

"What do you want me to do with it?"

Elene didn't look at him but frowned at the bowl she had filled in vain. "I should have known Terra sent you so she could see if her pasta cooked well." She dropped her solid stance and took the bowl from his hands. "You can leave now, Killer."

"I have a name." He let her insolent comments slide once, but he wasn't going to put up with that treatment again. "And I would appreciate it if you stopped calling me a killer."

Elene twirled the spoon in her soup. "Mercenary is just another word for a killer, and as far as I'm concerned, you're a criminal who's been allowed to roam freely."

"You know, for a Riman, you're pretty off the scale when it comes to new faces."

"Riman?" She gave it a slurp and looked at him. "I don't believe in Rima."

"Now that makes sense." Come to think of it, he hadn't recalled seeing her attend service.

"*What* makes sense?"

"That Melodia is harboring a little heathen like you—"

An uncomfortably warm fluid splashed on his face. He stumbled back as if it would help him breathe. He wiped his face, breathing pepper and the odor of onions that seeped in when he opened his eyes.

Elene clutched the empty bowl, eyes wild, dagger-like, just like her mother's.

Lucan left the kitchen, eyes still burning from the spices she put in that soup.

As soon as he opened the door, Matias was in front of him, wiping his hands. Seeing his condition, he dropped the rag he

carried. He marched into the house, shoulders high and voice rough as he called for his daughter.

"It's alright, Matias." He wiped clumps of the star-shaped wheat off his hair. Honestly, she wasn't worth him getting troubled over.

"No, she just doesn't know when to quit." Matias grabbed his arm and led him to the demon and her throng of ladle and soup. Elene was cleaning the mess before she saw her father, and her complexion went pale. "What did you do?" She fumbled over her words, but Matias cut her off. "Answer me!"

She jumped at his raised voice. "I threw the soup at him."

"Apologize."

"You're not going to ask why I did it? He called me a heathen."

"Apologize *this* instant!"

Elene dropped her gaze. Her upper teeth squeezed her bottom lip until she said it. "I'm sorry."

The steps from upstairs came down, and not a second later, Mrs. Harrow was lost for words, surprised to see his red face and the spilled soup on the floor.

"Norma, give him a cool, wet towel."

Blinking at Matia's darkened voice, Mrs. Harrow hurried to the kitchen. After he washed his face, Lucan didn't bother with his tunic. He knew it was going straight for the trash from how the tomatoes stained the fabric.

After he washed his face, he stepped into the porch. Wein was there, waiting under the peach trees before he noticed them.

"Please forgive Elene." Matias came up from behind him, looking more remorseful than his daughter. "She has my pride, but she lets it get ahead of herself."

"Acts before she thinks is more like it," Norma said, smoothing her skirt and walking back inside. "Terra, hurry, or you'll be late!"

Wein gave an unfriendly look. Like it was his fault.

"Don't worry about it," Lucan said to relieve the tension from his eyes.

"Are you sure?" Matias didn't look convinced. "I don't want Elene to be responsible for you wanting to leave early."

"Women like Elene do not scare me. I didn't make a big deal about it because you have been hospitable to me."

Matias gave him a half-hearted smile and went back inside the house. His shirt was ruined as tomato juice was a hard stain to wash off.

"Women like Elene?" Wein asked. He should have known if he brushed it off, the big brother would not garnish any sympathy for him. He didn't know when he arrived, but from the looks of his attire, he seemed to be training to be a guard.

"Got a question for you." He hoped he wasn't too pissed to answer. "What's the status of Avery's occupation on the Grazen Fields?"

"It's dimming down," he said without explaining more.

"The place I saved Cleric Aaron wasn't far. I was wondering if you knew the swiftest way I could go and examine the region."

"The quickest way is to just leave Melodia for good."

Lucan said nothing. He was evidently not going to play the peacemaker. He looked at his ruined shirt and made his way down the road.

"If you're that desperate, I can take you."

Wein's offer stumped him. His reply knotted in his mind. He didn't trust him to invite himself, but he couldn't stomach another day for Cleric Aaron's permission. "How soon can we go?"

"We can go now," he answered. "Would give me time to talk to you before I'm expected at the wedding."

Great. He should have known there would be a catch.

Being so early in the day, the path through the Iven Forest was a gentle stroll. The light peered overhead like the twinkly reflection of a wind chime. Because the terrain had high and low slopes, he had to make a few stops to catch his breath. The forest was lush and abundant in Grandi trees. The more there were, the faster they could detect ill people and squash them.

"This place is well protected," Lucan said.

Wein didn't answer. Instead, he continued without him. He could be upset all he wanted, but he's not the one who smelled like boiled tomatoes.

"A tree is still a tree against fire." Wein finally answered and stopped for him to catch up. "Melodia suffered enough raids, and those who wish to do us harm like to be clever about it."

"I'm surprised Avery didn't deforest the place."

"Who told you they didn't try?"

Lucan cleared his throat and decided it was best if he kept his mouth shut. Angering one Harrow was enough.

They traversed through the vegetation, nodding at the few guards who roamed the area.

At the border, Wein scouted the vicinity. Then he waved him over.

Lucan stepped into the Grazen Fields, where he thought it was the end for him. Life was slow in Melodia, nothing like the bustling cities. That night with Major Rudra and his two assassins felt like it had occurred years ago, but the squashed flowers he saw in battle had regrown. The wooden structure and wheels that belonged to a canon lay sideways, but the canon was missing, likely taken when Avery moved their encampment.

Lucan searched through wide stretches of meadow grass. He searched for hollow ground, for soft dirt beneath his boots, but there weren't any sinkholes.

The other guy must have brought it back up. The painful memory returned, the blade running from his back through to his chest, Rudra's stupid laugh, and that one who buried him underground. Knowing that he was alive and breathing didn't give him the comfort he thought he would find.

"Father said you are looking for your friends?" Wein's words convinced him to look at him. "Do you think they might be dead?"

"No. Well, that's what I have to believe, at least." It was too late to search for clues. Zorn would be impossible to track with his stupid ability to float over the ground. Oscern would leave some heavy indentations on the ground, but it's been nearly two weeks.

Wein started returning to the Iven Forest, but Lucan hesitated to take another step. It was just one guy. He could take him down and be gone.

"You'll find them when you fully recover," Wein said without turning to see if he had left. "But not like this. You barely made the walk to get here."

Of course, he couldn't. He was out of money, travel gear, or a sword. In his discontent, he followed him back into the forest's embrace. Hopefully, Zorn and Oscern would forgive him, but for now, he was stuck. "Thought you said I was best to just go?"

Wein smiled but said nothing.

On the way back, Wein didn't speak unless Lucan asked him questions. It started with what he thought of life here, to what his occupation was. Wein sold his family's wool products on Vine Road, visiting smaller kingdoms and places like Lyrin Town, Appleton, and Havekin.

Amidst their breaks, Lucan shared his life in the Southern lands, his early years in Truterson, the Bison Ranges, and his journey to Vinol. Sharing his story about how they got kicked off Fredrick won smiles from Wein, and it was in their conversations that he realized the mean look he gave him on Matia's farm was for his sister.

Wein spun his dagger. He held it with a steady grip and, by his posture, had some experience. "Trading is a stressful business, dealing with the customers, reminding them how we charge by the length of the cut of wool. Coming home sometimes with not enough coins or bringing damaged products because the weather ruined it."

"Then why don't you stop?" He asked, watching his steps. "You clearly want to be a Melodian guard."

"I hate the business, but I don't mind the travel. It's easier to pack up and leave for a few days and enjoy the scenery. Because of that, someone I care about gets to join me and take a break from this place."

CHAPTER 10

ELENE

Elene cursed as the keys clattered on the porch. She hurriedly locked her front door, palms still sweaty as she was running late. The key felt heavy in the pocket of her new skirt, the one she made just for the Lovelett's reception. Her blouse was a soft ivory shade, with the sunflowers she liked to stitch at the collar. As she paced through the dirt road, she lifted her skirt to pick up more ground. Since she was not one to have guests, nobody would see she wore men's drawers instead of pantalets as they were too long to wear in the summer. Pantalettes or drawers, she secretly wore the modern underwear women from the city wore. Mother found them provocative, but Elene liked the style and sewed her own ruffles and laces.

A tent protruded from the open field. Strong pillars kept it grounded, and extra tables and seats surrounded the entrance. Upon entering, the pillars were decorated with pansies, no doubt by Mrs. Brel's services. Being a florist must be hard as her businesses depended on the seasons. In the winter, her shop would sell mostly herbal teas and potpourri. Sometimes she would buy Mother's flowery embroidered patches. There were rumors that Mrs. Brel would claim she made them and would resell them, or so Terra said.

The place was busy, with organizers helping set up the feast. The rest were at the temple to witness the Lovelett's vows. Tables were set, and an array of vibrant red carpets were laid out, stacked over one another to conceal the grass or cushion the drunks. Glass jars on each table had some of her flowers, Camelias, Snowdrops, and

yellow Winter Aconites. They were well into Summer, but the flowers gave the reception the look of Spring's symbol. A new start, a fresh new life.

The dance floor was in the center, made up of unpolished wooden flooring, and in the far back were extra barrels of aged wine.

"Elene," Mother said after she found her. "You're late. Start folding our napkins." She was a close friend of the Loveletts and vowed no hell or hail would stop her from helping with the arrangements.

Elene folded the cherry-colored napkins, shaped them as bows, and neatly set them around the tables.

Mother would sometimes stop and look at her, and she would pretend she didn't notice as it was probably her turban that distracted her. "You're sporting a new skirt," she declared rather than ask.

Elene looked down as if she didn't know. "I am."

"Let me give it a look." Mother crouched and raised the end of the skirt where she could see her needlework. She was risking attending the reception without her feedback.

"You certainly know how to make a fine point down the end."

"Well… I did learn from the best."

The corner of her mother's lips curled before she got up. She then frowned when she looked at her turban. "Don't mess this day up, alright?"

Elene blinked a few times before dropping her gaze. Terra returned, and her chirping giggles pulled them apart. She squeezed behind Mother and went to the standing mirror she made Wein bring along.

Mother sighed, seeing her back so soon. "Terra, I thought I told you to stay at the temple?"

"Oh, Ma, you know I can't be caught looking untidy." Her dress was white, her corset decorated with sewn rose flowers. Mother had taught them both her skills with the needle and thread. Still, Terra didn't want to accidentally prick her finger and grow a bruise for the Lovelett's wedding.

"Do you like it?" Elene asked. Since she helped Mother with most of her embroidered handkerchiefs, Elene offered to do it for her.

"I would make some adjustments with the arrangement of the thread." Terra adjusted her hair and pinched her cheeks and nose to look rosy. Like she was suffering from a fever but did not look like she was dying. "But yes, it will do."

"You're *welcome*," Elene said, turning back to the plates. "Next time I decide not to have bruises, I'll ignore your pleas."

Terra grabbed her shoulders and shook her a bit. "Thank you, Elene—you know I appreciate what you do!"

Elene smiled. Her sister's touch was always soft and often left her feeling a burst of energy.

"So, how busy are we to have this night?" Mother asked while opening a new trunk of items.

"The entire temple was packed," Terra said. "The Maidens sang, attendees wept, and Aaron joined the Loveletts in matrimony." Her smile widened when she looked at her. "Pretty soon, that will be you."

"And she will not mess it up." Mother set ten ceramic bowls with a blue starlight gloss, followed by the next set. Piled next to theirs were wooden bowls, which everyone was smart enough to bring, but they did not do the bowls justice compared to theirs.

"Did we really have to bring these?" Elene said.

"Without a doubt." Mother rested her hand on her hips and smiled. "People need to know that you and Terra have wealth."

"An excellent idea," Terra waved at the first line of guests. "Because nobody knows we are short on coins on the inside."

"Terra," Mother said in a low tone. "Keep those lips sealed, or I'll think twice about you being here."

"Sorry, Ma, but we might as well start a cotton field. Nobody wants to buy wool when it's pricey."

"That's why Wein is preparing to go back to Vine Road. We will find our customers after those Avery soldiers leave."

Elene listened, hesitantly setting them on the counter. If they were short on coins, it was because Mother liked to spend them on entertaining her small parties or getting that recent septic tank she fought Father for two years into buying.

Just thinking about their lovely bowls slipping from a careless drunk or chattery woman tensed Elene up.

A bittersweet memory was imprinted on the bowls. Father had purchased those precious bowls when he went to Voxfes City. They were kids then, and business in Lyrin Town was slow. Her parents were considering slaughtering their oldest sheep in winter.

Father left for Vine Road and was gone for nearly three months. When he came back, they were not only going to be well off for the year, he purchased the bowls from a talented artisan. Elene remembered she threw a fit about him leaving, so when he returned, he brought her a special gift.

More and more guests started to arrive. Each table had the family's surname, so nobody would just sit anywhere.

As drums and violins played, the crowd cheered and clapped to welcome the new Mr. and Mrs. Loveletts. Even their damn name sounded like it came from a romantic tale. Soon, everyone found their seats.

Elene started serving the star soup while Terra and her mother served them to the table.

"Guess who's here?" Terra said in a low tone. "Hunter."

Elene searched the room. "Where?"

Terra giggled and shrugged. "Not here, silly, but he was with Mrs. Brel at the temple, so you better pinch your cheeks."

Mr. Bo, the owner of Sundale Tavern, returned, rubbing his stomach. "Why if it isn't Elene." Because she was one of his regulars, he never treated her differently. "Why are they still volunteering you for another reception?"

"We Harrows are hard workers." At the last wedding, her buttocks were sore from sitting and doing nothing. "Would you like another serving of soup?"

"You read my mind." He gave her a tankard filled with beer. "Came to bring this to you."

Elene thanked him but hid the tankard under the counter because Mother didn't like to mix their image with alcohol. Seeing this, Mr. Bo chuckled and left with his bowl of star soup.

Elene ducked from everyone's sight and drank the cool beer. With the heat filling up the tent, she hadn't had any refreshments. Taking her handkerchief from her pocket, she damped the sweat on her forehead and took another drink. After the alcohol made room

in her stomach, she got up, coming face to face with a pair of green eyes.

"Hunter," she stammered.

"Miss Elene Harrow." He bowed, eyes soft and lips smiling. The acknowledgment flushed her cheeks. His stare then moved to the empty bowl he returned. "The tomato star soup was superb."

"Oh, uh… thank you." Her mother caught them from across the reception. "We all took turns making it."

"Don't lie, Elene, you made it." Terra nudged her shoulder. "She's a marvelous cook, ain't she?"

Hunter surprised her with his pearly smile. "That's why I've returned. May I have another?"

Smiling but not being able to look up, Elene went for the bowl. When their fingers touched, she nearly wanted to curl them back.

What was wrong with her today? This was the second time another man touched her.

"Sorry," she snapped.

"Sorry for what?"

"No, never mind." If he was alright with it, then so was she. Heat flushed out of her chest when he thanked her with a wink. Terra laughed, drinking from her tankard. "Hey that's mine."

"Not anymore." Was she drinking in secret? Those flushed cheeks didn't look recently pinched.

"Terra, what are you doing down there? Stand up straight." Mother had finally made it back. "And Elene, don't even think about fancying him. You never know what reputation men who work outside of Melodia have."

"Mother, he works with his father as a carpenter," Elene said, dropping the rag on the counter. She argued that she should be allowed to enjoy her freedom before she was properly engaged.

Mother leaned her elbows on the counter. "Look at his family. Don't you see their disgrace? And Mrs. Brel… don't even think I ever enjoyed her company."

"But you never cared about what they think."

"I do if there's a chance you will ruin your Vow of Marriage again."

Those words dropped a cold shiver down her spine. Father walked up to them, smiling. Elene moved from her mother and quiet

sister and left. If she had stayed longer, he would have read her face no matter how she hid it.

Today wasn't supposed to be about them. It was about the Loveletts.

The air felt humid now that everyone was sharing each other's breaths. In the far back was Wein sitting with Pete and Gourd.

"What happened?" Her brother said after she plopped on the chair beside him.

"Mother."

Wein held the tankard's rim by his bottom lip and gave it a hard gulp.

The celebration continued, Mother didn't search for her to help, and Elene didn't return to the table. This was how they resolved their fights. They didn't talk to each other until it naturally happened.

As the music picked up, the heavy atmosphere in the tent smelled like beer and wine. Men were leaving their tables and asking their loved ones to dance. This was the opportunity for single women to use the dance floor to find a partner or show the town they were available.

One of the Lovelett's sons asked Terra to dance. Just as she made her debut appearance on the dance floor, Elene counted the tense look of the men who witnessed it—even the married ones.

"Your sister is gorgeous." When sober, Pete wasn't much of a talker, but with some beer in his blood, he had made that comment several times already.

"Why don't you ask her to dance," Elene said. "The single men will panic at the thought of someone else taking her attention."

"Really?" He tucked at his collar to air out the heat.

That was Terra's plan, after all, throwing the fish line as many times as she could and being a natural at it.

Pete left the table and went to the dance floor. As Elene expected, he stole a dance from Terra's partner but was red-faced the entire time.

"Why don't you go and dance?" Gourd teased.

"Nobody's asking me."

He then got up and offered his hand. "Then let's do it!"

Elene lowered his hand. "Sit down, or your parents will have you by the ear."

Chuckling, Gourd sat back down. It was a surprise he and his sister were fond of her, but his parents were just like the Brels. Looking at the tables, she found Hunter hadn't gone dancing. He sat with his family but seemed more interested in talking to his friends.

Wein lowered his tankard and distracted her when he waved at the crowd. She peered, unsure who lurked near the exit, cross-armed and far from the celebration.

To her displeasure, it was him.

Wein was staring him down until the fool noticed he was being watched and went over to their table.

"Join us," her older brother said. "You're among company."

Lucan only had to look at her to know she thought the opposite. When the Loveletts called for everyone to dance and surround the newlyweds, her stare went to Hunter's table once more.

"Yes, join my brother," Elene said, leaving abruptly. As he went to take Pete's empty seat, she walked out. He wasn't making room for her to squeeze out, so she forced her way through, bumping his shoulder but pretending she didn't mean to. Her peripheral caught him turning towards her, but she didn't care to see what look he had. If he was going to hang out with her brother more, he needed to know where she stood.

Elene walked through the tables, her sweaty palms deep in the pockets of her skirt. The closer to the tent she went, the hotter it got. When she made it to the table of her desire, she took a few breaths of air.

"Hunter." Her sweaty palms smoothed over her new skirt. "Hunter." In case he didn't hear. Her target finally took notice and wiped the foam of beer from his lips. Elene fumbled with the fabric. "Uh… well." Her words knotted on her tongue. "Would you like… like to dance?"

His smile widened. "Of course."

But as he rose, Mrs. Brel took his arm. Her stare moved to her turban, then back at her. "Hunter will stay."

"Ma—I want to dance with her."

"Now, now, Hunter, you don't need to say anything." Mrs. Brel rose from her chair and went between Hunter and her. She was Mother's age, with skin as pale as the porcelain dolls. "You have no shame in coming here," she whispered so the guests watching them

wouldn't hear. "Think because my son liked your soup, it meant something?"

Elene stuttered over her words, eyes frozen at her small pupils and the soft wrinkles around her eyes. She looked at Hunter briefly but couldn't unglue from Mrs. Brel. When her throat grew too tight for her to speak, she nodded and broke through the crowd.

Hunter was calling her back, but she didn't stop. It was best not to cause a scene. She kept her head down until she made it out, and the tent was far behind.

Rather than take the dirt road, she brushed through the wheat fields and headed home. The spikes tugged and clung to her dress, but that didn't stop her.

Mrs. Brel's words came back. Hunter wasn't dancing with anyone. If he had, she wouldn't think to ask him. And what's wrong with asking? Couldn't she dance with the person she liked without making it about something beyond having fun? Like everything in her life, she couldn't get close to anyone. That's why Corie and Theo could only play when they were at her father's property, why Mr. Bo brought her tankard in secret. She was just a space that could only occupy the Beaven River.

The wooden fence blocked the way home. Elene hankered her boot on the bottom rail and lifted herself up. As she swung her leg over the other but lost her footing. Her thighs squeezed the fence for balance until she wobbled sideways and crashed on the ground, arms first.

"Terrific," she wheezed. She spat and wiped the dirt from her lips, slowly crawling back to her feet. Sweat accumulated on her forehead from the heat, but she continued following the lampposts gently guiding the way.

The passing wind rustled the small, wooded area ahead. On the other end, home.

The sound of a galloping horse came within earshot. She couldn't make out who it was until the horse stopped. Staring at her was the handsome black horse.

Elene smiled and grazed his cheek.

"Elene." That deep voice belonged to her father. "You need to come back."

She moved from Fior and continued home. "You would die with embarrassment."

"You're not an embarrassment." He unmounted Fior and followed her to the cottage. Nor far was the Beaven River, the grasshoppers' cracking noise while the croaking frogs made her cringe. They built a small boardwalk where Father would go fishing, eat sandwiches, and wait for the downstream fish to catch their lure.

"I'm sorry," she said, covering her face. "I'm sorry you had to leave the reception."

"Were you drinking?"

"A little."

Sighing, Father rubbed her shoulders. "You know what I see when I look at you?"

"No."

He raised her chin so she would look at him. His beard had bits of grey, and his eyes were lined with soft wrinkles. "I see my kind daughter, a selfless woman who did no wrong in wanting to enjoy this night."

Elene moved from his hold. "I'm used to Mother's words, and I'm not surprised that Mrs. Brel spoke ill to me in front of everyone. But why did you make me apologize to that Killer?"

"Elene."

"Why are we pretending that doing good will be rewarded with good? Melodia could've burned to the ground if Avery discovered we kept that Vinolean soldier."

"Cleric Aaron was careful in that not happening."

"But you don't know who he is, what he could do once he leaves Melodia, and you still let him visit your home."

"He's a Riman, so I can only trust my gut that he's a good man. But you had to apologize to him. I know you're no longer in the faith, but I wish you could try to practice humility, if not just a bit."

That had nothing to do with the reality of things, the risks they took in taking that Killer in.

"Are you coming back?" He said, guiding Fior around.

Elene said nothing but followed him the same.

When they re-entered the tent, it was like nobody knew she had left. The music still carried on, and the dance floor was as busy as it

was when she left. Father led her to the crowd, excusing the crowded areas so they could get through.

Elene asked him what he was doing as he led her to the center.

"You wanted to dance, didn't you?" Before she knew it, he helped her onto the dance floor. The lighting, the noise, all of it tensed her muscles, moving against Father's steps. His callous hands took hers and raised them. He peered at her fingertips, seemingly aware of the discoloration. "Why are they bruised?"

Rather than explain the extra sewing she did for Terra, she blinked the small tears away. "You always do right by me." What little honor she had, Father made sure it stayed on her shoulders. She could be an old woman, and he would always make her feel like his little girl.

"People will tell you their opinions, but you don't need to do right by anyone—not even for me."

Elene gave him a tight hug. His deep chuckles boomed in her ears. The stares no longer mattered. Mrs. Brel's opinion of her no longer had any power over her.

Father suddenly released her and nudged her. "I think someone wants to dance."

Behind them was Hunter, smiling.

"You didn't have to do this," she told his warm eyes. Father left, so it was too late to give up this opportunity.

"I told you I wanted to dance," he answered smoothly. Their hands touched again. The skin-to-skin contact, the feel of another, did things to her state no beer of any tavern could do. "Besides, my mother needs to know I'm not her little boy."

They picked up where the music continued, joining the crowd. Being this close, she could smell Hunter's sweat. The beer in his breath didn't bother her, and his pink cheeks made her that much more nervous. She always liked Hunter from a distance, but she knew nothing about him. Even though there was nothing to be said, she didn't mind.

Father said she didn't need to do right by anyone, but her mistake followed her wherever she went. Like a ball on a chain, she couldn't walk straight, but right now, she couldn't feel its weight.

CHAPTER 11

LUCAN

The new Mr. and Mrs. Lovebirds, or whatever they call themselves, left the reception early as they had a trip to Appleton to take in the morning. For the entire reception, Lucan relished two tankards of beer and ate some spiced chicken with lima beans on the side. He wasn't much of a drinker—nor was he going to try the tomato star soup the Harrow's heathen made.

The reception didn't die down until twelve. At least, that's what Wein said, as all he did was stare at his pocket watch and sit in his seat. His mother would come by to introduce him to some bright-eyed women, but he would come back minutes after leaving the table. His friend Pete was a dark-haired man who said little. The large muscular man named Rüfus was likely in his thirties but didn't share the same somber personality as Pete and Wein. He stunk like sweaty armpits, but then again, the whole room did, but he laughed loudest and drank beer like it was water.

Wives started pulling their drunk husbands from their tables, and the tavern owner started serving spiked coffee for those who wanted to stay. High Cleric Aaron and some older men were outside, having a private chat, inviting the smell of their tobacco to enter the tent. Now and then, that red-headed girl from the temple would yank on Gourd's sleeve and ask for another gumdrop he carried in his pocket. It turned out she was his little sister, Corie. She hadn't forgotten who he was because she stuck her tongue out at him and left.

Gourd, being the youngest of the group, was also the chattiest. He learned from him that a Vow of Marriage differed from

traditional marriages as Maiden Derli took the role of matchmaker. Anyone who wanted to find a suitable partner would go to the temple and vow in front of Rima's statue that they were trusting her with a partner. Seeing how happy the Lovebirds were when they left, Maiden Derli may have had a high success rate.

"Did your parents marry the same way?" Lucan asked.

"Yeah." Gourd was picking his teeth with a toothpick. "Why do you ask?"

"Just want to know if your parents also vowed to name you after a plant."

Rüfus snorted, but Gourd smiled, taking no offense to his tease. "It was my great grandfather's nickname, but no one ever knew him by his real name—just Gourd, so they gave it to me in his memory."

"But the name…"

"We grow gourds, melons, and watermelons in the summer, butternut squashes, and pumpkins until winter."

"Sorry to interrupt you, Gourd." Matias was carrying a set of folded chairs. "We'd appreciate it if you men help us stack the tables and chairs."

"Better than sitting and doing nothing." Wein groaned off his chair and folded it. His family and that boot-stomping Little Heathen had left hours ago. There was a strange commotion that occurred prior to the first time she left the tent. Wein had to leave to investigate, but Lucan didn't ask for an update, perks for not caring.

The group dispersed and stacked as many chairs as they could. Lucan worked just as fast as they did until an electric shock kicked in. He thought it was a bad stretch from sitting for a long period until he pressed his hand to his chest and inhaled. Wein would have noticed his state, but he turned that moment.

"You can still feel the blade, can't you?" Matias passed him, carrying five stacks at a time.

"Sort of."

"Sit down. I think we have the rest."

That would be for the best. He unfolded the chair he could barely carry and sat down. He tried not to show it, but his lungs demanded more air.

"And you wanted to leave at the Grazen Field," Wein said, now aware that he was unable to continue.

"What's this?" Cleric Aaron came into view. Rather than help stack the chairs like the others, he took one from Wein and sat with him. "You want to leave soon? It's a risky business to leave in that state and with Averyans still lurking about."

"I was planning on boarding a ship to Vinol," he said, taking slow and deep breaths.

"The battle may be over, but the enforcement is still active. Appleton has closed their routes to Vinol until Avery's troops have left. Like many of us, they want to avoid conflict."

"Great." That took one plan out, but not his longing to be on the road.

"Perhaps your friends will understand?"

"One of the two might, but even so, they both probably think I'm dead." Just talking about it was enough to bring back the memory and, with that, the pain. "We also agreed that if anything happened to one of us, we would reunite elsewhere."

"What purpose would that serve?"

"As I said, we're mercenaries, not Vinolean soldiers. It's easy to become a target when you're just a sword for hire, and from the way things ended, I'm certain Colonel Finsley will think I deserted the army."

Matias lingered, staring at Aaron and back at him. Whatever he was thinking, he kept it to himself.

"Father," said Wein. "Since I'm leaving for Lyrin Town next week, I can give Lucan a lift."

"That won't be necessary," Lucan interjected. "If Averyans are still occupying the region, it's safe if I go alone and off the public road."

"But that's even more dangerous, given your condition." Cleric Aaron chimed. He leaned towards him and said almost in a whisper. "Where exactly is your destination, young man?"

"Mudburrow."

"That's just as far to Vinol on foot. Word is that by fall Avery will be off our backs completely."

"That's great, but I can't wait any longer," Lucan said. "Look… the man who took me down was a Child of Rima. He was hired to kill me in the same way I was hired to kill people like him." Matias's

stare fell, but he continued. “I took down his boss, but that gifted Riman is alive. He may still have gone for my friends.”

“What powers did that man have?” Wein seemed like the only one who wanted to help, even when he never asked.

“He could open the ground by just whistling.” It took a while to realize people had gathered around them, listening to his predicament.

“Then your friends may be doomed,” said Pete. “Not to take your hope, but if you barely made it, what makes you think they weren’t the next target?”

“Maybe, but maybe not,” Lucan said, with every intention not to include himself. “Yes, I’m Riman, but they’re Children of Rima.” Surprise eyes filled the room. “And if I can be honest, I don’t think my wound will heal soon. So I appreciate that you have been kind to me, but I won’t overstay my welcome.”

“You walk with a limp.” Pete's words cut more than he expected. “And hitching a ride all the way to Mudburrow is going to cost you a pretty coin.”

“I can be persuasive.”

“No, this changes everything,” Cleric Aaron announced. “If they are Children of Rima, we must help your friends, and we will help, won’t we, Matias?”

Matias dropped a chair. He cursed under his breath and picked it up. “We?” he said without looking at them. “I don’t understand.”

“You mentioned having some trouble with your finances, did you not—perhaps you could sell more if you branched out.”

Matias frowned, and for a moment, it looked like he could punch the cleric. “I’d appreciate it if you kept that out of everyone’s ears,”

“Oh, my apologies,” said Cleric Aaron.

“With all due respect, having company will slow me down,” Lucan caught Matia’s stare going to him. It seemed like he was against helping, but he was having a hard time saying no. “Besides, I planned on leaving tonight.” Wein scrunched his face. He seemed disappointed in him, but since they’re all aware of his predicament, it’s best if he came out with the truth.

“Alright.” Matias’s voice turned many heads. “Wein can take you on account that he sells seventy percent of the items in Lyrin Town.”

“Seventy?” Wein didn’t sound confident.

"Avery's intrusive presence might lead us into a difficult winter, and I won't allow my family to face it unprepared."

"Then, when you put it that way," Lucan said. "Once I find my friends, I'll pay you for the trouble."

"Oh, that won't be necessary," Cleric Aaron laughed. "We're Rimans. Consider it a blessing."

What on Pleada? It wasn't the cleric's right to answer, and it was beginning to annoy him. "I'm sorry, but this is a contract I'm doing with Matias." Lucan ignored the surprised look on his face and wobbled back to his feet. He met Matias face to face, as he wanted to show he meant well. "You're a businessman, but you're also going through the trouble, so allow me to compensate you. I have more than enough funds in Vinol to cover the distance."

Matias rubbed his beard, his thick eyebrows narrowed. He glanced at Cleric Aaron for a moment before looking back at him. "I accept—only I don't send my kin out of Melodia without protection."

"Then I will cover the bill and hire your usual guards." Cleric Aaron announced. "But that doesn't settle the bill of you saving me, alright Lucan?"

"Thanks," he answered, though he never said he intended to return to Melodia to receive his prize. Lucan followed Matias to where they were stacking the chairs. With no one else to eavesdrop, he spoke his mind. "You didn't have to do that."

Matias didn't look happy, but he didn't explain either. "Just keep an eye on my children."

"Children? Will Terra be joining us?" Finally, some good news about this last-minute arrangement.

Matias smiled and shook his head. "No, not that one."

The aroma of tomato soup and the pain over his left knuckles returned.

"Great."

At the steps of the temple, Lucan gave his Melodian sword a few steady swings. From the leather hilt and the shape of the pommel, it

didn't differ from their guards. As long as it was sharp and balanced, he couldn't complain.

Aaron and his need to pay his debt left him ten silver coins to spend on the road. The bag he was given had the basic essentials, flour, nuts, a knife, a wooden bowl with a spoon to eat from, a mug to drink, and a blanket. Maiden Camilla added some of the fresh spinach tarts she had made for him. On the second window was the record keeper, Vance, arms crossed, peering at him but not saying goodbye.

"I have a feeling you'll be back," Cleric Aaron said. "And for that, I'll be building you a home in town. Nothing big, but enough for you to start a new life here."

"You don't have to do that." *Take the rejection already.*

"If you don't return, then the building will take in people like you, good meaning, who are in need of help." He placed his right hand over his left shoulder and nodded. "Be with the light." He smiled as his daughter went up the steps, entering the temple that needed his attention.

Maiden Camilla held her hand over his head and gently moved them down his cheek. "May Skiar guide your passage with light, and may Rima cast your nightmares astray."

Lucan looked up. She moved her hand away and smiled, blinking at him. "What is it?"

"Nothing…" she said, rubbing her hands. "You give off this energy about you when I touch you."

"You decide to flirt with me now that I'm leaving?"

Maiden Camilla gasped and climbed back up the steps. Lucan chuckled and left the temple. It was the perfect response to repel suspicions, especially to a Maiden. He couldn't risk the chance of her sensing something else.

Lucan headed up the Avenue. Wein lived near the upper side, on one of their narrow little roads.

"Hold it right there." A voice halted his steps. The same old woman who owned that bakery had left her shop. Lucan gulped and went to meet her. "You didn't think you were going to get away from me, did you?"

"Sorry," Lucan said. "I thought you were anxious about my stay."

The old woman chuckled. "Not in the slightest. Heard you were leaving, so I brought you some cream pastries for the road." The box was neatly wrapped. He didn't have to open it to smell the sweetness.

"Excuse me, uh…"

"Olivia's my name, and before you tell me your name, I know it's Lucan. Word spreads like wildfire here."

"Well, Olivia, how much will it be?"

"Free."

"Free?"

"That will teach you a lesson about running off when a young lady is speaking to you."

Lucan smiled. He carried the box up the street like they were glass. He couldn't wait to try them.

Wein's house was a tiny cottage that probably had one room. Gourd, Pete, and Rüfus were in their traveling gear, swords neatly tied around their belt. They were talking to one another until they saw him. Before he got close, a band of children almost trampled him, tilting his box of pastries. It was those little minions again!

The children, too inattentive to apologize, giggled and hid behind the wagon.

"Oi, don't be climbing the back," Pete called. "You know Wein doesn't like that."

Stomping around Wein's home was a woman. A sack for potatoes was over her face. Marked in black ink was two dots that appeared to be the eyes, furrowed eyebrows, and a frown with sharp triangles for teeth. By that black corset with the gold branch designs, it had to be Elene.

"I have a hankering for little children," she groaned, stomping like she was some bear. It was clear from the burlap she could see but pretended otherwise. "Come, my little children, I have sweet yams and delicious caramel salted chocolate."

"Never!" one shouted from the tree. *How long has that kid been there?*

"I'd like some chocolate." The chubby-faced one said. He was one of the little demons who tried to send him back to the river.

"Hush, Theo, she doesn't have sweets!" Corie warned from behind the wheel.

"Then you leave me no choice," Elene snickered. "I'm going to hunt every single one of you and gobble you up like little candies."

The theatrical act had absorbed Lucan's attention. He only just noticed the woman marching behind Elene, who yanked the potato sack from her face. She jumped, realizing what had happened.

"Theo!" the woman exclaimed. "What did I say about hanging around here?"

"But…"

"No buts, come home this instant." She looked at the hiding faces. "All of you, go home now!"

More children went out of hiding, four-year-olds, five years to eight, left with sulking heads.

Elene steadied her turban but said nothing. She smudged the sweat on her forehead and started dusting her maroon-colored dress.

The woman, who could be Theo's mother, dropped the potato sack on the ground and left with her son. Corie picked up the sack and gave it to Elene. She smiled at her and thanked her.

Wein came out in brown slacks and high boots. Contrasting his buttoned shirt was a moss green double-breasted wool vest with five gold-colored buttons on both sides of the angled stitching of two birds.

"You never told me you were a member of the Red Guild," Lucan told him. Wein fashioned the same merchant hat as Frederick, with the red-tailed feather in the back.

"Been a member for two years now," Wein answered. "I met a Gypsian who was one of the leaders, and he signed me up."

"He couldn't've just signed you up," Lucan said. "You'd have to possess top-quality goods."

"Have you seen our wool?" Wein asked. "Aside from that, my mother and sisters are talented with their sewing."

It looks like they have some protection on Vine Road. Members of the Red Guild watched over one another. Though they were peaceful traders, they took the law into their own hands against any threat, be it thieves or bandits.

"Take care of ma and pa," Gourd told his little sister. "And don't throw a fit when you can't get your way."

Corie crossed her arms, tears whelping in her eyes. "You'll bring me a dolly, won't you?"

"Yes."

"Bring two, remember? The first dolly is going to need a friend."

"Yes, a million times, yes." Gourd squeezed her cheek. She smacked his arm but dove in for a hug.

"Everything good?" Wein said, climbing to the front seat. His sister was petting the horses, staring deeply into their eyes. She nodded at him, climbed the front seat, and dug into the wares, searching for something.

"There's room for you to rest in the back," Wein said.

"Thanks, but I'll walk for now." He needed to get his strength back. Fast.

Matias's horses, Fior and Ivory, pulled the wagon out of Melodia and took the open road through the Iven Forest.

"This is for you." Without looking at him, Elene handed him an item covered in a thin decorative sheet. "It's from Terra."

Lucan opened it and unraveled a fringe scarf.

"Lucky," Pete said with a lopsided grin.

"Yeah." It was kind of her but a rather useless item. It was summer, and though they had Lotter's Mountain to go through, he had no need for it on the road.

Once Iven Forest and their mountains faced their backs, Wein would glance at his sister and smile. At that moment, he understood what he meant during their walk. Elene was the special someone he wanted to take out of their town.

The Grazen Fields was covered in blotches of black soot from where Averyan's soldiers had camped out. Cleric Aaron warned there were some encampments out there, but that may no longer be true. The only folks passing by were regular travelers.

Seeing them, Pete asked if Melodia would see more visitors once those Southerners left to which Wein replied it was too late to make up for the loss of income for his family.

"You're not alone there," Gourd said. "That's why I didn't hesitate to come along. This is the longest route that will pay for my family's expenses until this holy war blows over."

After walking for a mile, Lucan needed a break and rode the wagon. Once Gourd gave his mouth a break about how he thought the world would end by fall, he had to intervene. "Don't be so sure the war is ending just because there's a few Averyans."

"Mind telling us what you mean?" Pete said.

The answer had a lot to do with the history of both kingdoms. King Pann and King Galrug were distant relatives that, over the years, adopted different religions. Vinol was a kingdom of many deities, acceptive of all religions as long as they didn't rise above their main one, the Goddess of Wealth and Harvest. Avery worshiped no god or goddess but a name, Beron, and Beron seeks to eradicate any belief system until there is nothing but Beron. But with the Northerners' deities crossing Blood River, it was a call to war to King Galrug. Even a child could see under the guise of this so-called 'holy war' being just a turf war, like gangs on the street, except they're both willing to send countless generations to their deaths.

"That's terrible," Rüfus said, lips barely able to hold a smile. "For a Northern, you sure know what's going on in the Southern."

"Well, I lived a good few numbers of my life there, so you pick up the events since most of the war took place there."

"What made you decide to work for Vinol over Avery?" Wein asked, carrying that same unsure look as Rüfus.

"Hunger, but also that if any of them were to win, it would be the kingdom that would accept Rimans."

Under the cloak of the darkness, the stars scattered over the sky. Grasshoppers called from the tall grass, calling for their mates.

Wein had become hesitant about resting because of the few lone soldiers they ran into. If it wasn't for their guards, they probably would have tried their luck. Elene changed his mind, saying the horses always rested before making the way to Lyrin Town.

Lucan didn't doubt his indecision. He had seen what unsupervised soldiers could do, and with a woman in their company, they could resort to just about anything if their carnal hunger was great.

While he started the fire, Wein started hammering down three iron rods over the dry wood. His blanket was already laid down, and his bag was going to serve as a pillow.

Rüfus and Pete set up three tents. Gourd helped Elene remove the harness from Fior and Ivory so they could freely move but not wander from the wagon. No one asked who was in charge of doing what. They knew their roles.

"You can strike a light," said Wein, giving him the flint and steel. He filled the iron pot with water from the barrel he kept in the back. He had to stop the nose drip when Rüfus went to talk to Elene. He noticed since they left Melodia, Rüfus enjoyed chatting with the Little Heathen. The exchange was relaxed and informal, somehow that still made Wein look at them, secretly side-eyeing them when they thought he wasn't looking.

Elene minded the fire, stirring the soup from her iron pot with a long-handled laddle. The citrusy fragrance could easily attract hungry travelers. Wein sliced the boiled eggs over his lap while Pete recalled their first encounter with Averyan soldiers.

One by one, Elene served the men a bowl of hot soup, who took it and thanked her. When it came to him, she didn't hand it over but set it on the ground like he was some dog.

Peering at the content, he frowned. Tomato star soup. The very same thing she splashed on his face. No wonder that fragrance was familiar. He didn't try it at the Lovelett's wedding, and he would not try it now.

"What's wrong? Don't like it?" Rüfus said with a chuckle.

"Oh, that's right," Gourd said. "You like to eat it while it's coming at you in mid-air."

"Very funny." He glanced at Elene and caught her smile. Rather than give those boneheads the pleasure, Lucan grabbed the spinach tart from his bag. He unwrapped it and gave it a hard chomp.

"Got us, dessert." Pete took a bottle of wine from his bag.

Everyone grabbed their mug and raised it for him to pour. Elene's mug was shaped like a buck's head, with the antlers pulled back to make the handles. She smiled when Rüfus told Pete he was greedy and poured a bit more on her mug.

"Just don't want her to get another shave," he hinted.

The men roared in laughter. Elene stuck her tongue out and drank her wine.

"You guys always this lively?" Lucan asked, taking a sip of his own. "Were you all friends before, or is this something you lot built?"

"We were friends but certainly closer after Matias hired us after our what, first trip?" Pete asked Wein.

"Yeah, don't recall liking you lot much in town."

Gourd snorted. "Hey, you all like me—it's Rüfus we had trouble getting used to."

"You're just a little stick, kid." Rüfus gave Gourd a hard pat on the back. "I'm the bigger and more muscular one of the bunch. That's why we've been safe."

Gourd pointed at his belly. "You call that round pot for a gut muscle?"

The group laughed. One after another, the men started grabbing seconds of Elene's soup while his bowl got cold.

The star-shaped wheat hung on Rüfus's large bottom lip. It couldn't be that good, could it?

Elene left the campfire and went to the wagon. She pulled two carrots and went to give them to her horses.

Seeing her from a distance, Lucan jumped on the opportunity. He picked up the bowl and gave the soup a mouthful. The star-shaped wheat was soft, and the broth felt like silk running down his throat. He scooped another bite, then a third. Before he knew it, he was slurping the remaining and finished it.

Breathless, he left it back on the ground and downed his wine.

By the time Elene returned, the bowl was empty, but she only saw him with the mug in hand. She carried a box and opened it. Without asking, she started passing the content around.

"Might go bad in the afternoon," she explained. "So, eat as much as you want."

"Don't have to ask me twice." Rüfus took two fluffy wobbly blocks. She stopped in front of him and offered the last piece.

"What is it?" he asked.

Her eyebrows narrowed. "Do you want it or not?"

Lucan took it, and at once, his hands felt powdery and gooey. Rüfus handed him a stick and started roasting his.

Ah, marshmallows. It couldn't be hard for her to say that name. Her problem was him. He stabbed the stick through and roasted the

surface over the fire. The sugar melted and burned into a crispy brown shell, and a hint of what smelled like butterscotch brushed up his nose.

"Lucan, tell us a bit about your friends." Pete ate his share of marshmallows without roasting them over the fire. "All we know is they're Children of Rima."

"Their names are Zorn and Oscern." Lucan blew the fire off his marshmallow. "We've known each other all our life."

"Where did you guys grow up?"

"Truterson." He gave his marshmallow a bite. A gooey texture clung from the stick to his lip. The smoked sweet and rich flavors melted in his mouth.

"And you're certain they would be in Mudburrow, not Truterson?" Wein added.

"After three years working for Vinol, it's not safe to go down south." Wiping his lips from the sticky sugar, he turned to the wagon, filled with chests of items. "How fast do you think we will sell Matia's goods?"

"Hard to tell. It's still summer, so I'm going to have to be persuasive," Wein gave the wagon a look. "About three weeks, more from how packed my parents crammed every trunk."

Pete and Gourd shared a tent together. Rüfus had his own, probably because he was a big guy, and Wein and Elene shared their own.

Lucan lay by the fire and brought out his necklace. He liked to keep it under his garments in the day to avoid thieves from thinking he had anything worth taking, but at night he couldn't rest without looking at it, knowing it was in his possession.

"What are you doing?" Wein said. "We got room in our tent."

Lucan raised his head and looked at him. "I'm fine here."

"Are you sure? Mosquitoes will eat you alive."

"I like it like this," he said, tucking his necklace back under his shirt.

For the rest of the night, Rüfus kept watch, and Elene didn't turn in. She sat there, holding her buck-shaped mug, watching the fire repeatedly flicker.

Rüfus would take frequent trips to relieve himself, return, and chat with her. When he saw he was peeking at them, he went back to keep watch.

The following day Elene was sleeping in the back of the wagon. Wein draped a blanket of protection over her face to shield her from the sun. It was a wild guess, but she probably didn't trust to close her eyes with him in the group.

Ahead was a city with towering walls that surrounded the place. Because of that blizzard three years ago, Lucan never got to visit Lyrin Town. It almost looked like a fort from how many campsites were outside. Each spot had a partially divided wall with its own stables for horses and donkeys to fit in. Some were covered in tapestry. He hadn't figured out why there was so much privacy until he saw a woman walk out, corset loose from her abdomen.

Wein informed him they would rent out one of those awful spaces. Lyrin Town looked like it had affordable lodging space, but he was too tired from the journey to find any point in it. They were the experts in this region, not him.

The campsite that was open for them was on the opposite side of town. Wein went to set his vending table in the town, Gourd and Rüfus went along to pay for the reservation fee, while Pete, Elene, and he stayed to set up the tents.

"You guys really going to risk sleeping out here?" he asked. "Place kind of stinks."

"Get used to it," Pete said. "This is the better option. Wein's going to be in town all day, so sticking with the rest of his wares and the horses is cheaper."

"At the cost of safety."

"Hey, that's what we're here for."

Elene boiled a pot of water over the fire. Little by little, she would pour dried flowers and stir the content. She didn't seem bothered by the decision, but from the dagger on her belt, she must know the danger, either from thieves or their very own neighbors who camped in the other reserved spots.

It was getting dark, and hunger was sinking in. The spinach tart was gone, but he had Olivia's pastries to enjoy. With the others in the town, there was only Pete to take a piece. Elene didn't even look

at the box when he offered. She seemed hyper-focused, arranging the iron pan and steadying her basket.

Wein came back with Gourd, but Rüfus stayed in town. Without asking, Pete helped him unharness the horses and take them back to the stables.

Lucan watched, arms crossed. The place carried a lingering smell of grime, and wherever the sewage leaked from in the city.

"Any sales?" Elene asked without looking at her brother.

"Just two of mother's handkerchiefs and four of Father's wool." Wein seemed irritated by it. The short sales were going to be a problem, it seemed.

When she looked up, she looked around as if realizing something was amiss. "Where did Rüfus go this time?"

"He's at the tavern. Just couldn't wait another day to be in those women's company."

Elene shook her head but said she would get started on cooking. Lucan lay in his usual spot by the fire, and before he knew it, he fell asleep, hand pressed on the discomfort in his chest.

CHAPTER 12

LUCAN

A hollow clatter shook Lucan awake. He rolled to his side, knee pinned on the soil with his hip half raised, hand clutching where he lay his sword. Minding the fire, where the noise came from, was Elene, one eyebrow raised. Like every waking hour, she didn't say good morning, nor did she apologize for the noise.

Lucan rubbed his lower backside. Three nights of sleeping on the ground were stiffening his muscles. The grim cloudy sky made the heat that much more unbearable, his shirt would stick to his skin, and he had to make space in his crotch area so his balls wouldn't stick to his leg.

Seeing her work, Elene made that weird pink batter again, plopping it into the cast iron griddle, a flat rectangle shape with low sides. A line of people from the campsite waited for Elene's fresh batch.

Since they had that encounter with the tomato star soup, she avoided him, focusing solely on her pink pancakes or caring for the horses. When she needed to wash, she did it in a stable, and if she needed to buy food, Gourd would get it for her.

Wein got out of the tent, surprising him. Normally he would leave for Lyrin Town at Dawn, but it seemed he was running late. He secured his Red Guild hat and gave the feather a flick. "Care to join me today, Lucan?" He took a batch of the pink pancakes Elene had made and brought them to the front seat of the wagon. "You can see how a pain in the ass my job is."

"Why the hell not?" It was better than walking around Lyrin Town and risking wasting his coin. From the snore in the other tent, Rüfus had gone to the tavern again and was out cold. "Does that mean I'm skipping my turn in cleaning the stables?"

Wein chuckled. "Don't count on it."

Lyrin Town's guards kept the door open for the merchants and their wagons. The cobbled roads were cramped and wet. Like most mornings with large populations, there was a pungent smell of the open sewers.

The townspeople busied the sidewalk, their talking muddled by the sound of their steps and the carriages passing by.

Uphill was the central market and its bustling noise.

"Keep an eye out for folks with sticky fingers," Wein said. "Especially the young ones."

"You don't have to tell me that twice." A boy was following their cart. The holes on his cloak were pulled more over his face to hide his identity. But the boy never got too close, as Lucan was staring at him. *Sorry kid. You'll have to be hungry today.* This was Matia's hard work, after all. Just now, he felt like a hypocrite. "I think I finally understand how pissed off the merchants were when we tried to swipe a few items."

"Why did you steal?" Wein asked.

"Ah, we were hungry orphans. Probably just like that kid."

"Orphaned? I thought you had a mother and an absent father."

"I never told you that." Suddenly, a certain maiden came to mind. "Camilla told you, didn't she?"

"She and Terra are close friends, so naturally, they started talking without wondering if I was listening."

Lyrin Town had a long road that stretched through the city. Vendors occupied every space, calling their customers over.

Wein organized his table, starting with a tarp so the surface of the wood wouldn't damage them. Another overhead to block the sun. Lucan stacked the trunks from the wagon. To any curious person, one could imagine the content carried gold or silverware, but when he opened it, it was just cases of wooden boxes with balls of wool yarn.

Wein said that wool's greatest enemy was moths, so each trunk had airtight boxes of neatly balled wool. Besides the basic ivory

color, there were greys and other various bright colors, gold orange, pale pink, a cool green, much like the moss, and different shades of blue. Finely knitted handkerchiefs of various designs were on display, shawls, blankets, anything the Harrow could make.

"Why don't you have a partner to help you with this?" Lucan asked, seeing Wein put the basket of pancakes in the center of the table.

"You mean… like a wife?"

"Or husband."

Wein shrugged. "When you grow up in a town with the same people, you end up knowing too much, the good and the bad. Kind of hard to find someone for the longer term."

By the afternoon, Lucan noticed the line between haggling down a price and getting one's money's worth. Wein often had to repeat the same sales pitch. He forced many smiles with buyers who gave him tall tales about why he should lower the price. Watching it over and over was like pulling one's hair out and being told to put it back.

The rest of the day went slow, changing items, restocking some areas of the table, and rotating the elegant handkerchiefs Mrs. Harrow made.

The basket of Elene's honey pancakes was down to five. It wouldn't hurt to get a bite, not after he skipped his morning meal. He reached for it, but just as he did, Wein took his wrist. "Two coppers for one honey pancake," he said. "Four for calling my sister a heathen."

"Best to let someone else enjoy them." Lucan moved back and sank his hands into his pocket. Wein frowned, seeing he wouldn't buy one. "Hey, she called me a killer."

"She told me." His stare moved to the basket. "But those pancakes are her only means of income. So, if you really want one, pay up."

"Yeah? Well, if she wants to make money, why isn't she helping you?"

"She does help me, but she doesn't like Lyrin Town." Wein moved from the basket and went to tidy up the scarfs they hung on the poles. "Listen, while we're talking about my sister, I need to tell you about my friends. They're still men, just like you're still a man."

"Alright?"

"If they say anything vulgar or try at her, let me know."

"I thought you and your traveling companions were all one happy family?" Lucan leaned on the trunk. His feet were hurting from standing all day.

"We are." Wein ruffled the back of his hair. "Pete and Gourd, I trust, but Rüfus is a heavy drinker with a weakness for sex workers. I fear with my sister's transgression, he'll probably think it's alright if he tried at her."

"Transgression?" Wein always spoke in riddles, with himself, or when regarding Elene. "You mean she broke some rule?"

"Anyway, Rüfus is well-meaning, but I can never be too careful, and since we'll be traveling together, I'm only asking you what I asked Pete and Gourd. So, if you can help it, don't let them be alone."

"Your sister is a big girl." *And old enough too.* "I doubt she'll need an extra pair of eyes."

Wein's face hardened. "She's *still* my little sister. I thought you'd understand, seeing you were desperate to find your friends in your feeble condition."

"Alright, you got me there." Lucan rubbed his jaw. He didn't mean to sound callous over what his little sister meant to him. "Sorry."

"It's alright."

As the hours passed, the same heavy cloud from the morning returned. The sight alone made Wein curse. They pulled through the day until there was no longer enough light for customers to look at their wares.

At the campsite, Gourd, Pete, and Rüfus were in their regular clothes. He and the others agreed to go for a drink. Instead of his leather armor, Pete wore a plain shirt with trousers, and Gourd wore suspenders over his.

Rüfus wore a sleeveless shirt, rubbing the area on his shoulder. "Thanks for stitching the hole in my pants," he told Elene.

"You're welcome." She snugged her fabric scissors back on her leather belt with a holder that also carried some yarn.

Rüfus frequented The Lampstone tavern, calling it affordable and entertaining. The room carried a cloud of tobacco, with dice players at every table. Sex workers swarmed the place, touching their

arms as they went to a table. Their skirts were raised above their knee, with no pantalettes.

Rüfus slapped one of the woman's asses. He carried the laughing pick of the day over his back and went upstairs.

"Looks like Rüfus is going to spend good coin on a room again," muttered Gourd. He waved the server down and ordered their beer.

"Again?" Lucan said. Rüfus unquestionably had a problem with beer and women. Did he think the further he was from Melodia, the less Skiar could see?

"Good, we won't have to smell his farts," said Pete.

Gourd and Pete started playing a game of dice called Winner's Luck. He tried to keep up with the game, but he wasn't much of a player, not like Zorn.

"Think it will rain?" Lucan said after his second tankard. He wasn't asking how the game was played, but he noticed it was solely based on chance and the call the player made.

"It's just how Lyrin Town is," said Gourd, smiling at the outcome of the game. "You're going to get squashed, Pete."

"Gourd, by all means, *you're* the squash."

By his third tankard, Lucan couldn't hold his bladder any longer. He went to the back of the tavern, where the men relieved themselves.

Several men were already at the spot, buttoning up and walking back into the tavern. As Lucan undid his trousers, he heard a rustle in the bushes, followed by moans. A man was leaning by the lamppost, eating a drumstick as he watched. When their stare met, he smiled.

"Five coppa' if you wanna be next."

Lucan ignored him and relieved his bladder, dogs were barking in the distance, and the smell of metal and piss was getting to him. After he shook it off, he buttoned his trousers. The moment he turned, he felt a hand brush against his face. He jumped and gripped the hilt of his sword.

The man with the drumstick was looking at him strangely, more so at his fist clenching the hilt of his sword.

Lucan left the tavern and hurried to the nearest entrance of the alley. He waited for someone to appear, some robber, some drunk who wanted to hurt him. "If you're going to come at me, just do it,"

he called to the dark. Frustrated by the coward, he leaned against the wall and crossed his arms.

He scoped the area until he was sure no one was following and closed his eyes.

After a few steady breaths, what little noise he picked up went dead. His sight took him elsewhere, to a warping blue tunnel with the light coming at the end. He went through it for some sound to come back, but it was distorted, and his eyesight was back. Lucan saw himself hovering over his head. His vision had a blue overlay mostly caked under a blend of grey. Any movement or noise reflected streams of gold light.

He hovered over the street as if he was a kite, picked up by the wind. The handiness of having this ability allowed him to see without his physical body. Back to the area he left, the bush was still rustling, the man was still watching, and a drunk was unaware he was tinkling on his boots.

After he circled back, he watched himself stand still, eyes shut, focused only on what he could see.

His sight came back, leaving him to breathe.

Perhaps the alcohol got to him.

In the morning was the same sizzle and sweet smell of those strange pink pancakes. Wein had invited him for another round at the vendor's table, and though Lucan had enough from one visit, he obliged.

"The stables are dirty," Elene commented out of the air.

Wein side-eyed him. "I noticed."

"Let Rüfus handle it," Lucan said. That Little Heathen had to butt in.

"Sorry, but that's on you," Rüfus said, yawning from how little sleep he had gotten. "Elene is sending me on an errand for potatoes,"

"And I'm going with him," Gourd said. "Wein needs me to fetch some wood glue and oil."

"I'm guarding," Pete muttered.

"Alright, and how many more days are we going to be doing this?" Lucan said, rolling his neck. "Why don't we just leave Lyrin Town and head out?"

Wein crossed his arms. "Where did this idea come from?"

"It's been on my mind a day after we arrived. Sell your wares on the road and at Mudburrow. We still have a long road, and summer will go by before we know it. You'll probably sell more of your wares quicker than this old place."

Wein looked at Elene, who was looking back at him. He was thinking about it or perhaps waiting to see what she would say. Finally, he answered. "No, Father said this is where he wanted to open shop."

"And on Vine Road, we'll run into many traders and travelers. You'd empty your trunk more in half the time."

"I'm sorry, Lucan. I know you want to see your friends, but I'm not leaving earlier than planned."

The sun had gone, and the same humid night took its place.

After returning from a long day, Lucan could smell sausages lingering by the campfire. The men were already laughing, on their asses, and gobbling the food.

"Don't forget Lucan, you got a stable to clean." Wein rubbed his shoulders and joined them. "And don't forget to feed them."

"Terrific." Lucan left the campsite and went into the stables. Two oil lamps lit up the room. The place was poorly constructed or perhaps neglected. There were cracks that should have been big enough to ventilate the smell of manure.

Lucan rolled his sleeves and went for the pitchfork. He approached the stalls and peered at the Harrow's shit droppers.

"You're Ivory," he told the white one who stepped into the back corner. "I mean, it's pretty obvious." The black horse stepped up to him when he got close. "And you must be Fior."

A bed of straw in the stalls helped soak up the mess. One by one, Lucan collected the mess, holding his breath many times and growing dizzy by it. A nudge sent him stumbling to the wall, nearly sliding with the manure he hadn't picked up.

"Hey! What was that for?" Fior huffed and bobbed his head to the feeding box. "Oh, you want your food." He paced to the exit

and gave the gate a hard shut. "Well, I'm not your servant. You're going to have to wait until I'm done."

After piling all the large clumps of horseshit on the wheelbarrow, Lucan started to scatter fresh straw on the ground, but not without checking to see what Fior would do. The horse stood still, watching every direction he went.

Lucan grabbed three flakes of hay. Fior went to the corner where the low-hanging box lay. Just that moment, he passed Fior's stall and went to Ivory, and filled his box.

Fior huffed.

"Hey you pushed me." He grabbed the flakes of hay and finally gave Fior what he wanted.

Traveling with a wagon and two horses was laborious and expensive. It was cheaper alone, but of course, he didn't have any items to sell. As he rolled the wheelbarrow out, Fior huffed slightly, leaning more toward him.

"What is it now?"

There was a rope that looked like it had come undone. A copper-like salt brick had fallen and stumbled under the fencing, away from Fior's reach.

"So that's what you wanted." Just as he was trying to wrap it around the post, Fior began to lick his fingers, trying to reach the salt brick. "Alright," he stammered. "Have at it."

Lucan went back to work, humming to himself. Passing him now and then, he noticed Fior would stop licking the salt brick if he stopped humming.

"You like the tune?" he asked as he passed him. "You're a horse, so I doubt you'll understand *A Thousand Leaves of Light*."

The stables were clean, the horses were fed, and the wheelbarrow could be dumped in the morning. His humming continued, but soon the words came out.

Rima, walk among us. Take us
where you most reside.

He started washing his hands and forearm with a bar of soap.

Oh, Skiar, free us from the
shadow's cage.

The subtle steps behind him choked his singing altogether. That Little Heathen had walked in, looking at him sourly.

"What?" He got the towel that hung on the shelf and dried himself.

"Just making sure you're not feeding the horses something that will get them sick." She frowned but only kept her gaze on the ground. "I left your plate by where you sleep."

It seemed she was only willing to talk to him to either rat him out or remind him there was food to eat.

Elene slowly reached for the door handle but paused. "And don't sing to my horses anything Riman."

Lucan planted his hands on his hips. "Trust me, I regretted singing those words the moment you walked in." That was a sacred song, one he thought he could share with Fior, but then that woman had sneaked behind him.

Rather than take the leave like she intended, Elene went to pet Fior. "Just know that I'm watching you, Killer."

"Then you're wasting your time."

A sudden whisk of air breezed to the cracks of the stables. Ivory and Fior pulled back, whining. Not a moment later, a scream detonated from outside.

Lucan left the stables. Shutting the door behind him was Elene, joining him at the campfire.

Their companions were on their feet, swords unsheathed and ready for whatever caused that scream.

"Did you two hear that?" Pete told Elene.

"All the way from the stables," she answered.

One of their campsite neighbors was running towards the light in a zig-zag manner. He pointed at the forest and hollered some words, but they were slurred. He stopped in front of their campfire,

wiping his hands on his bald head. Several of the other camp folk started to gather, curious about what was occurring. Everyone had to keep an eye out for one another and if they had to push any thieves away.

"He smells like a barrel of ale," Pete commented, covering his face.

Coming behind the bald drunk were his friends, laughing and calling him back. "Keep talking like that, and you'll agitate our neighbors."

"I'm—tellin' ya' I s'aw a ghostly figure with a stiff leg beyond over yonder!" He was pointing at the wooded area. "It was coming towards me—calling mah name—I swur it!"

"Guess it was nothing," Gourd said, putting his blade back in his holster. "Just another folk who fears the forest."

Wein said nothing. He stared at the laughing friends, tapping his fingers against his shoulders to steady him.

Elene went back to the stables, and the camp folk returned to their spots, grumbling about the waste of time. Among their shuffling bodies, a man was heading to outer campsites in the open field. When a person passed him, the man vanished.

"I'll be back," Lucan said, thinking only of the whispers, of the unseen thing.

"Where you off to?" Wein asked.

"Just need to piss."

There were a few campers outside of Lyrin Town's reserved zones, either because there was no spot available or because they couldn't afford it.

When passing the campfires, most of the conversations would fall silent. The mean-looking men didn't like him snooping in his area, but he had a man to find. Perhaps it was connected to what that drunk man said. He saw him again, the same dark coat swaying as he walked further back. He didn't know if he blinked or when he walked around a campfire, but the man was gone.

In the end, he made it to the last campsite and the dark forest that lay half a mile away. Two poorly structured sheets of wood were leaning toward each other, barely offering any privacy. It was a place to take a dump, and the odor was worse than Fior and Ivory's dung.

As Lucan turned back towards the camp's fire, a cold, sharp point brushed his neck.

"Why are you following me?" The voice said. He didn't hear a monster, just the voice of a man, a figure who had snuck up behind him. Lucan didn't gulp. He pressed the edge of the blade against his Adam's apple. "Not going to talk?"

"You have a blade to my neck." He couldn't make out his face, but he could see the blade was still, ready to strike if he dared make a move. "I followed you because someone described seeing a dark limping figure."

"Did you see *me* limp in any matter?"

"No."

The tip of the blade touched his skin. "Then you best return to your people or wherever you came from. It's dangerous to be out here, covered in darkness."

His advice was not a threat but cautionary. "And you?"

The figure shrugged. "I don't fear the dark. The line between light and darkness is finer than a—"

"Thread of silk," Lucan finished.

The blade slowly moved back. "Ah, a Riman?"

"And by your response, you must be a Riman as well."

The man sheathed his blade. He was a few inches taller than him, slim with broad shoulders. His black hair was mid-length, cut short in the back but messy in the front. "The name's Caydon."

"I'm Lucan."

"Sorry about the little misunderstanding." A match sparked between him. He had a pipe on the corner of his lip this entire time. "Been quite edgy as of late. Have gotten little of a full hour's sleep." He waved at the campers nearby and gave him a curt nod. "Well, you have yourself a goodnight."

"How did you disappear?" His question stopped Caydon. "That's your gift, isn't it?"

"Lucan, right?" He went to a campfire that had recently been put out and sat on the ground. "That's quite a guess for such a short time."

"I had my eyes on you."

Caydon chuckled. He grabbed a wooden trinket with a metal end and started tampering the pipe. "Well, friend, not all Children of

Rima are accepted with open arms, not when they fear supernatural powers." He didn't deny it, but he also didn't admit it. He dug into his coat and took out a flask, and offered it to him. "Drink?" Lucan stared at it but didn't take it. That was quite a friendly offer for a short amount of time. "It's strong stuff from the south. Not the weak beers and wines you Northerners like to drink."

"Hmph." Lucan grabbed it and took a swig. A blend of spices sizzled down this throat. Just as he exhaled, his breath watered his eyes. "Hell."

Caydon chuckled. "Like it?"

That burst of energy got him to linger a little longer. "I haven't had Rose Liquor since I left Truterson."

"Ah, born and raised?"

"Sorta." Looking at Caydon's bag, he was traveling light. He didn't want to ask where he was heading, not after he raised his blade to his neck, but there were some questions he wanted to ask. "Say, have you run into other Riman Children?"

"Haven't seen one in weeks. I have a friend I run into now and then, but no fresh faces." Caydon got up and confronted the incoming figure with his sword.

"Wait!" Lucan said, recognizing that figure. "They're friendly."

"Well, you better stop them, stranger."

Lucan raised his hand before Gourd got any closer.

He halted, blinking at him and Caydon. "Thought that limping figure took you."

"There's no limping figure," he answered, turning to Caydon. "But I did meet a Child of Rima."

"Really?" Caydon said, sheathing his sword again. "I told you that in confidence!"

Gourd lowered his sword, blinking. "Uh… well, we should head back. We're too far from the others."

Lucan looked at Caydon, smiling at the embers of the wood.

Back at the campfire, it was only Wein and Pete. They told him not to wander off like that at night. Lucan promised not to do it again but thought they were overbearing. After all, he got himself a prize. The flask Caydon gave him was still in his pocket. The drink was too good to return.

"You believe there are monsters too?" Pete said.

"I'm not against it."

Wein looked up. Someone was standing behind him. He could feel it. He looked up and found Caydon frowning at him, pipe still in his hand. "You took something from me, friend."

Lucan took the flask from his pocket. "I hoped you had left."

Caydon smiled, but rather than taking the flask, he sat beside him. Wein leaned back, hand pressed on his dagger, eyes narrowing at him.

"This is Caydon," Lucan said, hoping to lighten the air. "He's a Child of Rima."

"So are many who don't follow in the faith," Wein said. "Let me see your hand."

Caydon presented his right hand so the fire's light showed the black line that wrapped his middle finger. It was just like Zorn and Oscern, a mark on the flesh since birth. Caydon's palms were ashen, perhaps from the campsite, but there was a discoloration on his cheek.

"What happened?" Lucan asked. He couldn't see before with the dying fire, but seeing up close, the wound looked not close to a day old.

"Just a little run-in for traveling alone."

Wein looked at the stables. Elene was walking to them with a slow and meager pace, crossed-armed, uncomfortable by the new face.

Caydon scratched the wound. "It sorta itches. Think I got poison ivy or some—" His voice fell when Elene walked up. His attention fell still, eyes pressed on her.

Elene blinked a few times, trying to avoid his stare, but Caydon didn't seem to break it.

"Where are you from?" Wein said, drawing his attention to him. "You can start by at least telling us that."

Caydon's stare swept back to Elene, where she stood perfectly still behind her brother. He then looked down, half smiling, while he took out his pouch of tobacco. "Well, I practically grew up in the Southern, not by choice if I say so myself."

"Where exactly?" Pete asked. "Some names would help, stranger."

"Truterson, and before you ask, I do not supporter Avery's war or any war of that matter."

"How do we know for sure?" Gourd was in his crouch stance, still guarded like the others of the newcomer.

"Because I've seen what they could do." Caydon cleared his pipe with the same device he used to tamper it. The end had a curve shape he used to scrape it. "Avery used to be a golden city, the place to visit and seek wonder, but since the war with Vinol, they're unrecognizable." He stopped what he was doing and stared at the flames. "My hate for that kingdom grew after they slaughtered a Riman village." A cold sweat stirred Lucan. Caydon, seeing his reaction nodded. "You must have heard about it then."

"No," he said, rubbing the back of his neck, moist from the heat. "News from the Southern doesn't reach the North."

"Well, sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but it's true." His gaze fell for a moment before he blinked at the ground a few times. "Place was called Estiria, a little Riman village southwest of the Amerson Woods. They had no White Oak to guard but were Rimans by all rights."

"Then what reason would Avery have to attack them??" Pete asked, his walls slowly falling to concern.

"Resources. They wanted the woods for themselves." Caydon turned to an approaching shadow and grabbed his dagger. The large man was stumbling over his two feet, rubbing his belly when he approached the light.

"Rüfus," Wein groaned. "You had us worried."

He belched and sat to Lucan's right. "Sorry got lost on ma' way back."

"Phew, he is hammered!" Caydon opened his bag and brought out a glass bottle. "Wouldn't be fair if we got acquainted without something to drink."

"Now we're talking!" Rüfus's eyebrows dropped, blinking at the new face. "Wait who are you?"

Caydon laughed, his nails grazing over his inflamed wound. For the rest of the night, Gourd and Rüfus drank from the wine bottle, but Pete and Wein wouldn't touch it.

Elene didn't join them. She cozied up at the end of the wagon, shawl over her shoulders as she watched them.

Lucan scooted back, the embers of the fire gave the needed light to see everyone's face, but it was too hot to enjoy. Caydon's pipe left a pleasant lingering fragrance, like jasmine, with a hint of softer spices like cinnamon.

What Avery had done circled in his mind. He never went to Estiria, but he had run into folks who visited Truterson, selling lumber to the big city. It was true that they were Rimans.

Beron, that forced ideology that believed religion should be wiped out had treated Estiria like it was a fallen tree on the road and hacked it down.

"Lucan, it's your turn." Caydon's voice called him back to the present. "Since I shared bits of my journey, mind telling us what you folks are doing here?"

Lucan looked at Pete and Wein, who had been the least talkative. "Wein here is giving me a ride to meet my friends."

"What do you gotta worry about? If they're Children of Rima, I'm sure no mere man could take them down."

Lucan tapped his fingers against the cup. "They're sort of all I have."

"Brothers then." Caydon smiled, scratching the same wound again. "I have them too. Their abilities led people to call us freaks, so it's easy to have only Children of Rima or Rimans as friends."

Lucan raised his eyebrows. "Must be some gift if they get called that."

"It is. One can turn any liquid into purified water. I can't taste any other water the same."

"Did you guys try that with your own piss?" Rüfus asked.

Caydon chortled and looked at him square in the eye. "We did."

Rüfus slapped his knee and laughed.

"But it's nothing like my other friend." He gave his pipe another light. "He can slip through any wall like a damn ghost. We tried to get him to rob a bank, but he's a virtuous wimp."

"If Zorn had that ability, he would be in jail," Lucan said under his breath.

"Zorn, eh?" Caydon overheard him. "And what skills do your friends have?"

Lucan cleared his throat. He scooted back to the fire so they could all hear. "Zorn can levitate off the ground and glides over any

surface like a damn hummingbird. Oscern can't feel pain. You can kick him in the balls, and he wouldn't budge. He broke his ankles once from falling off a cliff. When we found him, he was walking with the bones that connect to his ankles out, feet hanging by his skin."

Rüfus groaned while the men winced.

"Hell." Caydon scratched his wound again. "I would pass out if I saw that."

"And if you keep scratching like that, you're going to infect it." The cold icy words of Elene pulled everyone's focus to her.

Caydon chuckled and moved his nails off his skin. "Thanks for your concern, gorgeous."

Her eyes widened, and her uptight shoulders leaned back.

Wein cleared his throat. "Watch it. That's my sister."

"My apologies," he said, smiling.

Lucan rubbed his jaw. The poor man had no idea about the woman he tried to compliment.

Caydon shrugged. His stare shifted to Elene. "Hey, there's a bit more to drink if you want some."

"No." The sharpness in her tongue struck like lightning.

"Come on." Caydon slapped his knees and got up. "Just give it a taste—"

"Why are you bothering me?" she asked.

He stepped back and chuckled. "I've been waiting for you to join us, but since you're not, at least I got you to talk to me."

Elene was about to say something, but Caydon started making his way back to the campfire. "I should go, my newfound friends. The night is still young for travel."

"Likewise." Lucan gave him his flask back.

"Keep it." Caydon waved at the rest and went for the road he meant to take earlier.

Lucan stared at the flask. It was a personal one, marked with a C and N. It must be his last name, but he wouldn't give it out, just like he didn't share his friend's name. He'd forgotten what it was like to be among his kind instead of on opposing sides of another battlefield. Even though he hid his true identity, he understood the burdens of gifts.

"Lucan." Wein had been staring at him. "Is this going to be the norm for you? Wandering off and bringing over strangers? Because we don't do that here."

Lucan looked where Caydon had gone. "Is that why you behaved so tense?"

"It's because I've decided to take your advice. We leave for Mudburrow in the morning, after we fill up on some supplies for the road, but if you're going to be picking up new friends…"

"Alright," Lucan said. "I won't do it again from here on."

Elene scoffed, but he didn't look her way. One unhappy Harrow was enough.

CHAPTER 13

ELENE

The tailgate was down so Elene could sit in the back. The road was flat, so there was no risk of the trunks falling off the wagon. Her boots dangled from the motion of the road. As much as she liked looking ahead, she also enjoyed sitting in the back, bidding goodbye to the scenery they passed. After all, the terrain was getting heavy with pine trees, and the breeze was becoming cooler. This was the furthest she had ever been from Melodia, and they were coming close to Lotter's Mountain.

"Keep your eyes peeled," Rüfus warned. Since the incident with the drunken man and what he claimed he saw, he started sharing stories of all the types of monsters people believed existed in forests, humanoid wooden creatures, well-meaning old women who made their victims their stew, and imps who soared through the trees to drag children away.

It was ridiculous to believe that monsters existed. And if such a thing existed, then the only monster in this world was the human heart. They knew how to turn their words into a hideous creature, how to ruthlessly stare at her, and parch her from ever wanting to leave her home.

As the traders passed by, she glanced at Lucan. Rather than observe them like Pete and Gourd would for any sign of danger, he barely looked at the folks. He seemed oblivious to the danger, and it was no surprise then that he brought that weird man, Caydon.

Gorgeous.

Elene touched her turban. Heat was swimming back to her cheeks.

The wagon slowly went to a stop. Before Elene could turn, Lucan hopped into the seat beside her, his shoulder nearly touching hers but bumping only when they swayed side to side. As she was about to complain, the sound of hooves choked her words.

"Halt!" A man in full armor was approaching them, high on his war horse. "Where are you all headin'?"

"To Lotter's Mountain," Wein answered plainly, his voice showing no fear or disdain.

The clanking got closer. Two soldiers with spears surrounded them.

"Why do you have so much protection?" That accent, it was just like Caydons. Short in some vowels and dropping after.

"I'm a trader."

"I can see that boy. What's in the trunk?"

"Wool products, scarfs, blankets, yarn, handkerchiefs—"

Not far from the lake was their encampment. She thought about that Averyan captain who forced them to deliver their water. If Melodia had disagreed, would he have burned them as they did to Estiria?

"Alright," the leader said. "I didn't ask for a registry. Move along."

Lucan didn't meet their eyes but appeared to be relieved they didn't discover him. The problem was she could no longer visit the lake, and Tremoren wasn't letting in visitors. Even worse, her monthly just started, with cramps and all. She refused to bid goodbye to the lands they passed, not with the Averyan campsites tarnishing their beauty. Now they had Vinol to worry about, both carrying misery and death.

"Hey!" A carriage carrying stacks of wheat stopped them.

"What do you hold?"

"The finest Melodian wool," Wein said. "Best to stock up now before the weather drops."

"Let me see what you have."

Elene rolled the tarp while Wein went to pull down one of the trunks. That Killer was right about one thing. Selling father's wares was better if they did it on the road. Some passing travelers were

interested in buying and trading, and since they were short on flour and firewood, they made the trade.

"Have you run into any place to rest?" Wein asked his new customer.

"Those damn soldiers are taking up all the good spots, aren't they?" He tugged at his dirty tunic but nodded in confidence. "Yes, go down that road, and you'll find a little village before hitting Tremoren. Place is untouched by those bastards."

"You have my thanks," Wein said, taking two wool sheets. "I'll give you a ten percent discount for your help."

"You got it."

Wein led them a few miles off the road to rest at a nearby village. It seemed like travelers had taken this route often before making it up Lotter's Mountain.

Instead of paying money for an inn, Wein paid a farmer named Taylor so they could stay the night and set up a tent on his property. Pete, Gourd, and Rüfus stood firmly as they gained nodding respect from the onlookers and a few giggles from the girls.

Before she lifted the iron pot from the wagon, Wein stopped her. His stern look had softened to his sister. "Come on, let's get you cleaned up and a bite to eat."

They headed down the road, leaving the others to set up for the night. Rüfus seemed like he wanted to follow them, as he had been combing his hair since they arrived, but Pete had whispered to him not to. She hoped they didn't know about her monthly, but Wein was already a private man. If anything, he told Pete in advance to back him up when he left.

Elene bumped her hips with his. "Thanks, Wein."

He glanced at her and looked back. "I hate to leave you alone in strange lands."

"You already know what I'm thinking," she said to lessen their dispute. Her dream of staying at an inn, in a cozy fluffy bed over the same bed straws, was becoming more of a reality.

The clerk at the Tailfoot Inn didn't look up from the counter. From the sound, he was counting his coins before Wein got close enough for him to stop. He carried an angry frown and had grey bags under his eyes. In using their bathing rooms, the clerk was charging a full night's stay.

Immediately Wein mirrored the clerk's frown. "Then we'll do without," he said, guiding her to the exit.

"Wein...." He knew how badly she wanted to stay. Sure, the inn was small, and there was a stench of sweaty socks when she entered, but if she could stay in her own room.

"One moment," the clerk muttered behind his missing front teeth. "We have a tub just in our backyard. We can heat up the water."

"Backyard?" she whined.

"Deal." Wein just couldn't trust her. She cared about him as much as he cared about her, but at times there was still the guilt. He was protective because of her, because of what she had done.

The only thing on their menu was a bowl of hearty vegetables with boiled chicken feet. Wein ate heartedly while Elene ate around nails and bones, as she never liked the taste, or anything wiggly, like the frogs that ribbit by the Beaven River.

At the clerk's announcement, the tub was ready for her to dip in. The backyard was spacious, made mostly of stone, with shelves of potted plants and chickens with their feet still intact.

White sheets covered every angle around her, giving her that privacy from prying eyes. It wasn't elegant, and she didn't have her own bed, but she did need a bath.

Elene untied the back of her corset. She breathed easier now and went to unbutton her blouse. Her body felt light after her skirt and muslin drawers met the ground.

"Be quick," Wein said. "You never know who might waltz in."

"After not letting me stay at the inn? I'm taking my time," She hung her clothes on the same wire that held her sheets. She dipped with her underwear and bra still on her body as they also needed their own washing. She did the same with her turban, slowly unwrapping it. "Ugh." She could almost see the oil Maiden Derli made her apply to her scalp.

"Ugh what?"

"Nothing." She sank into the tub, toes expanding as she stretched her legs. It wasn't as hot as she liked, but could she complain? The cool breeze made her dip her head. The soap the clerk left was new, with the smell of almonds, and… Elene gave it another whiff. Coconut! The fruit only grew in the Southern region.

Elene lathered her body in suds all the way up to her neck. The breeze picked up again, agitating the sheets and picking up the scent. She dipped again and waited for it to calm.

"Wein?"

"I'm here."

"Do you remember those long months Father was gone? When he went to Voxfes City, and we thought he wouldn't return?"

"I remember. We got those fancy plates and that buck mug you like."

Elene stuck her toes out of the water and wiggled them. "I don't think he meant for us to go as far as Mudburrow, not unless Cleric Aaron had something to do about it."

Wein fell silent after that. Not that he wasn't capable of lying or that he was afraid of the truth. He knew how she felt about Cleric Aaron, about how merciless he was to her during that winter when she shivered more than the breeze touching her bare back.

The trees above moved and shifted under the white clouds.

Elene dipped into the water again and held her breath. There was no use in thinking about the negative, not when she smelled of coconuts.

For now, the brief moment of paradise was life. No talk of a ghostly figure or Lucan to tolerate.

No Rima.

For a discount on Father's wool blankets, Taylor let them camp on their property for the night. His wife even let them borrow their table and chairs. Ivory and Fior were in the stables with the other horses, getting the much-deserved rest they needed for Lotter's Mountain.

The Taylors brewed their own beer, and Rüfus made sure there was enough for everyone to share. Though her steps swayed a little, Elene steadied her balance. Gourd's sword was shorter than the Melodian blade, light enough for her to hold. The clashing of metal and their laughter must have woken up Lucan. He moved his blanket off his face and sat with the others.

Pete and Gourd looked just as red-faced as Rüfus, raising their foamy mugs and applauding at the fight ahead.

"I hope they remember it's sharp," she heard Lucan say.

"This isn't their first time," Pete burped. "Just sit and watch the fight and wait your turn."

"No thanks, I'll use my blade when it's needed."

"Well, ya wuldn't wan' to intervene anyway," Rüfus slurred. "Them Harrows are hammurre'd,"

"They're sparring swords while drunk?"

"Relax, they do this all the time," Gourd said, watching from a safe distance between them and their fight.

Lucan seemed more disappointed than impressed. "And if they keep at it, someone's going to get seriously hurt tonight."

Wein swept in, but Elene moved out of the way. She didn't think Lucan was such a worrywart.

"We can stop if you want," Wein said, panting as she was.

"Why?" she said, slowly inching towards him.

"Because you're going to lose again."

"Is that what you thought?" Elene sent a downward strike, and Wein held his blade up. The clash stopped each other's strike.

"She has a weak defensive stance," she heard Lucan say.

Heat started to fill her headspace, but she pushed forward, driving Wein to step back. Another strike, and he parried the blade without effort. Her brother always knew her open spots before she realized them.

Blinking at their spectators, Rüfus nearly nudged the mug against Lucan's chest, dribbling beer on his shirt. He winced but thanked him, hand pressed where he had that wound.

Wein advanced, and Elene was shuffling back. His approach stole her time to recover, forcing her sword solely for defense.

"Alright, you two, take a break," Gourd said.

"You ready to forfeit?" Wein huffed, his posture leaning slightly to the left.

"Not one bit," Elene answered, breathing steady and slow. If Wein was getting fatigued, then maybe she could get through his defenses. The more she backed, the closer she got to the fire.

From the corner of her eyes, Pete poured more beer before seeing their approach, he told them to stop. She didn't hear what he told Lucan over the clash of their blades.

"Why should I?" That much she heard.

"I can't believe you." Pete splashed some beer and got up.

Wein legs bobbed after Elene's next strike. He was losing his advance. He was backing further and further into the others. His backside suddenly toppled the chair, and he fell sideways. Elene kept her blade overhead. The hollow crack locked every limb in her body.

"Hell." Pete was rubbing his face. "Hell."

Wein groaned to his knees and looked at the mess. "Oh, Elene" he murmured. "I should've stopped."

Elene dropped the sword. She went to her knees and gently picked up the buck's cracked face. Half of the face missing, staring back. She didn't know if it was the fight, the alcohol, or her crumbled mug, but she was shaking, and she didn't know how to stop it.

"I told Lucan to grab it before Wein bumped into it," Pete's voice couldn't pull her attention, but then he added one more thing. "But he said, 'Why should I?'"

Elene turned to the Killer.

CHAPTER 14

LUCAN

Hornshit.

That stupid mug must've had more sentimental value than he thought. It looked like it was made of wood, painted white to look expensive, but it had actually been ceramic. Now he had irritated the Little Heathen. Rather than explain, he prepared his defense, for he knew how one-sided her reasoning would be.

Wein remained remorseful, coverings his hiccups while repeatedly apologizing to his sister.

"You chose not to grab it, knowing it would fall?" When Elene looked up, it wasn't at her brother but at him. Her glossy eyes fixated on him. Her tears clung to her lashes but didn't fall. "Well?"

Her question directed all eyes on him, but the men were silent.

"Answer me!" Her shout echoed into the field, damping the mood to a grimmer state.

Lucan pointed at the darkened road that led back to the village. "There's the market street. Go get a new mug."

"There *isn't* another one!" Her shaky voice echoed. "My father…" She pressed her hand to her neck as if she had trouble swallowing. "My father paid a lump sum of coins to have this made for me. It was one of a kind."

"Then it's really your fault than mine."

Elene sprang to her feet and took one step toward him.

Wein took his sister's arms to block her. "Elene, calm down."

The tears she forbade from him fell when she looked at her brother. "Why are you defending him?"

"I'm defending no one. This was just a big bad accident."

"Did you not listen to a thing Pete said?"

"I only said his response," Pete stepped in, looking as perplexed as Wein. "But I think it was out of anyone's hands."

"I'm taking Elene's side on his one," Gourd went to stand by her side, holding his mug close to his chest. "That mug was special, and she's in her right to be offended."

"Why are you taking her side?" Lucan said. "She's the one who got the bright idea to bring a fragile item on the road."

"So what if she did?" Gourd slammed his mug on the table. "You were the closest one who could get it out of the way, but you decided to do nothing."

"The kid's right," Rüfus said, giving Gourd's shoulder a nudge. "Ya bettur start getting' to yur' knees and beg for forgiveness."

"Oh please." Lucan brushed his hair back and sighed. "Look where we're at? She's practically asking for it to break."

"It's because the mug was precious that I kept it with me," Elene answered, moving Wein's hands off and taking another step towards him. "Taking it with me meant more to me than leaving it on some shelf to collect dust."

Lucan looked at Wein and then at Gourd. Their eyes were imploring him but not signaling what to say or do.

Elene pressed her fingers to her temple, her breathing still labored. "If you say that you're sorry, then I'll try to forgive you."

"I *didn't* drop it," he defended. Rüfus groaned, and Pete rubbed his face. "And before you all start to treat me like a villain, I thought it was made of wood."

"I remain convinced that you could've stopped this." Elene's voice seemed calmer this time, but not in a reassuring way. "But you're not showing any remorse or guilt for your actions. That's why I'm asking you to apologize, so I know where you stand."

"Quit the virtue signaling. You're trying to take advantage of this situation so you have someone to blame."

Gourd threw his hands in the air. "I give up!"

Wein stepped in, but Elene went around him. Her focus centered on him. "Listen here, you shithead."

"Shithead? I thought my name was Killer?"

"I'm trying to let you off the hook, and it's costing me every ounce of what little patience I have stored for you, so just—just apologize—or!"

"Or what?"

"You'll no longer take a single bite of anything I cook."

"Lucan, just do as she says," mumbled Rüfus. "Apologies don' hurt."

"They do if you're getting blamed for mistaking ceramic with wood." Who the hell did they think he was? That he was a pushover? Some log that would come tumbling down a hill if someone pushed him? No. Apologies were not possible with the Little Heathen. He stepped into her space and gave her the same bitter state she's been feeding him since they went on the road. "And you want to know what? If it broke, it's probably because Rima willed it."

It looked like the campfire had died, but it was him, falling hard on his back. A heavy weight was on him, and sweaty hands were clutching his neck. Lucan gripped her wrists and moved her off, but just as he did, her nails scratched his face.

Laughter broke out from the drunken idiots. The only one who came to help was Wein. He tried to pull Elene off him, but every time he tugged, she would grip his hair tighter, nearly tearing it off his scalp.

In response, Lucan grabbed a fist full of her turban and yanked it off. He couldn't see her hair with the campfire behind her, but it looked meshed from how tightly she wrapped it, the ends pointing in different directions like stomped grass.

Seeing her turban on the floor, Elene released his hair and sank her elbow into his chest.

Lucan screamed.

The bony side kneaded into his stitches like hot needles prodding through his skin. Major Rudra's blade flashed back in the form of stitches as she pulled his flesh apart. He had to use the last of his strength to stay conscious.

Wein laced his arms around her waist and lifted her off the ground. The action left her clutching bits of his hair.

"I hate you!" she screamed. "I hate you!" Elene stormed off into the night.

Wein was panting, staring at the bits of hair she plucked from his scalp. "Gourd," he said. "Go after her."

Gourd nodded. He grabbed her turban and followed the direction she went, legs shifting an uneasy left and right.

Rüfus calmly collected fragments of the mug while Pete opened the box where Elene kept it stored. Of course, it was made of ceramic, the interior was padded in velvet with room for the mug to fit in.

Wein's anger wasn't visible in his eyes or voice, it carried a silence that could cut bread.

Panting from the fight, Lucan tucked his hand under his bloody shirt and saw red. Her elbow felt more like razors than bone. "Maybe this isn't working out," he said, yanking his blanket from the floor. "You guys can stay here or return to Lyrin Town for all I care."

"Hold it." Pete raised his hand to stop him. "You won't make the way to Lotter's Mountain, wincing every time you think we're not looking."

"I've dealt with worse, and you guys are inexperienced."

"We gave our word," said Wein. "My father's reputation is hanging on it. And besides, I've made more sales on this side of Vine Road than I ever did in Lyrin Town. If I keep this going, I'll have everything sold before we get there."

"Yeah but—"

"Do you not know how much that would help my family? I know you don't care about Elene, but what about Terra?"

Lucan dusted the grass off, his face still burned from her scratch marks. "This is ridiculous."

Wein's stare tightened all the muscles on his face. "Listen, Lucan, I don't care what she did to you, but if you use Skiar or Rima to hurt my sister again, I will sink my knuckles into your face."

"I didn't break her mug."

"You didn't make it any better."

"Look at me! She purposely pushed into my wound so it could reopen."

"I don't care."

"Unbelievable." Lucan left the campsite and went to sit by the fence.

The crickets were louder from the campfire, the call of the coyotes in the distance.

In silence, he watched the stars, hand pressed on the tender wound.

Hmph. Not make it to Lotter's Mountain? He didn't need permission. He could leave right now if he wanted and free himself of their company. His father's reputation, honoring their word, none of that noble stuff mattered to him.

Elene's words shot back. That stupid mug and its sentimental value. That's what was bothering him. He did feel guilty. At least, he felt more now than he did in the heat of their banter. But Elene was a closed door, and the only thing she's ever shown him was that anything he did was his fault.

"Skiar, give me strength." Lucan started making his way back.

Elene sat on the chair Wein toppled over, hunched, and wrapped in a blanket. On seeing his return, she refused to look at him. Gourd, who found her, gave him a small smile but said nothing.

Fair enough for him. Not like he came back to apologize, and the good mood of everyone was gone. It was just the summer insects and the crackle of their fire to entertain them.

"Do you really want to make it through Lotter's Mountain?" He asked. "Because if you do, we need to be prepared to make the journey. I don't want to be held responsible for anyone's life, and with two horses and a wagon, the road that sometimes goes narrow, anything could happen."

Wein looked up at him, "I meant every word I said."

"We go where Wein goes," Gourd added.

"No false claim there," Pete supported.

"The same goes for me," Rüfus chimed.

For the remainder of the night, Lucan shared the obstacles of the mountain, the elevation, the mountain lions, and the bandits they might find on the way. Don't assume nothing can go wrong, but face it like anything could happen. If they're hit by rain, pick up the pace until they reach the rest stop.

"They have that?" Rüfus scratched his beard. "I thought Lotter's Mountain was abandoned?"

"Not in the slightest." Lucan looked at Elene. She had her eyes shut the entire time, as if looking at him, perhaps hearing him was

giving her a headache. "Lotter was the wealthy investor to pave these roads. Back then, nobody could get through without paying a toll, but now it's a trader's spot."

Wein also grew a habit of looking at his sister. Since they left Lyrin Town, he had bags under his eyes. "Elene, maybe I should send you back."

Her eyes flashed open. "What for?"

"It could be dangerous."

"We've taken steep hills and inclined roads to Havekin. Don't forget that time Father's fence broke, and we had to take the horses up the mountain to get the sheep back."

"Except this place could have folks who want to cause harm," he said.

"I have Rüfus, Pete, and Gourd?" she said, slightly smiling. "And I have you."

Wein nodded. "Alright, tomorrow we'll recap everyone's task."

"Terrific, now, if you'll excuse me." Lucan wobbled back to his feet. "I need to go into that village and find someone to stitch me up. I can barely stand as it is."

Wein looked at Elene, who immediately looked away. She could probably do it but was evidently refusing.

"I'll go with you," Gourd said. "You need a shoulder for the walk."

"And the kid needs someone strong to watch over him," Rüfus said, giving Gourd's back a hard slap.

Gourd frowned. "Really? I can take care of myself and Lucan."

"Let's just go," Lucan said. If he stayed any longer, he might change his mind.

Lucan and Rüfus pushed a clump of fallen rock off the road. The hollow clunk echoed as it crashed miles off the ground. The path up Lotter's Mountain was well paved with flat stones, but sometimes rocks from the mountains would fall and damage the road. People had rolled to their deaths, either going uphill or downhill, either from being crushed by the tumbling horse or the weight of the carriage or wagon. And if that didn't take them, it was dehydration or vertigo.

"Nice and easy." Wein's boot anxiously bounced on the footrest. Since they started going on an incline, the condors followed them.

Caught by the slant trees that were scattered, broken wood that marked the place for failed travelers.

Elene tied two rolls of her mother's fine linen on her back to ease the weight on the wagon. Rüfus carried two trunks tucked under each arm. He was making the most labored breathing.

"Don't look back!" Pete shouted when Gourd leaned to see how far they climbed.

"It's getting harder to breathe," Wein said. "Everyone, keep your feet on the ground."

"It won't be long," Lucan said to keep their hopes up. Sweat was dripping from everyone's temple. "Lotter carved through the lowest part of the mountain, so it's not an impossible task."

"I don't like that he did it so close to the ridge," said Wein.

"My guess is any other route would have lengthened the time."

"How far high are we?" said Gourd. "Because the last time we stopped for those people going downhill, my head was spinning."

"Stop locking your legs," Lucan answered. "And we should be eight thousand feet."

"Do you hear that?" Rüfus said. "I hear music."

"Don't joke with me now." Pete was in the back, watching for animals or bandits.

Nestled between the mountain ranges were tiny wooden homes, tents, and wagons with someone playing the harmonica. The rest stop was covered with a bed of mist. In no time, Lucan's hair was damp, and with the sweat, his clothes gave an unpleasant odor.

As they searched for a space to rest, Rüfus already had his coin purse in hand. The scent of caramelized yams flooded the area. A woman was calling them over, asking for fifteen coppers for three steamed buns.

"That's quite a lot," Elene uttered.

"Makes sense for food in an impossible place," said Pete. "What's for dinner?"

"Well, we still have plenty of canned beans."

"Oh no." Gourd covered his nose, darting his eyes at Rüfus.

"And we still have some salted bacon to eat with."

"Anything will do," Wein said. "This climb has carved a hole in my stomach." He found a makeshift for the horses to rest. With a pricey fee, Fior and Ivory drank to their heart's content. The owner offered to clean them, but Wein and Elene were insistent on caring for them.

A family of passing travelers stopped by, attracted to the wool they had on display. Wein couldn't be more than happy to sell it, as it would lighten the wagon's weight. "This is promising," Wein said, dropping the silver coins into his leather purse coin with his initials, W. H. "If we had stayed in Lyrin Town, who knows how much longer before we left."

"You're welcome." Lucan was setting up the tents.

The smell of bacon and beans grilling after the fat was torturing him, but he never apologized, and Elene hadn't offered him a bite of her cooking since they left that farm. She tried to fit the broken pieces of her mug together using some glue. Eventually, she left the pieces in the box and gave the lid a hard shut.

"Any luck?" Wein said softly, as if not to agitate her.

"It's hopeless." She got up and went to their wagon, nearly bumping into someone who was passing by. Elene stumbled back, startled by the scare. She reached for her dagger from the holder and raised it against the man.

The man raised his hands and stepped into the light. "I'm sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

That slight accent in his voice and the dark hair over his eyes as the smoke lit his face.

Caydon.

CHAPTER 15

LUCAN

"Hey, I thought I saw that wavy hair somewhere." He waved at the Melodians and winked at Elene. "Mind if I join your company?"

She spun from his view and headed back to the wagon. Wein, who had told him not to invite strangers again, and he still had that unsure look.

"Just let him," said Gourd. "Poor sod looks worse than the last time we saw him."

"I do?" Caydon asked, looking at his grey trousers while patting down his coat.

"Alright," Wein said.

"Thank you, friend. I didn't know traveling so high up has its suspicious folks." He rolled his sleeves and showed them his scrapped arms. "Some man tried to push me over on my way up. Guess he could tell by my accent I was a Southerner."

"The war has affected many," Wein said.

Elene didn't return. She seemed bothered rummaging through the cart and muttering to herself. Finally, she made enough space to plop there, just like she had before. Was being around strangers such a big deal to her?

"Why take the risk on your own?" Pete, who said nothing to him in Lyrin Town. "If you had told us you were going up Lotter's Mountain, maybe you could have tagged with us."

"Ah, well, I intended to go around the mountain, but the road looked like it had been neglected." He was back at it with his pipe,

filling it with tobacco. "It was against my better judgment as it looked like historical ruins. But reunited, didn't we?"

"Then we can sure use you for the trip downhill," said Wein. "If you're up to it."

"Of course," Caydon said. "I'll happily assist." His stare shifted to the Little Heathen. "How has the road treated you, Elene?" Her posture froze upon being called on. She stared at him, lips pressed tight from answering. "Is she still angry at me?"

"Just leave her," Lucan said. "She's been in a prissy mood since before we climbed up here."

"Who do you think is at fault for that?" Wein said after.

Gourd and Pete chuckled.

"Not bad." Her voice quieted the men. "I'm just… tired, is all."

"Got grounded coffee to spare. I got them from a kind family who gave me shelter on my way over here. I'll give them to you." He got up and went through this bag. Elene crossed her arms and leaned back when he got close. "Here, take it."

She inspected the bag for a while before she took it.

"Caydon, don't linger over there," Wein said.

"Alright, alright, protective, isn't he?"

Elene smiled and looked at her boots. Lucan rolled his eyes. Caydon had yet to know he was dealing with a rattlesnake.

"So," Rüfus said, scratching his beard. "What're you doing here, anyway?"

"I can't share the details." Caydon rolled his shoulders before giving them a long smile. "But I suppose I can trust you kind Rimans. You did take a chance on me on our first meeting."

"Don't feel you have to say much," Lucan said, looking at his scratch marks. "Not if it's going to put you in danger."

Caydon took the pipe off his mouth and kept it in his hand. "I expected to meet with a friend in Lyrin Town, but he didn't show up. Our next meet-up is southeast, to Nemdrin."

"That's why you wanted to go around the mountain," Lucan said. "Nemdrin is south."

"And that failed attempt led me to comprehend that private roads have highwaymen. So, I went back, and here I am."

Wein looked at Elene. She had nodded off, arms crossed with the bag of grounded coffee in her hand. "I should turn in. You guys should too. Got a big day ahead of us."

Like every night, Lucan used his bag as his headrest and laid back down. Rather than lay down for some sleep, Caydon started to clean his pipe for another smoke.

"Not tired?" Lucan asked.

"Exhausted, my friend." He took off his jacket and took out a journal tied by a pencil. "But tonight is such a nice evening to sketch."

"Is being an artist one of your gifts too?"

"Hardly." He passed his journal to him. "I just sketch where I've been through."

Lucan flipped through the pages. They were mostly landscapes, buildings, and forests. One was of Lotter's Mountain drawn from afar. From the angle, it showed he was trying to go around the mountain, and the deep indentation of the pencil looks like he got disturbed. The next page was recent, one of a woman standing tall among the mountains. She looked naked, with some silk covering her and her face. He knew what he had drawn because she wore a headgear that covered half of her face.

"Rima," Lucan said.

"In a time of need, she answered Skiar's call and came down the heavens and stood among the mountains, blade in hand, ready to fight the darkness to submission."

"You know your words."

"I may have grown up in the Southern, but I've visited a temple when I can."

"That means you went to Villena," Lucan guessed.

"Oh, you've been there?"

"Got into a fight a few years ago because of them. They don't believe in killing, right? Some merchant was pretty upset that I disagreed."

"They're pacifists, but yeah, they sorta take non-violence a bit too seriously."

Lucan returned the journal and rolled on his back. Tomorrow was going to be a big day.

When he closed his eyes, his heart recited those same words.

In a time of need, she answered Skiar's call and came down the heavens and stood among the mountains, blade in hand, ready to fight the darkness to submission.

The morning blared its strong light, and the morning breeze was cool enough to lead the group downhill. Gravity tugged the wagon forward. Lucan and Pete held on to the ropes they tied to the back to ease whatever pressure they could on the horses. Despite Wein's assurances, Elene wouldn't leave until the breeching was secured to her liking.

Going down was a different challenge than climbing up. Nature had put everyone to the test, their reflexes and physique drawing sweat.

Caydon became the extra hand they needed, slowly pushing back so as not to force the wheels to slip down. He was calm under pressure and didn't question Wein's instructions, who, after all, knew how wagons worked and their limits with two horses pushing them.

Where the mist divided, the sun cleared the path, beaming its light way down. A lush region running for miles with slim tendrils of clouds hovering over the new day.

The wagon bounced, pushing Lucan off his balance. Just one minor distraction, and he nearly had his final view.

Wein slowed down the wagon. But he didn't stop the wagon cold. "You alright?"

"Y-yeah."

"One mistake, and you would've been under the wagon's wheel with crushed bones."

The lower they descended, the more strain he felt on the ropes. It was both frightening and remarkable to see Fior and Ivory persevere, despite the burden placed on them. Below, on the side of the roads, with sharp rocks. If they make it down in one piece, he's going to have to apologize for calling them the Harrows' shit droppers.

"Wein!" Elene was pacing from the right to the front, studying the horses. "Keep the traces straight. If you keep breaking, the

carriage will pull on their neck, and you know Ivory isn't used to this kind of pressure!"

"I know that!" he said, holding the lines steady.

The warning seemed to be too late. Ivory started pulling back, dropping the rope Lucan held. With little effort, the wagon started to steer to the right.

Fior was head down, focused on pulling forward, while Ivory had abandoned his share of the weight.

Pete grumbled, firmly steadying what he could on his side. Lucan shifted to the left and joined him, pushing against gravity and the wagon. They were both risking a heavy fall or getting crushed under, but that was all they could do.

"Whoa, Ivory, steady!" Wein shouted.

Elene jogged ahead, where they could see her. "Slow down, Fior. Give Ivory time to catch up." Her right foot sunk into an uneven hole, and she toppled to her back with her mother's fabric absorbing the fall. She looked up, watching as the horses came down.

Ivory and Fior halted.

Wein's leather gloves crinkled from squeezing the line, his tanned face turning pale. "I-I could have trampled you." Elene was panting, hand pressed against her chest. "Come back up," said Wein. "Slowly."

She carefully moved to her knees, squeezing her dress. When she propped herself up, her foot caught on the hem. Her elbows were out when she landed, but the steep incline pulled her back.

"Elene!" Wein's voice echoed into the mountains.

Her screams followed as she tumbled back, her nails barely able to dig the soil. Caydon dropped the bag of wool and charged ahead. He slid down on his knees until he caught her wrist and penetrated the ground with his dagger. After he pulled her up a bit, his arms laced her waist, hoisting her upward. Their faces were close, and their noses nearly touched.

Elene's face turned red, her breath short and labored but holding him tightly. Lucan exhaled, unaware that he had been holding his breath.

Pete swung the rope in his reach, and though Wein had put the breaks, the wagon was creaking. Caydon started to crawl with one

arm until the rope was within Elene's reach. After taking it, she made her way back to the rest.

Caydon climbed up until it was safe to stand. "That was close." He went back to carry the rolled up wool he dropped.

Elene was adjusting her turban. "Look, Fior and Ivory are on the same team now."

Wein was dapping the sweat from his forehead. "It's because they saw what happened to you. They're loyal to you more than you know."

Elene smiled and gripped the rope again, and the wagon went back into motion, horses lined. The descent was moving at a reasonable pace.

"You moved like a mountain climber," Gourd told Caydon. "Didn't think you would have reached her in time."

"It's a little gift." Caydon winked at Lucan. "But it's not the real deal."

Lucan chuckled. "Well, it was impressive just the same."

Through near misses, exhaustion, and the scare of Elene nearly falling to her death, the flat land was hardly a celebration. No one was faster at putting the supplies back on the wagon than Rüfus. He rubbed his arms, telling them he felt he was going to pass out twice.

"You should have told us," Gourd said. "I'd have helped."

"Leave him, kid. He has no one to blame but himself," said Pete. "He offered to take the heaviest."

Elene took out the mugs and started pouring water from the barrel and serving it to the others. After counting only six mugs, Lucan took his waterskin and replenished his thirst.

Caydon had climbed a boulder, scoping the way south. Elene went to him, lingering behind but not making herself known. It took a few moments for him to realize she stood behind him, but he took the mug she offered and thanked her, calling her gorgeous.

Elene rushed back to the wagon, head lowered. Caydon chuckled and hopped off the boulder.

"She's not a Riman," Lucan told him.

"Elene?" Caydon poured a bit of the water into his sleeve and wiped the back of his neck. "A shame for someone so pretty."

"Are you serious?"

"What?"

"That woman is a toothache. Nearly got me killed."

Caydon smiled and emptied his mug. "Well, she treated *me* nicely, so I'll have to forgive her."

"Come on, you two." Wein had climbed back into the wagon. "Let's cover some ground before we make it to our next rest stop."

"I still think we should rest now," Elene climbed the wagon and stood up. "I saw a river passing through those woods when we were in the mountain."

Wein shook his head. "No, we have to continue."

Elene spun, her legs wobbled, but she grabbed Wein's arm in time. "You're not giving Ivory and Fior any consideration. They kept the wagon from tumbling over us."

"Just listen to your brother," Rüfus added.

Elene planted her fists on her hips and shifted her posture sideways, hips curving her form. "I understand the urgency. We're all tired, but we're not working Father's horses to death. Ivory isn't as young as Fior, and if you want healthy horses, they need as much rest as any living person needs. If you have a problem with that, then you can start walking."

The men were looking at one another. Wein wiped his face with his towel. He steered the wagon off Vine Road and towards the woods, as she suggested.

Even if the men were unconvinced, Elene was right to say her share. Those horses hauled ass and did a better job than he expected. Sure her strife with him made her a pain to have as company, and he rather avoid her wrath if he could help it, but a small part of him almost admired how willingly mean and nasty she could be to defend something that she loved.

"I saw that smile," said Caydon.

"What smile?" Lucan said, rubbing his jaw. "Come on, before they leave us."

The camp was set up in silence, everyone knew their duties, and they were too tired to speak. Perhaps that was why Wein was urgent to cover some ground and find a nearby town or village. But hell, even he wanted to sleep.

Caydon returned from the river, brushing his hair back. "That was refreshing."

"Is it?" said Rüfus, scratching his beard. "A nice cold dip doesn't sound too bad."

"We can go fishing," Pete said.

"Eat before you decide to tire yourself some more." Elene set a pot of thick creamy soup on the side and mixed water, flour, and salt in a bowl.

"Alright, potato soup." Gourd started rolling his sleeves. "Need help with anything?"

"You can help me finish this batch." She separated the stiff dough into little portions. "The flour we got from Lyrin Town is going bad, so I'm making some hardtack."

"By the way, I have a favor I need to ask." Gourd started poking them. It seemed he knew how to make them without asking. He looked at him and Caydon before he continued. "Actually, I'll tell you later, privately."

Lucan was surprised when she put another tray over it and buried the entire batch in coal.

Caydon watched before he lit his pipe and blew out some air. He smiled at the group, grabbed his bag, and swung it over his shoulder. "Well, I better get back on the road."

"You're leaving already?" Lucan said.

"You're not staying for soup?" Elene followed.

Caydon opened his mouth, looking at them both until he smiled. "I would love some soup… but I should get going." He nodded at Wein. "Thank you all for your company."

"Thank you for saving my sister," said Wein. "I'm sorry for being hesitant about taking you in."

"You did what any leader would for their party and brother for their sister."

Wein nodded, looking at Elene before looking away.

Lucan followed Caydon from the camp. "Try not to go for any shortcuts."

Caydon chuckled. "Are you a mind reader?"

"If you stay on Vine Road, you'll hit many farmlands down south."

"Thanks for the tip." He puffed his pipe a few times, his focus up at the blue sky. "You know, being around you and your group, it

really makes me miss my friends. I really hope you find Zorn and Oscern."

"Likewise. Maybe next time we get ourselves some good food and drinks."

"I'll hold you to it." His smile fell when the steps behind them came close.

Elene was holding a mug of potato soup. "For your trip," she said, offering it to him. "You saved me up there, so I couldn't let you leave with an empty stomach." She went into her pocket and took out a metal tin. "This is for the wound on your cheek."

With a mug of soup in one hand, Caydon kept his pipe in the corner of his mouth and used his free hand to take the tin. Rather than take it, he held her wrist. Her stare froze, staring at his hand over hers. "Elene, if we meet again, will you talk to me more?"

"What?" She curled her fingers back, but when she moved away, Caydon took the tin as he intended.

"Just want to talk, know more about you."

Elene brushed the baby hairs that stuck from the side of her ears. "I-I suppose."

"That is good enough for me." Caydon gave Lucan's shoulder a nudge. "Later."

Caydon was heading for Vine Road, crossing over a few tiny hills. The man was gone, but he left a warm impression. He spoke with sincerity and acted naturally with the group. It was his private side that made Lucan unsure about letting him leave so soon. Avery slaughtered a Riman village, he and his group of friends roaming the Northern region, but for what?

Elene was still standing at his side, watching where Caydon had left. "Didn't know you could be so nice to strangers," he told her.

She gave him a sour look and returned to the camp.

Lucan scoffed and followed behind. Rather than join the others, she stayed with the horses who lingered by the river. She was their voice, and from what he observed in Melodia, they were her only companions.

Wein finished his bowl, rubbing his back as he joined his sister by the river. Fior and Ivory were taking a dip on the shallow side, cooling themselves off. He said something to her and patted his sister on the head.

CHAPTER 16

ELENE

Elene laid a fine cloth and wrapped five hardtacks before tying them nicely. The sun was setting, so there was no longer shade over their camp, but at least the heat was bearable. Wein and Pete took the wagon to Vine Road so they could sell some items before the day ended.

It had been almost an hour since Rüfus and Gourd dipped into the river. She had to keep her back facing them so she wouldn't see their manly parts, and when the Killer joined them last, she certainly had no interest in looking his way. The splashing and laughter tickled her stomach and pulled smiles out of her.

After the hardtacks were all stored, there was little to do but wait for the men to be finished. Her scalp was itchy, and her head wrap smelled like oil and baker's yeast. Now and then, she peered at the nameless forest, its dense branches swaying over them. There was a noise coming from within that she recognized in Melodia, a waterfall giving life to the river everyone enjoyed.

A set of steps were coming from behind. Elene grabbed the soap bar she stole from the inn and tucked her towel in her wooden bucket used for fetching water.

To her disappointment, the first to return from the river was the Killer, with only his trousers on. She tried not to look, but with the sun against his back, there was a cobweb of scars from his upper shoulder spreading down to his waist. The biggest one was the stitches on his lower shoulder blade. He grabbed the scarf Terra made and used it to dry his hair. After he let it hang over his neck, he turned, suddenly taking notice of her.

Elene looked away and stared at the wooden bucket. Since she attacked him at Taylor's farm, any moment alone with him squeezed any free thought.

The Killer smoothed his damp hair back and sat in front of the dying campfire. He didn't mind that the setting sun faced him, contrasting his sharp hooded eyes and freckled face. His features were strangely soft, at least when he was lost in thought, staring at the necklace he kept tucked under his shirt. The same quantity of scars on his back also marked his chest. It had been over a week since she elbowed his stitches, but the scar tissue from the front was still red.

The Killer's eyes swept up again, and she looked away.

Rüfus came back, shirtless, carrying his bottle of wine in hand. He was a giant compared to all the men. Despite his bulging gut, he had large, broad upper muscles.

Gourd came next and sat by the fire, dropping the bucket of fish they caught. "Wein and Pete haven't returned?"

"Not yet," she said, turning for the river. There was no shortage of shirtless men before her eyes. If Wein didn't get back in time, she was going to spend the night scratching her scalp.

"They're fine," Rüfus said, "They got some time before it gets dark."

"I'm going to see if they're alright." Gourd went shirtless but took his sword.

"Holler if you need us." Rüfus plopped some wood on the fire.

"Hey, careful," the Killer chided. "We'll need the fire for tonight."

"Last one, just a lil' cold is all."

Elene blew raspberries and glanced at the open meadow. There was no way Wein would come back in time, but she got up and took matters into her own hands. She deserved a wash just like them. "Rüfus, I need a favor."

"Yeah?" His pinky was in his ear, rotating with his head leaning sideways.

"Can you…" Her heartbeat fluttered, knowingly aware that it was uncommon to ask. "Can you keep watch while I bathe by the river?"

Rüfus took his pinky out and looked up at her. A sly smile cornered his lips. "I would be honored."

"Th-thank you." She grabbed her white blouse and blue dress to change in. Her corset could go for extra rounds before replacing it with her new one. Rüfus could barely get on his own two feet, but before he made another step, the Killer moved his arm and blocked him.

"I'll go."

Elene almost choked on her own spit. "I wasn't asking you."

The Killer scrunched his face, showing his irritation. "Rüfus is drunk, and he can barely walk."

"He's been in a worse state."

"Yeah," Rüfus defended. He was wiping his hand over his beard, smiling. "Besides, Elene needs me."

The Killer still kept his arm out, blocking him. "If you want him to go, then you'll need to be responsible if something happens to him—it wouldn't be the first someone nearly drowned on your behalf."

Elene squeezed her bucket. Her cracked mug kept flashing back in her mind, the cold defeat when she tried to glue it back together. The sad look on Wein's face swept over her mind. He apologized because he felt it was his fault that the mug broke, not the Killer's doing.

"Fine," she said. For peace and for Wein, she *had* to.

The walk to the river was downhill. It seemed to course off the mountain and forest and through the open valley. Along the way, the tall grass carried the sound of their steps, turning gold from the remaining light in the sky.

There was still enough light left, enough to enjoy, at least. The river was wide and deep-rooted, but the course wasn't too strong. She glanced at the Killer, hand resting on the hilt of his sword. She set her bucket by the river and kept her clean clothes in a dry spot.

The Killer went to the nearest rock from the river, where his shirt and socks were laid out. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Keep your back against me and make sure nobody comes near."

Without a follow-up question, he turned.

Elene took off her boots. She watched him for a few minutes just to see if he was going to peek or make an ass-biting remark. When he didn't, she unlaced her corset and undressed. She inhaled when she dipped her feet into the river. It was just as cold as the Beaven

River but not impossible to enjoy. As she went further into the river, the coursing current swept through, and the tiny rocks tickled her toes. She counted to three and submerged herself completely. When she went up, she gasped for air and swam back to the shore. Her teeth chattered as she lathered suds with the soap and washed her body.

She dipped again to wash all the dirt away and stayed there. Underwater, the current slowly drifted, but she hankered her feet on a rock so it wouldn't steal her away. When she got out, she slipped into a white cotton chemise. She put on her robe next and tied the sash over her waist. She wished she could just be in her chemise like the men just walked around shirtless, but the robe would have to do.

The Killer still sat on the rock, with his back against her, straight like he was some king on his throne.

Elene grabbed her new turban and neatly tied it around her head. The oils Maiden Derli made were unbearable in the heat, and there was no time to put them on.

"You can turn now," she said while laying her maroon dress over the river to dry. "I'm just going to wash my clothes."

"No need, just tell me when you want to head back."

"Alright." There wasn't much sun to spare, but she scrubbed her clothes with soap and slapped the dirt off with her hands. Most of the rocks were sharp and could rip through the fabric if she tried to use them for washing. She balled up her clean undergarments, blouse, and extra turbans in the basket. Turning back to the Killer, he slapped the back of his neck, where a mosquito must have gotten him. "Give me your scarf."

"Hm?"

"Your scarf, I want to wash it."

His boots crumbled the tiny pebbles before she saw the scarf Terra made for him. He turned and headed back for the same rock. Elene washed the scarf with more love than her clothes. Terra may have hated knitting, but she had Mother's talent as her scarf traveled far in mint condition.

Auburn-colored specks of light twinkled against the running water. Elene twisted the wool, wringing every last drop. Her heart suddenly thudded out of her chest. She wouldn't have noticed something was amiss if the man across the river wasn't standing so

still. The tall bushes kept him under the darkening shade where the setting sun had long abandoned them. His eyes were coated in white, radiating out of the darkness.

Elene's jaw muscles locked, and her throat had become dry and itchy like the moisture from her body was taken. Was it fear that paralyzed her? Or had her body become frozen? In a split second, she watched her feet hover over the river. She gripped the scarf, waiting for the fall until she fell into a pair of cold arms.

Up close, his eyes narrowed, the whiteness lacking any color.

The Killer still resumed the same posture. She tried to say his name, not Killer, but his real name.

Lucan!

Air came out instead of words. She tried again, blowing air instead.

Lucan!

Tears whelped up as her efforts proved useless. Lucan's posture suddenly changed. He must have noticed she was no longer washing because he stood up and turned. Without a second thought, he unsheathed his blade and stepped into the water.

"There is no need to fight." Goosebumps ran up Elene's arms. The man who carried her was speaking in her voice. "We will be going now."

"Wait." Lucan slowly lowered his weapon. "Let's not do anything rash—" His face, the river, the meadow behind him, all of it became blurry.

Elene tried to scream, but all she could see were trees endlessly passing her. She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping it was all a dream—a nightmare, of that matter. Terra's scarf had escaped her grip, unwilling to follow her into the depths of the forest.

The world stopped spinning when she found herself in a slanted terrain surrounded by pine trees. The man who carried her had put her down. The moment her feet touched the soiled ground, her first instincts were to run. Staggering by her own weight, her legs buckled, and she plopped on the ground. Cold mud splattered on her face. She hauled herself from the man, dragging her knees forward until her head hit the trunk of the tree.

"Don't worry." There it was again. Her voice. Coming out of his mouth. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Elene scooted her knees to her chest and locked her arms around them. The man by the river was coated in darkness and was pale, paler than the dead, but it looked like he had taken a different appearance. His skin was ashen and pale, the apples of his cheeks barely holding a tint of warmth. His hair lacked any color, but his eyes were light blue.

They were deep in the woods, and the sunset was gone, and only a dark blue sky watched over them. A cool mist came down and swept by. They were at the waterfall, which she swore existed but didn't think she would see.

Her kidnapper gave her a small smile and slowly approached her.

Don't come any closer! She pulled her ruined robe together and tightened the wet sash, fearing he had other motives.

The kidnapper frowned like he heard her thoughts. "I don't want to paralyze you," he said. "I know how much it scared you."

Elene shook her head, silently begging him no. She shuddered when he scooped her in his arms again. The mud that soiled her clothes smudged his attire, but he didn't mind. Before she could see where they were heading, they were standing by the waterfall in a matter of seconds!

The kidnapper sat her near the water, where it rushed with vigor, dangerously crashing against the rocks that protruded from it.

Elene tucked her knees to her chest again. The man sat beside her and leaned to look at his reflection. This was her chance to run, but was that even possible? He could just sweep her off the ground again.

Behind them was a loose tarp, a worn blanket, and what looked like a campfire that long went out. From the look at his torn pants and the holes in his tunic, he had been here a long time. Something on his backhand caught her attention, specifically a shape past his middle knuckle. A ringed mark.

"You're a Child of Rima." Elene touched her throat, surprised that her voice had come back. The itch was gone, but it still felt dry.

The man looked at her. His bottom lip hung like he was unsure of how to answer. "Yes. I am." Hearing her voice in him again sent chills down her spine. He reached and cupped the water and splashed it over his face. "Your voice is soothing," he said. "I thought I'd never use another person's voice."

"Is that your ability?" He was allowing her to speak, borrowing hers but giving it back when he wanted her to speak. "To borrow another person's voice and return them at will?"

"Yes." His answer lowered her tone of voice. "I was born a mute, but I can take any voice, animal, human, and use it as my own." When he smiled, the heavy creases lined the corners of his face. He was young, but that smile told her something was wrong. "By the way, did you know your vocal folds are scarred?" Elene touched her throat. What did he mean by that? The man nodded as if her eyes showed genuine interest. "Vocal folds help regulate the airflow into our lungs. You must've gone through something traumatic to damage yours."

"No," she corrected, answering by her own will. "I don't think so."

"Well, even so, it's been months since I've spoken, so I'm not choosy. I'm grateful I can speak, actually. Means I can finally sing."

"You got my voice to speak. Isn't that enough?"

"Speech and singing are two completely different experiences. Speech can be a form of singing when the person is speaking from the heart, but to sing the right notes, one cannot do it without the heart."

Her private thoughts alone made his shoulders sink. "Please don't look at me like that. I just want company. That's why I brought you here… Miss?"

"Elene," she said. "Elene Harrow."

"Hello Elene, I am Greison."

The ground was cold, and her robe was still damp. Summer's night by the waterfall brought about a trail of fireflies. Like she guessed, the nameless forest had its secrets, storing little lights in the middle of the night and people like Greison. She was free to move, but she also couldn't escape.

"I truly am sorry for frightening you." Now and then, Greison would talk or grow very quiet. When he wanted her to answer, she felt a warm sensation in her throat.

But Elene didn't answer. Her thoughts were on her brother. She couldn't imagine what he was thinking, coming back and finding her gone. Would *He* even tell Wein what happened to her?

From how far away Greison said they were, he couldn't have followed her if he tried, nor would he go this far for her sake, but she hoped that maybe just maybe, he cared enough to try, at least to get Terra's scarf back.

If she talked to him, if he sang, maybe that would be enough noise to alarm the others. But who was she kidding? The waterfall was loud.

"Can I ask you a question?" she asked.

Greison tilted his head. He had such strong feminine features. Even the way he elegantly leaned and sat. "If it means you can converse with me, then yes."

"That sash around your waist, clerics wear them."

Greison eagerly turned to her, interested or fascinated by her observation. "Are you, by chance, a Riman?"

"Hardly," she answered. "But I do live in a Riman village."

"Which?"

"Melodia."

"I'm from Preisen. It rhymes with my name, doesn't it?" He smiled wide. "It's a beautiful golden place. A dome to outsiders marked by Grandi trees to surround and protect them but the moment you enter our gates, it's a whole new land."

"Do… you have a family?"

"Yes, my mother is Preisen's High Maiden. She and her Maidens love me, you see, even though I'm different, even though I could never speak. They never minded that I borrowed their voices. You see, I can sing beautifully with any voice I borrow, better than any Maiden in Preisen."

"Why did you leave?"

"Oh it doesn't matter." Greison never cleared his throat, but he did, gulping hard at whatever seemed to want to come out of him. "What I mean is it wouldn't change a thing." His stare held a warm look she could trust, one she couldn't deny despite the situation he put her in.

"Greison," Elene said softly. "You haven't told me why you left."

"And you won't let me sing."

"Alright," she said, trying to hide her smile. At least he respected her decision. "Sing what you want, and then tell me why you're here—why you took me."

Greison frowned. He convinced her to let him sing, but he didn't see a good deal. "I told you, Elene. I wanted company…" Greison stood up. His slim body walked to the water. "But I'll take your offer. My gift is already going to waste, anyway."

Waste? What the hell did he mean?

Greison opened his arms and looked up at the sky and what little stars glimmered down at them. He hummed first and opened his mouth, singing only in scales, raising the pitch higher and higher.

Elene could only listen as Greison transformed her flat tone into an ensemble. The fireflies fluttered toward them and circled around them.

Rima, walk among us. Take us
where you most reside.

Oh, Skiar, free us from the
shadow's cage.

The fireflies emitted a stronger light, responding to his voice, the melodic wavelengths he freed into the dark.

The sight of the stars can
strengthen the weak.

Wherever you may go, the
mountains will oversee.

Open your eyes, and ask what's
within your childlike tone?

His tune fell to a low hum.

Have no fear, it leads where
you are, the scent of white oak
trees.

The cries, the old, the youth,
the laughter.

Guiding your hand to the truth

Rima, walk among us. Take us
where you most reside.

Oh, Skiar, free us from the
shadow's cage.

He spread his hands out towards the waterfall, his powerful voice moving with the same force and might as the current.

The sight of the stars can
strengthen the weak.

Wherever you may go, the
mountains will oversee.

Open your eyes, and ask what's
within your childlike tone?

After he inhaled, Greison peered at the shifting branches. "I ran from home. I dare not go back."

So, he wasn't a kidnapper but a runaway.

"You wouldn't understand." He smiled anyway. This time it looked weaker and crooked. "I've become a monster."

Elene felt saddened by his words. "I don't know how your Riman village is, but in mine, I could do no good. Not since I committed

my first transgression. I also ran away." Admitting that felt liberating. "I ran because I thought they would be better without me."

Greison wiped his eyes. "Did you want to go back?"

"Every day."

He half smiled, nodding. "My mother, she loved me. She let me lead the choir, and nobody cared that I borrowed their voices. Everyone who knew me loved me." Greison touched his chest. "But I'm different now. I'm not who they remember anymore. If they were to discover I had changed, they would be upset. Mother would try to help me if I told her, but then there are nights when I think the opposite, that Mother and her Maidens wouldn't want me anymore." He hugged himself and sank his head to his knees. "But these thoughts they keep telling me they wouldn't understand. So, I left, I ran and didn't look back. Only, I didn't think I would feel this alone, that I would miss Mother so much."

"Hey," Elene said. "Whatever your reasons are, we can help. I have a brother who will hear you out. Sure, I may not be one of you, but he and my companions are Rimans."

Greison brushed his long hair back and wiped the moisture from his eyes. "No, Elene, nobody can help me because you already have. I prayed for some company, and Skiar sent me you. There's no way that mean-looking man would have allowed it if I had asked you to come with me. I didn't think you would talk to me or let me sing, but you did. Now I can give something that he will never have for the end."

"End? What end?"

"Mine." As soon as he said it, he covered his mouth.

Goosebumps started to crawl up Elene's spine. The fireflies scattered and flew back into the forest. The waterfall, the scenery of the light coming from the moons barely shone.

Greison was muttering to himself, hand pressed against his temple as he marched back and forth. "I feel it. I feel it in me. They're back, want to choke out my light, my gift to sing."

"Greison?" Elene said. "Greison!"

"What a shame, a shame to think my singing will never hail on anyone's ears again. But at least I met that nice girl. Yes, she was so kind to me, afraid but kind. Come to think of it, I don't think she

was really afraid, but she comforted me, and her voice, did I intrude?"

Elene inhaled. Something was completely wrong. She rose to her feet, her balanced swayed a bit from her robe weighing twice as heavy. She went up to Greison and placed one hand on his shoulder. He stopped altogether. "Greison."

He turned to her, eyes widening. "Oh Elene. I thought… I thought you had left."

"What?"

He rubbed his eyes and started blinking hard. "No-no Elene. Y-you need to leave."

"But—" Greison pushed her hard, and she crashed back, landing on her elbows. Elene groaned, wincing in pain.

Greison stepped back, hugging himself. Tears streamed down his cheek. "I-I'm sorry." His fingers dug into his arms. "I—I can't hold him back. Run… please… RUN!"

Elene climbed back to her feet, shaken but unable to pry away.

Greison clutched his head, arched his back, and screamed. He fell silent, breathing calmly, but his posture went still. His eyes went pitch black, and his face contorted and sunk in. Shards of black glass tore out of his body.

His sweet voice was heavy with despair, and his beautiful singing darkened. "He's here."

He fell on his fours and galloped towards her.

CHAPTER 17

ELENE

Elene screamed. She fled to the forest, but the white eyes, the figure in the darkness that took her from the river, were back, blocking her way. When he lunged at her, her foot sunk into the mud and brought her to the ground. Greison leaped over her but made a turnaround. Elene slapped the mud and went back to her feet. She sprinted to the waterfall until her robe was pulled. As she crashed on the ground, Greison lifted her, nails digging into her skin.

Tiny shards bricked her shoulders. She untied her sash and slipped off the robe. The only way forward was the waterfall. Greison growled behind her. Shards of glass broke as he climbed after her. As she turned, Elene slipped from the rocks.

The water took her under and kept her there. She swam against the force and made it to the surface. As she gasped for air, the current pulled her back down and slammed her against the rocks, one after another.

A splash in the water followed. Hoping to lose him, Elene submerged and held her breath. The same cold arms curled around her, pushing what little air she had left. He raised her from the water like caught trout.

Elene screamed. His grip on her was tight, and her rib cage was nearly breaking. She bit his shoulder and pounded her fist at his face.

"It's me!" he shouted. "It's me, Lucan!"

Elene blinked through the drops on her lashes and saw him. She gripped his tunic and embraced him, face sinking into his chest. She held on tightly as he stumbled to get her out of the water. Back on

solid ground, she felt him pull away, but that made her tighten her hold.

"No!" She locked her arms around him.

Lucan's body emitted a warmth, a relief she never faced before. His chest rose and fell as he stood, hands apart, but giving her the time she needed to accept what happened.

"Elene," he said. "You're nearly naked."

Elene pulled away and looked at her chemise. She wore no bra and no underwear underneath. She then looked up at him. At night his silver eyes had a glow about them. Gentle but visible in the dark. "Greison… where is he?"

"Greison?"

A shout came up from behind. Seeing it was Wein, Elene released Lucan. In return, he stepped back, his focus at her eye level and never lowering on her body.

Wein covered her with his cloak and moved her aside. He grabbed Lucan by the shirt and pointed his dagger at his face.

"Wein!" Elene said, realizing why her brother screamed.

"I trusted you. Damn it, I trusted you with my sister, of all people!"

Elene jumped, startled that Pete was there. He gripped his sword's hilt until she squeezed between her brother and Lucan. "Wein, stop it. He did nothing. I took off my robe. It was the only way I could escape from Greison, no, not Greison but the monster who tried to kill me."

"Monster?" Wein slowly released Lucan. "There's no such thing as monsters."

Elene surveyed the way up the waterfall. It was hard to see with the fireflies gone.

"He's over there." Lucan pointed at a corner by the rocks, closer than she thought.

Sure enough, a body lay there. Slumped and motionless. Lucan and Wein went. First, Elene and Pete cautiously followed behind. Pete gave Wein the torch and gave light to the body.

Greison was dead. His soft eyes became dark marbles, glossy and vacant of life. Shards of dark glass were still there. His fingers were curled in, like a spider's legs after death.

"What the hell?" Pete said. "Is this some cruel trick?"

"That's Greison," she said. "A Child of Rima."

Lucan instantly looked at her. He then took the man's hand and inspected it. "He doesn't have a mark."

"It was there," she said. "I saw it before he turned."

"Turned?"

Elene gulped and nodded. "Greison took me because he wanted company. He liked my voice and wanted someone to be with him before the end. When I asked him what that meant, he said it was his end. Then someone else came out of him, that thing you're looking at."

"Elene," said Pete. "What you're saying…it's ludicrous."

"And impossible." Lucan's voice darkened. The look he gave bore no compassion. "Children of Rima don't turn into monsters. Sure, their actions could be monstrous by their life choices, but…" He stared at Greison and the shards of black glass that protruded from his skin. "Not like this."

"I know what I saw," Elene said. "He said he was from Preisen."

"That's a Riman village," said Wein.

"I know," Lucan answered. "I've never been to it, but it's quite a way from here."

"First, we have to burn him before the sun rises," said Pete. "Rima's word says cleanse the bodies with fire."

"Are you serious?" Elene said. "His family must know what happened. They need to understand he didn't abandon them on purpose."

"Why do *you* care?" Lucan asked. "This man practically kidnapped you."

"I don't need to explain myself to you."

"Really? Because I thought you wanted to leave Melodia. Now you want to go to a Riman village for the man who tried to kill you?"

"Well, not all killers are as bad as you."

"Enough!" Wein was wiping his face. "When Pete and I were on Vine Road, we ran into a few Rimans who mentioned Preisen. It's a few days from here."

"Good luck with that," said Lucan. "Preisen are strict people with their own army. They like to keep to themselves, and outsiders are not welcome. If we bring this thing to them, how will we know we won't get the blame?"

Wein thought about it, staring at the body with a frown. "That's why we won't burn him. I know it's against our customs, but we need a High Maiden to look at him. If what Elene says is true, then I think that is worth investigating than taking her word."

Lucan rubbed his bare neck. "I hate this. Every single bit." He was the first to lead the way out. She hadn't noticed it before, but Terra's scarf was around his neck. He must have picked it up when he tried searching for her.

Back at the campfire, Elene changed into her spare clothes and hung the clothes she washed before her kidnapping to dry by the fire.

Wein, Pete, and Lucan went back into the forest to retrieve Greison. Rüfus and Gourd cleaned the fish and cooked by the fire. They listened to her story of how she made it to the waterfall in seconds, the long talk she shared with Greison, and when he attacked. The color of their faces paled when they saw his body bound and tied up.

Wein would not bring him unless he was covered from head to toe with a spare sheet.

That night everyone was weary of the forest and of the night. With a body in their possession, nobody wanted to be out.

"Lucan," Wein said. "Come join our tent."

"No, I'm fine here. Don't want a random animal to open him up."

The smile Greison gave her returned. Elene hugged herself and pretended she didn't hear it.

Wein left the tent. It looked like, and after some time, he would not take no for an answer. "The tent has enough room for us three, and Pete is keeping watch. Unless you want to sleep in with Rüfus."

"Good luck with that!" Gourd said from the tent.

"I'm not going in anyone's tent," said Lucan. "Believe me. I'm just as disturbed about tonight as you."

"Please," urged Wein. "This… everything that's happening is bizarre, and I want us all to be safe. You included, and I feel bad for pointing my dagger at you."

After a quiet moment, Lucan groaned.

Wein took the middle, giving Lucan the other side. Elene kept her eyes shut and pretended she was fast asleep.

This was the first time they veered off Vine Road for miles. The roads were bumpier, with old wagons decaying under the sun. They saw many rice farms, homes in the distance on the hills, and travelers who passed by with a nod.

Wein kept his hat hidden. The body they carried was a look of its own, and he didn't want to taint the Red Guild's reputation.

Nobody but Lucan was willing to touch Greison's body. He used his bedstraw mat to lay him and wrapped twine over it so that when the wagon pulled his body, it wouldn't damage the corpse.

"At last, we're here," Rüfus said. "So, uh… how are we doing this?"

"We should probably keep the wagon a fair distance from the gate," said Lucan.

Wein agreed, slowing the wagon to a stop. Pete and Gourd went ahead to inform the gate master of their arrival and to request for the High Maiden.

On the way, Elene couldn't stop thinking of Greison. The way he sulked and his soft smile whirling into a vicious demented look.

Preisen looked more like a guarded fortress than a Riman village. Rather than a grand forest like Melodia or the mountain ranges of Havekin, white brick walls with gold pillars surrounded the community. There was no grand oak tree to signal a Riman village, which was a strange sight considering Melodia was the only known place known to have a small oak tree.

Elene stayed on the wagon. Lucan had untied the rope and carried Greison's body to where Wein stood. Ivory huffed, seeing it in their sight, and started to push back.

"It's alright." She got off and started to pet Ivory. "Everything is fine. Everything is going to be okay."

"Can I be honest?" Rüfus lingered by the wagon. "I don't want to be near that body."

"I know… believe me, I know." The gong of a bell from the tower startled the horses to neigh and pull back. "Whoa!" Elene raised her hands so Fior and Ivory could see her.

When the gate opened, guards in white robes and plated armor came down. They marched in a union, sword raised to the sky. Lucan stepped forward and moved Wein back. They parted, revealing two Maidens. They stepped aside and allowed the High Maiden to step out. She was a slim woman, middle age, with white hair pouring down her shoulders. She wore steel armor over her robes and a sword resting around her belt.

"Welcome to Preisen, fellow Rimans. I am Trini." Her dark green eyes settled on the body. "Let me see his face."

Lucan lowered the body. He and Wein stepped aside, giving the guards room to drag the corpse from them. They then tore through the straw matt. The white sheet they wrapped him with turned black as if ink that been poured over it.

"Th-that wasn't there," Wein said. "We gave him a clean sheet."

"I want to see his face," High Maiden Trini said instead.

One of the guards tore an opening near the face and opened it. Trini's calm composure flinched. She went to one knee and hovered her hand over his face. She could barely keep her hands from shaking as she neared him. "My son… my Greison." She inhaled and looked at the maid to the right. "Tell the others my son is home."

Her loss made Elene shut her eyes. Her heart heavy with sorrow.

The guards covered the body and took him inside the village.

Maiden Trini wiping her eyes, went to face them, observing Lucan and Wein and her. She seemed to be biting through her pain, inhaling deeply. "Who among you is the leader of this party?" Wein stepped in. "Your friend Pete informed me one of you isn't a Melodian."

"That would be Lucan…" Wein answered.

"And who among you is the faithless who walks among you?"

Wein rubbed the back of his head and looked at her. "That would be my sister, Elene."

"Very well then, you and that large man over there may come forward."

As Rüfus went to join them, Wein didn't follow. He was conflicted about leaving her.

"Brother, I'm fine," Elene told him. "I'll wait for you right here."

"Wait, why can't I join you?" Lucan took one step towards Maiden Trini, and one guard raised his sword to block him. Lucan

raised his sword so fast their blades crossed. The encounter surprised the spectators to see him move with such speed. "Sorry," Lucan lowered his sword back into his sheath. "I thought you were going to attack me."

"Riman," Maiden Trini said. "I appreciate you following your faith to bring this man, but for now, this is something I must share only with your leader and Melodians. Please, if you can, wait with this woman."

Wein agreed, of course. He wanted someone to keep an eye out for her. As soon as the gates closed, Lucan shook his head.

With the guard's permission, Elene could move her wagon closer to the Preisen walls. There was an open shelter for her horses to rest in. Among them were other horses that probably belonged to the guards.

Under the torchlight and with guards watching the night, they were out of harm's reach.

After the hours passed, the horses were fed and brushed, and the wagon was cleaned. There was no work left to do to shorten the time. Elene expected to see the gates re-open with her brother and the others stepping out. But it was just another group of people leaving the community.

Lucan stood by the wall, crossed arms, with one foot on the wall and the other on the ground. When his stare moved to her, she looked away. His steps came, but she looked at her hands, pretending she hadn't noticed.

The wagon shifted with his weight, and quickly she started to think of a reason why he would sit next to her. Rather than face him, she inched to the opposite side of the seat until part of her butt was out of room. If he wanted to talk to her, why couldn't he just say it from the ground?

"Wh-what do you want?"

He didn't answer right away, but he leaned his back against the seat instead and peered at the stars. "I… have some questions."

So, it was hard for him to talk too, even face her. She shrugged and looked at the guard who had been standing there as long as they were. "Like what?"

"Well…" Lucan shifted his posture. He was turning to her. "Was there anything else that Greison said? Anything that may not sound important but you haven't told us."

"Wein said not to talk about it."

"Except we were outed, so I'd like to know."

She discreetly looked at him, just to see if she what sour look he had this time. Since they left Melodia, his skin had tanned, and his light freckles got darker. He wasn't tall, was barely muscular, but she could see why Terra liked him. His long lashes over his grey eyes looked like the stare of a wolf at night.

"Elene?"

His stern voice startled her to blink away. "Umm… yeah, he said something." She looked at the gates once more. "He said he was born a mute. The only way he could speak was by borrowing my voice."

"That explains that encounter on the river."

"He wasn't bad," Elene said. "At least… his intentions weren't exactly wicked, and he was a talented singer… his voice was something."

"I know… I heard his call. That's how I found you two."

"Call?" she asked, surprised by the wording.

Lucan frowned. "What I mean is… I could hear him singing."

"From what he shared, Greison loved his family. He ran away, but not because he wanted to. He said what happened, happened, and there was no changing it. I didn't understand what he meant until he tried to hurt me. No… until something else made him do it."

Lucan nodded and silently tapped his fingers on his arms. He hopped off the wagon and went back to resume his position on the wall.

The owls were hooting into the dark hour. The guards patrolled the area and switched with another new pair. To stay awake, Elene stood by the wagon, watching the torches burn.

The wait was starving them both of answers. Not half an hour later and Lucan started pacing around. There seemed to be a lot running through his mind, but he wasn't sharing his thoughts. There had been something on her mind since they left the waterfall, something she hadn't told him.

"Lucan." He stopped, but his look inclined to a banter match than listen. Why else would he have that stare of a wolf, narrow and piercing by the color of his eyes. "I… never got to uh." She rubbed the back of her neck. "Th—thank you for coming for me."

From the unchanged look on his face, he must not have heard her clearly. Instead of asking her to repeat herself, he started pacing around, brushing her presence like the wind.

He left her with an awful pinch in her chest. Clearly, he didn't care if she thanked him. It took a lot for her to say it, but in a way, she accepted it. Even if he came for her and fought Greison, none of that can change the history they already made.

The sound of men singing Rima's song startled Elene awake. A fresh breeze swept by, inviting the new day. The gates moving open startled her to kick off her blanket and fold it over her pillow.

Lucan was sitting by the same wall, head down from having fallen asleep. He woke up just the same. The gates had disappointed them before with travelers or locals, but this time, Wein and the others walked out. From the way the guards blocked the area, Lucan was not able to talk to them.

Rather than Maiden Trini, there was another Maiden who followed them out. Her dreads were braided over one another, each bound by sepia-colored threads. Standing near her hip was a girl no older than twelve. She was dressed in a simple gown with high boots. The sash around her waist, the earrings she wore. Wein spoke to the maiden for a bit more and left, taking the young girl with him.

She would turn a few times for the other woman, who waved at her. She waved back and hurried to catch up to Wein.

"Well?" Lucan was the first to ask questions. "What did you talk about?"

"We need to get back on the road," Wein said instead. The horses were strapped back into the wagon. Without warning, the girl climbed the wagon's seat and scooted next to her. Elene almost wanted to curl away from her. Just as she was about to ask her brother what that was about, he raised his hand and hushed her.

Gourd, who liked to over share his thoughts, said nothing. The behavior of her brother and the others. Something changed them. Wein easily grew bags under his eyes when he hadn't slept, but he was ready for the road.

"Rüfus?" she asked when the wagon went into motion.

He cleared his throat and moved out of her view.

"We're going to Mudburrow," said Wein. "Leave your questions for another time."

As they left, Elene looked back at Preisen and their high walls.

Greison was home now.

On Vine Road, Lucan pegged her brother and their friends about what went on in Preisen. It seemed like now that they were out of the village, he thought he would get an answer, but Wein told him he promised not to speak openly about it.

"Then why did you bring the girl along?" Lucan would not call it quits. "You can at least tell me that."

"Sure, once we get to Mudburrow and we find your friends."

The way Wein said it sounded severe, enough for Lucan to notice it. "Why the sudden interest in them?"

"They're Children of Rima, are they not?"

"They are," he said carefully, glancing at the young Maiden and back at him. "Is that why she's here? Because she can detect them?"

Wein went quiet shortly after and said nothing else.

The others were the same, their stare solid. The friends she drank with shared stories by the campfire had become solemn. Rüfus and Gourd, who loved to talk on the road, hadn't said a word.

The little Maiden had her blue eyes on her, as if she sensed her discomfort. Her dark complexion had a bronze glow, and her hair was tightly braided with silver clips at the mid-length.

Maiden Camilla and Terra were close, but she wouldn't be this close to her, yet this Maiden didn't seem to mind.

"Her name is Gittle," Wein said. "She's a Maiden apprentice."

"I can see that." Her cream-colored dress was thick, and her blue cloak wrapped her shoulders neatly by a gold link.

In the distance, high in the mountains, the green leaves were fading to a yellow and red hue. The wagon slowed down, startling her to look ahead. The way forward led them to a bamboo forest.

The sun was going down, and Wein was uncertain about going through.

"Are we still on Vine Road?" Pete asked.

Lucan, who trailed behind, said the way through was a forty-five-minute trip.

Wein slowed down the wagon. "Everyone climb up. I'm going to pick up the pace."

Rüfus, Gourd, and Pete climbed in with ease, but the thump of Lucan falling to one knee startled her. There he was again, hand on his chest, staring bitterly at the wooden floor.

"You alright?" Gourd asked.

"Yeah… just a pinched nerve."

"Still? Where you got impaled?"

He gritted his teeth and nodded. "Basically."

The road was paved by bricks and lined by elevated terrain where dry, tall grass grew upright. The Bamboo Forest gave a green hue of light. The trees were so tall, limitless by their reach towards the sun, and their tiny leaves bobbed, fluttering like little wings. The blowing wind passed through the groves, making noises that imitated rain droplets hitting the roof.

Eager for something to do, Elene moved to the back of the wagon. She took off the tarp that covered the trunks and stacked the lighter ones with the heavy ones. Since they found Greison, Wein stopped selling Father's wool to every traveler they passed. Mudburrow had become his sole focus.

By the time they got out, the sky was dark and grey. Wein went off the road for half a mile before he stopped. Like the last couple of nights, Pete and Gourd were making more frequent trips around, scoping the area from danger.

A strong wind tugged at the tents, forcing Rüfus and Lucan to hammer the nail deeper into the soil.

Preisen sent them off with bags of rice, bread, bell peppers, and eggs. After she poured oil into the pan, the maiden started watching her. Her big blue eyes stared deeply as she cooked. Elene shuffled the other way to block her and focus on her cooking. She fried them in seasoning and set them in a large bowl. For dessert, she worked on her honey pancakes. The sweet smell usually won excitement from their friends, but the world was upside down.

"Elene," Wein said. "Since the night is chilly, you and Maiden Gittle can share the tent for tonight."

Elene looked at her brother. He hadn't shaved since they found Greison. It was bad enough that he gave her their tent, but sleeping next to a Maiden?

"I'm fine right here." She scooted next to the campfire and muttered. "Why didn't they send her own tent, anyway?"

Wein didn't engage with her. He knew how she felt about Rima. Perhaps his answer would have just irritated her, and her changed brother already annoyed her.

Elene jumped. Gittle inched toward her without a sound. She watched as she poured her pink batter onto the iron pan. Her eyes marveled at every pink pancake she stacked.

"What do you want?" she told her.

Gittle looked up and gave her a pearly smile. "It smells nice."

Elene cleared her throat and placed the last pancake on her plate.

The wooden mug that Wein bought to replace Father's buck mug was filled with the water Preisen supplied for them. It was hard not to take a drink without giving Lucan a hard stare. He knew she would not forgive him for her broken mug, and he was right. He grabbed a loaf of bread from the bag and watched them enjoy the meal.

Gittle took a bite of the pancakes first. Her eyes widened, and she took another bite.

Wein smiled, seeing she ate dessert first. "I see you like Elene's honey pancakes."

"Why does it taste like strawberries?"

"It's honey strawberries," she answered.

Gittle's cheeks were full when she spoke. "How did you get it to look pink?"

Elene ate instead, but Wein's stare persisted. She bit her inner cheeks first. No way she was going to tell her that secret, nor was she going to pretend everything was fine.

"I can't wait another day." She set her plate aside and crossed her arms. "Tell us what happened in Preisen, or I'll start pulling what hair has grown from my scalp."

Gittle, who stuffed her last pancake in her mouth, lowered her gaze.

"As much as I don't want to admit this, she's right," Lucan said. "We waited long enough."

Wein scratched his facial hair and glanced at his friends as if trying to draw some information. "Maiden Trini said it was vital that we keep what we know to ourselves." His blue gaze moved to Lucan. "I can't tell you the details, but what they requested was our cooperation."

"Spit out what they want," said Lucan.

"They want us to bring Lucan's friends to Preisen," said Pete. "Gittle is here to offer us protection."

The look in Lucan's eyes showed the same surprise as hers. "We don't need protection from a child."

Gittle spun to him, her eyebrows furrowing before she relaxed them. That was some self-control for a girl no older than ten against an unsympathetic Killer.

Lucan gave up on Wein and shifted his attention to Gourd and Rüfus, the more relaxed and open ones of their party. "What about you two?"

"You're not getting a peep from me," Rüfus said.

"Why not?"

"Because people could be listening," Gourd said. "That's all I can say."

"And you're saying when we find my friends, they must follow you to Preisen to know what's really going on?" Lucan crossed his arms and scoffed. "Good luck convincing them that."

"What about Father's goods?" Elene asked the group. "We haven't sold a single item since—"

"I know, Elene, that I haven't forgotten," Wein said. "But this is important, not just to Preisen but to all of us."

"What does that even mean!"

"Look, take what I said and leave it, alright?" Wein left and went to check on the horses.

Elene got up and went to the other side. She kept her arms crossed to keep herself warm as the wind was blowing in her direction. The clouds covered the moons, but now and then, their light would break through.

Pete and Gourd started their watch together, not taking turns like they usually would—they were on high alert.

Gittle couldn't keep her eyes open for long and went to rest in the tent she had all to herself. Elene already had her spot prepped by the campfire, straw mat, blanket, and her feathered pillow.

Lucan lay on the ground, tucking his arm under his head. The mattress he used to cover Greison was ruined, and he didn't get a replacement.

Wein kept the horses company, leaning on the side of the wagon while he peered at the empty field.

Elene grabbed her uneaten honey pancakes and tapped on his shoulder gently. He didn't move or say anything. Then she tapped it again, harder and harder.

"No, Elene! I'm not going to tell you anything so you can stop."

Lucan sat up, alarmed by her brother's lost temper. Elene took Wein's hand and gave him the plate of pancakes. "I thought you needed it more than me."

Wein staggered back a bit. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, grumpy head." Elene resumed her spot back by the fire. Those grey wolf-like eyes were staring at her before he showed her his back.

Restless from the night and the strong breeze, Elene listened to the fire crack and pop. According to the map, they had to make it to the mountain ranges before they could get to Mudburrow. If they had followed their previous schedule, they should've arrived a week ago, a week and a half if there was rain. But no one could have predicted her unusual encounter with Greison. Now the silence and tension in the group made the destination feel infinite. But this had become more than selling Father's wares or reuniting Lucan with his friends, but returning everyone to Preisen.

Wein returned with his plate empty. He plopped on his straw mat and stared at the fire, his silence turning into small snores.

Elene went to the wagon to grab his pillow and blanket he should've brought back. Before leaving, she threw a blanket over Fior and Ivory and bid them goodnight.

"Wein." She gently shook him. "Raise your head." He did so, eyes shut but allowing her to scoot the pillow under. She then covered him and tucked him nicely.

Feeling his stare, she looked at him. This time Lucan didn't turn around. "What do you think they're trying to hide?" It came as a surprise that he finally decided to talk to her.

Elene moved back to her mat and covered herself. "Probably some superstition." Her comment made him shut his eyes. "You asked, alright?"

"Life isn't just about what you can see, but what you can't."

"Yes, I thought you would say that."

"Whatever." He laid back down and gave the stars a mean look. "Forget I asked."

"Already did." Elene huddled under her blanket and shut her eyes. She thought of home. Of Corie and Theo, who loved to sneak out and play with her. How the Grazen Fields flowers flourished in spring before Avery and Vinol ruined them. The Beaven River's steady current, the sun on her skin on the boardwalk, the cool shade from the many trees, and the sunflowers that covered her little cottage. Mother in the living room, knitting. Terra's voice under the peach tree, waiting for a boy or Maiden Camilla to visit. Then there was Father, his tall stature, his warm brown eyes. Every time Father was on an errand in Melodia, Women would flaunt themselves at him with their dresses, jokes, and compliments.

Elene looked at Wein. Maiden Derli often said her brother was a splitting image of Father, except nobody approached him romantically. Her brother was handsome, that much she knew, but Wein was the opposite of Terra when it came to matrimony. Anyone who knew him knew not to approach him with a proposal of marriage, as he often called it a 'stupid idea.' Sometimes he showed interest in women, sometimes in men, but Wein seemed to leave it at that. If she could take a guess, it seemed he always wanted to be in control of his life.

A gust of air fluttered the campfire, agitating the flames. Elene rolled out of the way and shouted at Wein to wake up. He jumped and used the blanket to shield himself.

"What's going on?" said Pete. "Is everyone alright?"

Lucan was moving back, watching the campfire burn through the wood but maintain its existence. The clouds rumbled overhead. A low hiss swept by, surrounding them.

Gittle stepped out, dagger pressed to her chest as she sang a prayer. Pulses of light emitted from her body and shot out. Her dress flowed from the wind that gently stirred around her.

Lucan's focus suddenly shot up. Elene followed his gaze and saw a dark figure contrasting the gray clouds. Goosebumps ran up her arms. In sheer panic, she rubbed them to recede.

"Watch out!" shouted Gourd.

A web of darkness swept through and hit Pete, slamming him against the ground and lifting him in the air. Gittle flipped her dagger and swiped it. A shot of gold light shot out and cut the shadow, dropping Pete. Another came, but Gittle responded, cutting the darkness with her light.

One by one, she acted without a miss, striking and evading its reach for her. Sparks of light emitted from the contact like embers before it slowly faded.

The wind calmed, and the thundering faded.

Gittle was on her knees, panting.

"What… what was that?" Wein helped her back to her feet.

"I don't know," Lucan said. "But I'll be back, going to see if it's gone."

"No," Gittle said, panting. "You must stay near me, or I won't protect you all."

"Thank Rima, you were here with us." Gourd was wiping his face, unable to hide the fear in his eyes. "Without your veil of protection, we would have faced whatever the hell that was."

Pete rolled his left shoulder and winced a little. "I swear it felt like some demon took hold of me." Wincing, he gave her a worried look. "Elene, what do you think? Do you still doubt Rima?"

She didn't answer him. She collected the scattered items back in their place. If Maidens and Children of Rima, with their supernatural abilities, couldn't convince her, some dark entity wouldn't either.

CHAPTER 18

LUCAN

Since that Little Heathen said the man who attacked her was a Child of Rima, Lucan had his skepticism. Possession was real, and it has led individuals to behave erratically, even kill. But last night was different. Last night changed it all. Something was out to get them, and Gittle successfully drew them back with her dagger of light.

The Parting Ranges and their population of Mountain goats were behind. Farmland and smaller communities lived abundantly and in peace. Ahead was a cluster of buildings, crowded and towering over one another. This was the gem of the place, Mudburrow, the kingdom of the high mountain ranges. Most of the buildings were built in sandstone, from the little homes in the street to the four-story shops.

Its iron gates remained open for anyone to enter and leave. The lively, bustling sound was in earshot now, with chatter and clustered with merchants from all over the continent or from beyond the sea's horizon.

"Where are you supposed to meet your friends?" Wein would take hard glances at his wagon. It seemed like being burdened with his father's business was more than getting to him. "The sooner we see them, the better."

"Our meeting spot is the biggest tavern in all the Northern, Arrow Den." He instructed him to take a turn and head east, where the market square was.

Pete and the others had to climb into the wagon. The streets were bustling, and there was little room for them to keep up without bumping into another wagon.

Lucan looked at Gittle. "It will be much better if you join me." She was a quiet kid. He didn't think she could speak until Elene's delicious honey pancakes got her to talk. She was agile with her dagger and, being so young, was talented in drawing her light out.

"No," said Wein. "We're not taking a Maiden to a place that might have the usuals." It's like he had adopted her as another sister.

"I'm sure she's old enough to know what lurks there. Maidens are easy to find Children of Rima," he said. "It will make finding my friends easier, alright?"

Gittle looked at him. Funny, whenever she did that, he could feel she sensed something was different, but she couldn't sense his light. Rima's blood was too strong to notice, but he commended the girl's sensitivity.

"Light or not light, I agree with Wein on this one," said Pete. "I have never seen so many people crowded in one place. The colorful stoned houses, the fresh breeze, everything is starting to make my head spin, but we don't know how safe we are in this place."

Great. They were going to make settling down at the marketplace longer. "It's simple, really, don't go to corners that stray cats or dogs wouldn't wander, and you'll be fine. Like any town or city, it has its hoodlums."

Mudburrow was the city that never slept, and its marketplace was the driving force that kept the kingdom wealthy. King Dauro welcomed traders and emigrants who came from the sea, but the influx could lead to a disproportionate balance between the rich and the poor, and with that came crime.

The marketplace was marked with colossal pillars surrounding the location. The city guards patrolled the area, spear in hand, as they merged with the crowd.

"What do we do now?" said Wein. "How do we reserve a spot?"

"One moment," said Lucan. "There should be someone that will approach us unless we find him sooner."

Vendors lined the walls with their shops. The smoke of roasted meat and music converged in the air.

A round man with a feathered fan stopped them. He smiled gallantly at Wein. "Sir, it is the afternoon. If you plan on selling today, I'm afraid there are no spots available for you at the market square."

"Just my luck," said Wein.

The man covered his mouth and giggled. "Have no worries. We have many vendor streets open for you." He snapped his fingers, and the small man behind him gave him his notepad. "Let's see…ah. The Indigo Street over there, the fee is thirty silvers coins."

"I'm sorry, did you say thirty?" Wein gripped the reins. "That's nearly half of what I sold on my way here."

The round man feathered his fan and puckered his glossed lips. "If you don't pay the fee, I suggest you go outside and do your business with the rats."

"No," said Elene, digging into her coin purse. "I have five silver coins."

"Elene," Wein dropped his head, almost in a whisper. "You *need* that money."

"I have five silver on my person," Pete added.

"Take mine as well," Gourd followed.

"Sorry, I'm down to twenty bronze," Rüfus said with an embarrassing smile. "Guess I got carried away, eh?"

"And why you won't be going to the tavern," Pete said.

Elene gently touched her brother's arm and fed him some words of encouragement. She was tender to him like she was that night she tucked him in.

"Alright," he said, accepting the silvers everyone donated.

Lucan had nothing to give. Vinol's bank safely stored what wasn't lost on the battlefield.

"Ah, what wonderful companions you have." The round man elbowed the shorter one. "*Take* the coins, you rat."

The man smoothed out his bald head and took the thirty silver coins. Wein had a hard time letting go, but he was outvoted.

The round man started to air his face with the fan again. "Yes, this is a good decision, and let me tell you why. Mudburrow never sleeps, and neither does our business. For as long as you don't close shop, you don't need to pay an extra fee." He frowned at the bald man. "Go, take them to their spot."

"At once, boss." The man waved them over, compelling Wein to follow.

"Oh, and do remember folks, your shop can remain open, but it's not a place for your friends to sleep." The round man's voice lost his high pitch voice and deepened. "That would tarnish the city's image and take advantage of His Majesty's decree, understand?"

"That's not a bad deal," said Rüfus.

"Yes, I just can't wait to do this with no rest," Wein said.

"It's an incentive to keep Mudburrow running like some twenty-four-hour merchant town." Lucan picked up the pace. "This is how you're going to make the money your father needs." Since Gittle would not help him find Zorn and Oscern, he had no means to stay any longer.

Indigo Street was long and narrow. Craftsmen who sold Pottery, leather belts, toys, and flutes made up most of the space. It wasn't enough to attract customers, but they had Melodian quality wool and embroidered items.

Pete slid the chests at the end of the cart. Rüfus used his strength to carry them and stack them for Wein to open and arrange. Elene and Gourd helped by pulling the tarp under the vending table.

Gittle wanted to assist but was asked to stay in the wagon's seat. The heat must have gotten to her because she unclipped the gold chain from her cloak and got off to stretch. Her Maiden dress quickly grabbed the attention of the crowd. The traffic shifted toward her. A few would bow their heads and ask her to pray for them. For a little thing, she didn't seem apprehended by their request and didn't refuse them.

"I'm going to see if we can set camp outside, seeing we can't crash here," Pete said. "Unless you want us to sleep in an inn?"

Elene smiled, and her eyes widened with hope.

"After the silver we paid?" Wein shook his head. "That's no longer an option." She frowned and started smoothing out the tarp. Wein caught this and looked at Gittle. "We'll see how the day of sales ends today. Best to reserve a spot just in case."

Pete nodded and looked at him. "Well, Lucan, I hope you find your friends."

"I'll join Lucan to be his extra pair of eyes," Rüfus said with a wide smile.

"Count me too," Gourd said.

Arrow Den was a three-story tavern that flawlessly illuminated the cobbled streets, attracting eyes even from darkened alleys. The green rooftop had curved corners depicting a mermaid statue spreading her bow and arrow at the sky.

They hadn't gotten inside, and music was already blaring from their windows.

"I'll be," said Gourd. "It's as big as Melodia's temple."

"Arrow Den is the mother of all taverns," Lucan said. "It never closes, and if you pass out drunk on the table, Arlene won't kick you out. Not as long as you buy something the next day."

"Are the women beautiful?" Rüfus grinned with raised eyebrows.

"Sure. But is that what you should think about at this moment?"

"Just a little look won't hurt," Rüfus patted his back. "Come on, men, keep up!"

It wasn't just the perfect place to meet up with Zorn and Oscern because of its beautiful women, food, and gambling spots, but because they were regulars. If he had run into the owner or a worker, they would relay the information if they had been here.

Arrow Den was bursting with an aromatic blend of tobacco and roasted beef. The heat in the room was always one temperate, made from the bodies of people that filled the place.

The white noise of chatter moved like a wave as they passed dozens of tables. Lucan looked at every customer, at every drunk bastard or fool who had fallen in love with a working server.

"What do your friends look like?" said Rüfus.

"Zorn has a delicate face, porcelain skin, and short blond hair with a bit on top that he brushes to the side. He likes to wear fine clothing and rings. Oscern is dark-skinned like Gittle, except his eyes have a gold hue. He often wore blue garments and adorned his hair with clips and ornaments. Believe me, his stature and hair will stand out the most."

At the front desk was Arlene, the sole owner of Arrow Den. She gave him one look and planted her hands on her hips. "Well, well, well, if it isn't little Lucan."

Gourd snorted, and Rüfus chuckled.

"Hey Arlene." He winced when the old woman pinched his freckled cheek.

"Oh, and here I thought you had left us. Your favorite girl has been missing you." She blinked and looked at Rüfus and Gourd. "Wait a second… that's not Zorn and Oscern."

"Yeah, about that." Lucan took her hand down. "Have you seen them?"

Arlene crossed her arms. Her eyes searched the ceiling as if they were there. "No, not since you three came to visit in the Spring."

"That long?" He couldn't believe it. This was their meeting spot.

"Sorry young man, but I'll let you know if I see them. Let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks."

"What are we going to do now?" Gourd was losing hope in his eyes.

"We keep searching." It's possible that Zorn and Oscern hadn't run into Arlene. She was sometimes hard to find for being a short stalky lady. Little. How dare she still call him little?

On the second floor, it overwhelmed him by how crowded the place was. Heads bobbing, waiters running up and down the tables. Men smoking like a chimney, people roughing around, and arm wrestling.

"Are you sure this is the place?" said Gourd. "Doesn't seem like a place Children of Rima would hang out."

"You better just accept that the ones you'll meet are nothing like Caspian or that silent Vance. Zorn and Oscern work and live as mercenaries."

"If they live a life like drifters…." said Gourd. "What if they're one of Rima's Orphaned."

"Orphaned?" he said, feeling a twinge of pain.

"You know, survivors of the now destroyed Aelith. Boys and girls who were said to scatter the lands with only the memory of the lost holy place."

"Where did you get all of that?" Lucan went to the third floor, and the two followed. "I know of Rima's Orphaned, but nothing like you describe it."

"They say some Maidens witnessed the horror of that night in their dreams." Rüfus kept up, eyes following every woman who came down. "They described a great fire, a beast with skin as tough

as bears, stomping over mutilated bodies. Every Rima village led an expedition to that holy place to find the lost boys and girls."

Lucan leaned to the lower deck to see if he saw Zorn in the lounge seats with a sex worker. "We've heard that story before."

"My grandfather was among the many who went to Aelith," Gourd said, eyes drawn to the wooden floor. "He never came back."

"Nobody did," said Rüfus. "After that, Melodia and Havekin started losing Maidens. All we have left to watch over the Oak Tree is who remains."

Lucan hadn't forgotten. In the aftermath of that night, it rained for three days straight until volunteers rescued them. He remembered how often the wagon wobbled, how the wheels often got trapped in the mud. How the sun never rose again. The adults who saved them placed a blanket over his head. Zorn and Oscern never left his side, squeezed and huddled among the cries.

When Lucan jumped off the wagon, he ran back to Aelith, barefooted and with no provisions to keep him alive, but not without realizing that Zorn and Oscern jumped with him.

"Lucan?" Rüfus's voice snapped him back to the tavern. "Whoa, man, you spaced out."

"Sorry… were you saying something?"

"You're bleeding." Lucan touched the area on his chest. "It's reopening."

"Since when?" said Gourd.

"Since we left Melodia."

"You mean you… it's not closing?"

"Don't worry, I'll get it checked out again, but first, we need to find my friends." Lucan searched with hopeful eyes. Aware now more than ever of the pang of pain in his chest.

"Welcome, gentlemen," a soft voice said. "You three look like you can do with some company."

It was Junen, Zorn's favorite pick of Arrow Den. His lashes were powdered blue, and glitter ran from his cheek to his jaw. His tunic was big for his size, and his trousers looked too tight for any room in the crotch area.

"Lucan!" He leaped and embraced him. "Darling, you haven't visited us in so long. Rose will be so glad to see you!"

"Get off me," he said, trying to shake him off.

"Relax, deep breaths, my sweet pea."

Rüfus and Gourd broke into laughter. Their voices brought Junen to release. Giggling, he slapped his arms. "You know I only have eyes for Zorn when it comes to you three brutes. Where is he, by the way?"

Lucan stared into Junen's green eyes, waiting for it to be some joke. "You haven't seen him?"

Junen rolled his eyes. "Well, I'm not always on the floor, cupcake. I do have a job."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Months deary, when you guys treated Rose and me to a drink." He blinked at him in disbelief. "You mean you've forgotten? We tried to get Oscern drunk to see if Rose could take him to bed."

"Thanks, but we gotta go," Lucan said, leaving for the exit.

"How rude!"

Leaving empty-handed was a defeat. It was clear to him now, with Arlene and Junen, that Zorn and Oscern hadn't been here in months.

At Indigo Street, their news made Wein dispel a tired sigh. He then worked up a smile for a looming customer.

"Maybe we can check another tavern." Gourd gave him a small nudge in the arm. "Come on, we'll help you try again."

"No, they were supposed to be there, not anywhere else." He clenched his fist. If they haven't shown up to Arrow Den, it was because they were in danger or assumed he was dead.

Dammit.

"You can try again tomorrow," Elene said, folding her mother's fabric neatly. "No need to go around tiring yourself out if the meeting point is one location."

"I don't know," he stammered, giving his temple a squeeze. "What if they left? What if they're gone—what if they changed into those… those things?"

"Hey." Elene's dark eyes caught his. "If your friends are as close to you as you say, they'll show up."

Gittle took his hands, startling him. She gave him a little smile and patted the back of his hand. "Have faith."

"Yeah." Lucan shut his eyes. "I'll have faith."

"Look, why don't you give it another try tonight?" said Wein. "They could be asleep, eating. Who knows?"

"Yeah," he said, rubbing his neck. "Yeah."

He felt self-conscious that he had lost it for a second, that he couldn't keep his cool after one trip, but it helped to hear everyone's support. Even Elene wanted to assure him. He turned to thank her, but she was busy by the stall, talking to a customer.

Lucan left it as it was.

It was not like she would care if he thanked her, anyway.

At night, the streetlamps bathed the city in an amber glow. Laughter and parties were heard in the distance. Gittle could barely keep her eyes open. Everyone agreed it was too dangerous for her and Elene to camp out with the men. A shanty inn was just around the street, cheap and close enough for them to sleep.

Elene was against it, saying she preferred to stay with Wein and her horses. Wein was near ending his sales. All the chests they unloaded were empty. What remained on the table were three sets of fabric and seven wool garments.

"I thought you wanted to stay at an inn," he said with a smile.

"I did, one that doesn't look like I'll be sleeping in with the rats."

"Well, you don't have a choice. I won't have you and Gittle sleeping outside of the city." Wein had to take off his hat to brush his dark hair back. "And you heard what that man said if I close shop, and I'm not paying another thirty silvers."

"Then close up shop. You have sold more than already."

"I have to sell every last bit. Our family is counting on it."

"Have no worries," Gourd said. "I'll stay with Wein."

Elene still looked unconvinced. Wein was working himself ragged, that was true, but so was she.

"Come on," said Pete. "Your brother will feel better knowing you two are safe."

Elene brushed Fior and Ivory with a tired sigh before following Gittle and Pete around the block where there was more light. Darker, narrow streets like Indigo Street had low-hanging lanterns.

"Any luck?" Wein asked him. "Or were you and Rüfus just having fun?"

"No," he said, wiping the lipstick Rose left on his neck. "I'm a regular there, and some just don't know how to respect people's boundaries."

"Well, you waited patiently with us in Lyrin Town. We'll stay in Mudburrow for as long as we need to find your friends."

"You say that because they're Children of Rima." Lucan gave it another try. "Tell me, Wein, what did Maiden Trini tell you guys?"

"Sorry, Lucan, but not finding your friends will not make me speak. The sooner we find your pals, the sooner you will know."

When Pete returned, he started taking the bed straws from the cart. Wein asked if Elene liked the inn. He chuckled. "Not one bit, the inn is a rickety mess, but at least they're nearby."

Outside the city were small shelters not for the homeless but for those willing to pay a low price for the night.

Because Pete and Rüfus had spent the nights on the road keeping watch, Lucan let them rest for the night. He sat on the log and watched the camp settlers turn in. Other than the purpose of lighting the night, he didn't need to stay warm, so the campfire started to die.

The neighbor next to them saw him awake and gave him a loaf of bread. "For keeping watch," he said.

Lucan accepted it. He could eat whatever he wanted at Arrow Den, but he appreciated the donation.

At night, Mudburrow's iron gates were shut. Anyone who wanted to enter and leave had to go through the entrances on the side, which the city guards occupied.

Now and then, the sound of those smaller gates would startle him with an ear-splitting screech.

Merchants who could not pull the dark hour left. Their items and families were in the back of the wagon, fast asleep for the way home.

Tired of the long hour, Lucan stood up and stretched his body, the tip of his fingers reached for the skies. Then he relaxed and sat back down again.

The new idea came so suddenly that he felt stupid for sitting there. There *was* another way he could search for Zorn and Oscern. He searched his surroundings first. The night was calm, and few passed by without raising any suspicion. He shut his eyes and began

to focus on his third eye, entering the tunnel in his mind and stepping into the light.

Little by little, the image of Mudburrow unwounded before him. Its tall buildings, the gentle mist lingering in the dark, and the cold streets were accumulating from the drop in temperature.

At Arrow Den, he circled the place. Speeding up, warped view of the streets. They came slow and blurry, like a drunk who couldn't walk straight.

The lamp posts surrounding the tavern burned all night, giving him the clarity to see who was hanging by. He slipped through the drunks and glanced at others vomiting in the bushes and couples eating each other's faces. Nothing.

Like a bug with wings, he glided through the doors until he built a tense pressure in his head. There was too much noise inside. He was stuck just looking outside.

Before he closed his third eye, he thought of the others, Wein and Gourd working the late shift, and then there was Elene, who complained about the state of the inn. His sight blurred as he sped to Indigo Street.

Because the hour was late, the inn was quiet, and there was no noise to prevent him from going through the many rooms, and its hallways were barely lit by the oil lamps. The place looked more like an abandoned building with torn rugs muddled with dark stains. He didn't have to smell the place to imagine what odor it had. The paint on the walls had been peeling off.

Most of the people were asleep, and some were wide awake, doing things on the bed he would second guess with an inn like that.

On the third floor, he stopped at a tiny little room. The floor's carpeting was torn out. There were holes in the corner, and some had sunken in.

Gittle slept on the only bed. The wool Wein used to sleep on was underneath her. Even she wasn't dumb enough to trust the sheets. The bed was big enough for two, but Elene had slept on the floor, leaning by the window.

The moons barely peered through, but she was crossed-armed and fast asleep. Her fears came to reality when he saw a fat rat scurry and crawl over her feet.

Lucan left and shot up from the inn. He floated over Indigo Street and glided down where Wein and Gourd were.

His focus narrowed on the dark avenue. The lanterns were blown out, concealing the vendor tables. He descended more and found a slumped body. Moving left and right was Ivory tugging the lead from the hitching post. Fior was calm but wide awake.

On the wagon, the chests were scraped clean, even their firewood and, most importantly, Matia's items.

Lucan blinked and returned to his body. He stumbled and ran to the shelter. He nearly fell from trying to hop over the stump. "Wake up!" He gave Pete and Rüfus's tent a shake. "Hey!"

Rüfus's snoring clogged as he tried to breathe, and Pete began crawling out. He couldn't tell them exactly what he had seen, but he needed to take them, nonetheless. "We need to go to Indigo Street. Now."

"What for?" Pete said, rubbing his eyes.

"Don't ask. I just have a bad feeling."

Rüfus and Pete only took their valuables and left the tent as it was. The same squeaky gate screeched as they went through it and headed south of the city.

Mudburrow was still fairly awake, but there was not enough light to promise anyone it was safe, at least not from the main streets.

"Why is it so empty?" Pete asked.

"Most of the vendors come from the farms or towns nearby. The wealthy ones stay, but most don't stay out this late."

Once they made it to the market square, they bolted to Indigo Street. Passing through the few vendors, they made it to where the light had been shut out. There, slumped on the table, was the body he saw in his third eye.

"Wein!" Pete quickly checked his pulse. His mere touch brought him to groan. When he moved to the side, he had been holding something. Seeing this, Pete looked at him. "A knife impaled his side."

Lucan instinctively searched his surroundings, finding someone amiss. "Where's Gourd?"

"Shit," said Pete. "Shit!"

"I'll check on the girls," said Rüfus.

"Don't just check on them," stammered Pete. "Bring them here. Everyone is staying together!"

Wein was carefully laid on the table. The dagger at his side was sunken so deep it may have penetrated his organs. His lips were losing color, quivering from the loss of blood, but there was no blanket to cover him. He clutched the knife, keeping it steady as anyone should.

"Gourd," he said with a shaky breath. "Gourd…."

"Steady Wein," Pete told him. "There's an apothecary nearby. I saw it when we left the marketplace." He glanced at the darkened road. "I think—I think Gourd went that way."

"Focus," Lucan told him, relighting the lantern. "First, let's get Wein to the wagon so we can stop the bleeding."

Before he could make room, a figure ran so near them that she almost slammed into the wall for not stopping. She squeezed to the back, sniffling as she wiped the moisture from her cheeks. "Wein!" Her shaky hands cupped his pale face. "Wein, can you hear me?"

"Did you guys find the kid?" Rüfus asked. Beside him was Gittle, eyes wide with shock.

"I… no, no," said Pete. "There's a trail of blood over there… Skiar, I hope he's alright."

"No doubt he's going to need our help." Lucan rolled his sleeve. "Here's what's going to happen. Rüfus, we're going to need you to move Wein to the wagon. Elene, Gittle, I need you to steady him. Don't pull out the knife, don't touch it, just keep him steady. Once the dagger is out, we need to seal the wound with fire."

"Are you sure about that?" said Pete. "The apothecary is not far."

"He's lost enough blood already, time is ticking, and we need to get Gourd."

Gittle barely squeezed through the wagon to climb to the front seats.

Elene was still unsettled. From her quick breathing, her brother's condition was distorting her headspace. Rather than reaching for the handrail, her bloody hands slipped from trying to hold on to the sideboard of the wagon. She hankered her boot on the spokes of the wheel, her shaky legs sending her back to the ground.

Without her permission and without knowing if she would elbow him afterward, Lucan grabbed her waist and gave her a boost. He

caught her short gasp, but rather than pour a spit of fire at him, she raised her legs to her chest, arms locked as if suddenly aware that the only person who would touch her was the same person who would drop her if he wanted.

Lucan climbed next and took Wein's arms, and cautiously moved his immobile body onto the empty wagon floor.

"Give me your dagger," he told Elene.

The wagon creaked as Rüfus joined them. Elene gave it to him at that moment and moved back. Lucan grabbed Rüfus's flask and poured the alcohol on Elene's dagger. He only saw her use it when she cooked and watched her care for it, so the chances of it being cleaner were better than his.

"Gourd," she said with tears in her eyes. "What about Gourd?"

"Lucan and I will find him," Pete said, giving the candle to Rüfus. "Think you can take care of his wound?"

"I ain't got a choice," he said calmly. "Find the kid."

As Lucan shuffled to climb off the wagon, Elene reached for his hand. "Promise me you'll find him?"

His fingers found hers and interlocked with one another. "I promise."

Elene nodded. She took her shawl off and covered her brother. The color of his lips was turning purple, and his shaking was worsening.

Pete took the oil lamp and led the way where more of the lamp posts were taken out. Droplets of blood marked the ground, so at least they were going in the right direction.

The further they went down, the darker it became. The place wasn't as lit or given as much attention as Market Square or Arrow Den.

There were imprints of boots sliding from a pool of blood. From the mess, there seemed to be a struggle.

"The trail of blood keeps getting heavier," said Pete. "Rima, please don't let it be Gourd's."

The smudge led to a narrow alley, there was barely enough room for two people to fit. A body lay there, still. Pete raised his lantern to the face and saw a man, eyes vacantly staring at his boots.

"That's not him." They went on, following the trail more until they found another body, slumped, lying face flat. Pete lowered the light and exhaled.

Gourd lay motionless. His left hand had reached out and frozen over. His fingers seemed to have been clutching something that wasn't there. It was probably his or Wein's coin purse before it was snatched from his grasp. He took one bastard down, but there must have been others who advanced on him.

"Gourd…." mumbled Pete. "Friend, we're here."

The head moved and looked up. He squinted and blinked his teary eyes at them.

Lucan stopped Pete from moving him. Gourd's back was soiled from the indentation of a knife repeatedly stabbing him in multiple areas. His head felt like ice.

"Let's take him now," said Pete.

Lucan didn't pick up his feet. He already felt the recognizable feeling of death pulling and drawing from Gourd's soul from his body. "Pete, I don't think…"

"I said, let's take him now!"

Gourd curled and uncurled his index fingers. "It's alright."

Seeing this, Pete took it. "Hush, we're going to take you to safety."

"Tell my family I tried to get the group who did this to us, to Wein and me." Gourd still carried that weightless smile, that one that sometimes lifted his spirits because he had an optimistic view of the world. "Listen, the one who gave the orders had a… a birthmark no… a scar on his chin."

"Did they stand out in some other way?" Lucan asked, "What clothes did they wear?"

Gourd squeezed his eyes shut. "I… I don't know. It happened so fast."

"Lucan, don't make this into an interrogation," said Pete. "Save your strength, we're going to take you back right now."

"No, just listen to me." Gourd whimpered. "Corie. She won't understand, and she can be difficult, but she's your sister now. You have to take care of her—promise me."

Pete clutched his hand and bit his trembling bottom lip. "We're all going to watch over her. You can count on that."

"Thank you," Gourd shut his eyes. "I trust that you will."

Pete started to him, hand still holding Gourd's.

Lucan took the hand, feeling like a hypocrite the moment he took it. He took many lives but had trouble letting Gourd go like this. If he had been there, if they had all stuck together, they wouldn't have been targeted by criminals. The helpless feeling came back, proving to him again he was useless, that even as a celestial, he would have no power when it involved death.

Gourd opened his eyes for a moment, his eyes briefly widening. He was staring at him, just as Rex had done to him. He started to murmur, asking him what should remain hidden. But then, what was the point of redemption, of turning from a path his mother long reserved for him?

Lucan took a deep, shaky breath and sang.

Rima, walk among us. Take us
where you most reside.

Oh, Skiar, free us from the
shadow's cage.

The sight of the stars can
strengthen the weak.

Wherever you may go, the
mountains will oversee.

Open your eyes, and ask what's
within your childlike tone?

Lucan didn't finish the rest before Gourd passed in silence. A small smile cornered his lips.

"Thanks for that," Pete said. "I'm not a singer—didn't want to give him an unpleasant experience."

Rather than answer, Lucan released Gourd's hand and went to inspect their surroundings, searching for any clues of the bastards who did this.

There were no signs of the Harrow's wares. If they attacked them, it had to be when Wein sold everything. If his purse wasn't heavy, then the secured box he kept his coins was the target.

"We need to burn him before the sun rises," said Pete. "I'll go and find a place. You should go check on Wein."

"No, I'll join you," Lucan said. "No one should walk alone now, just as you said."

Outside of Mudburrow, dawn started to creep in.

After digging a shallow pit, Gourd was burned, marked only by a stone. Pete was humming again. There was a speech in humming Lucan understood, a tone he could find words in, and the low sad tune from Pete asked Skiar for forgiveness, for Gourd to find peace.

The fire invited a pair of clattering armored men, Mudburrow's guards. They demanded answers, interrupting their ritual. "They'll be no burning of any sort so close to the city without a clearance from our head department."

Lucan looked at Pete, gazing at the fire. "Listen, we didn't know we needed some documentation."

"Well, that sums it up for us. Follow us to the courthouse."

"We're Rimans," Pete answered. His eyes were red from crying, his teeth gritting at the sight of them. "They gutted our friend in your streets. We wouldn't be doing this if you had been there."

One guard aimed his spear at him. "You can come nicely, or you can come in chains."

"Please forgive him," Lucan said, trying to calm the situation. "He's mourning his friend. It was their first time in Mudburrow, and something awful happened that they didn't expect. We won't let the fire grow. We'll monitor it until it goes out."

"Yeh?" One answered. "And how are we supposed to sympathize with promises and no coin?"

Lucan felt his patience leave his body. "If you don't believe us, you can take us, but just so you know, a member of the Red Guild was attacked, so it might be in your best interest to get your facts straight."

The guard's ruffled feathers flattened, showing a look of worry, proving the reputation of the Red Guild held true. They take care of their own.

His companion nudged him from his spell. "Come on, ain't the first time these religious folk have done this."

"Puh." The guard spat near Gourd's flame. "Riman bastards and their imaginary beliefs."

Lucan bit his tongue. He was already gripping Pete's arms after that guard spat.

By the time the sun rose, only ashes had remained. In silence, they remained put, watching the fresh breeze pick up his ashes and scatter them.

"I knew it was too good to be true," said Pete. "There were too many heads interested in Wein's goods. They must have seen how quickly he was selling and imagined how many coins he collected."

"Was Wein aware that he was probably being watched?"

"He would have to. He's been nervous about this place since we arrived."

"At this point, it could be the vendors or that fat bastard who charged us thirty silver. They knew we were new to this."

Pete frowned. "At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if it was a Child of Rima."

"Don't say that," Lucan said. "Zorn and Oscern are not like that."

"But you saw him, didn't you? The one who attacked Elene. How did you take him down?"

"We struggled." He put aside the details. "After I got the advantage, I struck him without a second thought."

"It frightens me to think of it," Pete whispered. "That Maiden Trini performed an exorcism on her own son even though he was dead."

Those words stunned Lucan. "What did you say?"

"Fuck, I said too much." Pete wiped his moist eyes. "Forget what I said. Let's just mourn Gourd a bit longer."

CHAPTER 19

ELENE

News of Gourd's death kept Elene at her brother's side, fearing that if she let go, he too would pass. The apothecary tied a mint herb over Wein's bed. He was a crude old fellow who nearly didn't take them in, but having Gittle with them changed his mind. He had his fair share of seeing Maidens, and their good deeds left him in debt, or so Rüfus said.

For two days, she held Wein's hand, waiting for him to move a finger, bend his wrist—anything. She had to see Wein open his eyes. She needed to hear his soothing voice, feel his hand against her head, and see his blue eyes sparkle when she made honey pancakes.

Her mind burned. Seeing him without the green vest with the little tree swallows. The knowledge that they stole it before they stabbed him left her with a sick feeling in her stomach.

Gittle said he would recover, but Elene learned to ignore her. More and more, she was becoming aware of what a selfish celestial being Rima really was. Wein and Gourd didn't deserve what they got, yet no Skiar or celestial being prevented that. Her family was honest, hardworking, Rimans to her dismay, but they took pride in the labor of their efforts. Father, working from dawn to sundown, and Mother, spending long hours on her sewing table, everything they worked for stolen by murdering thieves.

At sundown, the group reunited in Wein's room. Seeing his unconscious state made them uncomfortable. To pay for the stay and the medicine to fight the fever and the infection, all their coins had been spent.

"Don't give me bad news," she told them.

"We have no more coins to pay that grouchy man," Rüfus said. "That's what you need to hear so we can move him to camp."

"But look at him." Elene wiped her face with her free hand. "He won't be able to make it out there exposed."

"That old man is going to let us use his stretcher to move Wein safely to our camp," Pete said in a low soft voice. "You won't have to worry about him being uncomfortable."

"Thank you, Pete," Elene said.

"Don't thank me, Gittle is the one who gave her last coins to convince him and get us the extra medicine we need."

Elene looked at her but said nothing.

"We should go before the sun gets low lest we deal with another incident," Rüfus said, peering through the window. He hardly talked since Gourd passed. They had some fun competition, and with the youngest gone, he must have felt the same remorse she did, that maybe they could have done more.

"I'm going back to Arrow Den." Lucan, who was the quietest, went for the door. "Would be much easier if I take Gittle with me."

"After what happened to Gourd and Wein?" Pete asked.

"Hey, do you want us to leave sooner or not?"

"Then take Elene with you."

Elene squeezed Wein's hand. "No. I'm perfectly fine here. Wein will need to be comfortable at the campsite."

Pete rubbed his eyes. His eyes were heavy from lack of sleep. He looked at Wein and looked back at her. "You haven't eaten anything, and Skiar knows you need a shower and sleep more than all of us!"

Elene rubbed her sore eyes. She was already seeing little black dots from sitting for a long time. "That is all secondary to me. I won't eat until Wein wakes up."

"He will wake up," said Gittle. "Have faith."

Elene shut her eyes. "Please stop saying that."

"If you only believe in the good, you will have peace—"

"I have no faith and certainly no peace!" she shot back. "None of it. Not one bit. Now let me breathe and be with my brother!"

Gittle stepped back, shaken by her raised voice. Had she not guessed where she stood? She didn't pray for healing. She didn't ask Skiar or Rima for help. Her hope was what the apothecary said.

"Rüfus, let's go," said Lucan. "The sooner we get there, the sooner we can leave."

"Rüfus needs to stay to help me move Wein," Pete said.

"Then I'll go by myself."

"Lucan… we agreed no one will be alone." Pete went to one knee so he could look at her closely. His sad eyes were sunken with grief. "Elene, please. You need this more than you know. Think Wein would like to see you like this? Starving yourself and worrying yourself sick? Is that going to make him feel better?"

Elene bit her lip. For how much longer did they need to sacrifice themselves to find Lucan's friends? Her cold stare moved through the room and locked on that Killer. Any tiny grain of humanity she had for him was shrunk by those unmoving eyes. He either didn't know how to show that he cared or lacked any sympathy. All he cared about was finding his accursed Children of Rima.

"Before you say something stupid, save your energy," the Killer said as if he read her thoughts. "I'm not in the mood to spar words with you."

"Well, you're out of luck because I've decided to go." Everyone had done something, and all she'd done was just sit here and wait.

"Thank you," Pete said. "Make sure you eat."

Elene took off her shawl and placed it over her brother. Maybe if Wein had the scent of home, it would stir him awake.

Before they left the room, Rüfus stopped her. "You're doing your best. Wein knows that."

Elene looked at Gittle, who she snapped at. The little girl responded by turning around as if by looking at her, she would blurt out again. She blinked her out of her view and left. She didn't deserve that. Gittle was only trying to help. Even so, she couldn't bring herself to apologize or thank her for giving up her last coins to help Wein. She was innocent in all of this, and yet she let her resentment pay the price.

Lucan led the way through the busy streets, the noise bustling with quick feet and carriages passing by. Somewhere out there was Gourd's killer and Wein's attacker.

Being near the marketplace, her focus scavenged the area, searching the sea of people for any pair of eyes that would recognize them.

Indigo Street was only a few blocks away. Just what had happened since they left? What would she find if she went there?

Lucan paced through like he was late for a meeting, barely giving her room to stay close.

"Hey." She waved at his back, but he said nothing or was probably pretending he didn't hear her. "Lucan!"

He stopped, huffed, and gave her the crudest what.

Elene squeezed her lips tight. Seeing she wasn't going to say anything, he turned and continued.

There was no point in talking to a venomous snake. She stepped off the sidewalk and crossed the other way.

At the marketplace, she observed the place for anything suspicious. Even if there was no chance she could find the killer out in the open, she headed there just the same.

Indigo Street had been wiped clean. A new vendor was selling copper pots. He thought she was interested when he called her over. She shook her head and looked ahead at the alley Gourd chased the attackers. What if the person who stole Father's goods were now selling them?

No. There was no way it would still be up for sale. They sold faster here than they ever could in Lyrin Town. Still… it wouldn't hurt to try.

A vendor with copper pots waved her over. "Young miss, don't carry that trouble look and have a look at what I got."

Before Elene could tell him no, her arm was gripped, startling her to turn fast.

Lucan. He must have discovered she had left him. His touch was cruel, and the tight pressure nearly stopped her blood from flowing. "What are you doing here?" he growled.

She yanked away from him before his grip started to burn. "What do you think? The killer may be out here."

"No, *we* must find my friends. *Now* is not the time to play investigator."

"Is it that easy for you?" she said, surprised that he saw it as a chore. "Saying cruel words at a sad and dire time like this?"

"Yes. My patience for anything at this moment is now spent. Gourd is dead, and your brother is hanging on to life. That's as simple things need to get me over the edge."

Elene's hand crossed his cheek so hard that the smack startled the smiling vendor with the copper pots.

"Gourd's death was not simple. Wein's condition is not simple. What we have is a tragedy."

Though his cheek was pink from the slap, he didn't rub it. "You want to wander off and get yourself killed? Go right ahead. I'm sure Gourd and Wein would love that." Lucan marched off.

Elene stayed there, staring at his back, Terra's scarf barely hanging on by how loose he kept it over his neck. She avoided the stares of the vendors and followed Lucan from a safe distance.

Now and then, he would turn to see that she was following him and turn back.

Arrow Den

It was hard to believe a tavern made up an entire block. Wagons and people traveled around it. Guests were crossing to get inside while others left the lively establishment, sharing heaps of laughter with their companions.

Lucan marched in, carrying the same annoyed stance. He paced through the room, scanning through the dancing people and servers carrying trays of tankards and plates of food.

The aroma of a meal got her stomach growling, and the foaming beer drizzling made her lick her lips. In the apothecary's room of herbs and chemicals, it was easy not to think of food, but here, her stomach ached at the thought of taking a bite of the pie crumbs off a man's sweaty shirt.

Without telling her his plans, Lucan climbed to the second floor. He searched in vain, carrying that mean, awful frown, and went to the third floor.

Lucan grumbled and swiftly spun, nearly bumping into her for following so close. His chin barely hovered over her nose and nearly poked her eye. He walked around her and waved to a server nearby. "Is Junen and Rose in for today?"

The server blew the strands of hair from her face, seemingly irritated that he asked. "They rarely come around before sundown. Is there anything else you need?"

"No, thanks." Lucan was biting his lip, watching every person passing by with those searching eyes.

"Who's Junen and Rose?" she asked.

"People of the night," he answered. "You know, the ones Rüfus loves to enjoy. Junen is Zorn's favorite, and Rose is my…." He held his words back.

"Unless Terra is serious about you, I won't say a word." However, she might hint at his habits. Terra was easily jealous, and she didn't like competition.

"Listen." Lucan chuckled as he headed for the stairs. "Before you become your sister's keeper, know that I like Terra, but I have no plans for anything serious. You Melodians and your obsession with marriage."

Elene halted. "Why even bother with her then?"

"Because Terra is easy to talk to and is less likely to slap my face."

Elene frowned at his jab. "So, flirting with her is just a game to you?"

"You're surprised? Come on, you're her sister, I know what she's doing, and I will not play her little tune or wrestle men to get her."

"Then why did you keep her scarf?"

"This?" he said, glancing at it. "It was a gift."

This man was unbelievable. He was the exact kind Mother disapproved of. He was wicked, callous, and by his own admission, a womanizer.

Lucan picked a table and ordered their meal. Her mouth salivated at the thought of food. Even as they sat, he watched the crowd, seeing who was coming down the third floor or coming up from the first.

Looking at his cheek, there was still a hint of pink from the slap. Seeing it, she still hadn't felt an ounce of guilt. He deserved that one.

The server returned, setting down two bowls of beans over rice. The teal-colored plates were appealing, a glossy loaf of bread seasoned with fried cheese, and on the side were roasted duck legs. Juices from the duck fat slid off the dark caramel-colored skin. The last thing on the table was a tankard of foaming beer drizzling down.

"Thought we were out of coins?" Elene said, swallowing her salivating mouth.

Lucan was about to break his bread when he looked up. He seemed annoyed that she talked. "Haven't I explained myself enough, or do you wish to engage in another argument?"

Elene crossed her arms and leaned on the chair. Her gaze moved to the food, the bubbling beer oozing on the table. Her knee bounced, ready to swallow her pride and indulge.

"A favor for a favor," he said. "Whenever things get rowdy here, my friends and I help escort Arrow Den's unpleasant patrons out, criminals, the press who stalk political figureheads or nobles." Lucan was observing the new faces passing by. "We ran several jobs here in the past, and as payment, Arlene lets us eat for free."

That was good enough. Elene grabbed the tankard and started drinking it. Gulping the cool refreshing liquid. She exhaled to take a deep breath and wiped the foam off her mouth. As soon as she grabbed the drum of the roasted duck, juices started to drip. She leaned in and tore the meat off the bone. The sweet, tangy sauce dripped from her lips as she went for another. Drawing a short intake of breath, she gulped the beer and went for another bite. The meat was so tender, the flavors and the texture of crispy skin tearing and crunching in one bite.

Elene released a tiny moan, leading Lucan to raise an eyebrow.

She emptied her bowl of rice and beans and finished her tankard empty.

Lucan barely touched his food. He was staring at her empty plate and back at her. He slid his plate for her to take. She curled her fingers to refrain from taking his meal. Instead, she moved his plate back.

Without a word, he rested his head on his chin and gently stripped a piece of meat, and started to eat.

By the time the food got cold, there was still plenty of meat on the bone as Lucan was more preoccupied with his surroundings. Sometimes, he would leave and go to the lower floors and return with a disappointed look.

Elene would take her turn and search the first floor. After two hours had passed, her butt could not sit on the wooden chair any longer. The many faces that came and went started looking the same,

each bringing sorrow or happiness to the place. If guests didn't have a sex worker at their side, they were coddling the tankard and asking for a refill.

When she nodded off, Lucan caught it. She shook her head and rubbed her eyes. To keep her eyelids from drawing shut, she thought of Wein. That night when he got stabbed, Ivory and Fior's lead rope was loosened. Whoever attacked him and Gourd was trying to take the horses. But Wein made complicated knots to slow down any would-be thieves.

Elene rubbed her face and secretly freed a yawn. When she opened them, a blond-haired man was standing a fair distance behind Lucan. His tunic was silver, with elaborate beads on the shoulder pads, his pants were black, and his belt was grey with silver pins. His narrowing eyes sealed on him.

Next to him was a taller man with broad shoulders. The lower half of his hair was trimmed, but the side was styled, braided, and twisted to hold gold hair ornaments.

The blond-haired man rolled his sleeves and stomped towards them. Two star-like earrings sparkled from his ears. Teeth clenching, his hand balled into a fist and crossed Lucan's face.

He tumbled out of his chair and hit the floor. He grabbed his feet and dragged him back, taking his shirt and raising him to his face. "Where the hell have you been!" He shook Lucan like how she sifted flour. "We've been looking for your sorry ass all over the place!"

"Zorn," Lucan groaned, cupping his cheek. "I've been waiting for you right here."

"Shit!" Zorn dropped Lucan back on the floor and scratched his short hair. Then his stare went to her, and his eyes widened. "Well, look'ee here… while Oscern and I were out searching for you, you spent it whoring around."

"For Skiar's sake, let me explain." Lucan slowly wobbled back to his feet and moved his toppled chair back. "She's not a working woman."

"Hornshit," said Zorn, glancing at Elene and drawing his stare at her chest. "I know the type you like."

Lucan scowled and squeezed his eyes shut. "No, she's the sister of someone who was recently attacked."

"Attacked?"

"The shows over," the taller man said to the spectators. His voice was so deep she felt it nearly tremble the table. "We're good friends." He sat on the table. Zorn stole a chair from the other table and joined them. Lucan rubbed his jaw and sat last.

"Excuse me." Elene was eager to get off the topic of Lucan's type having any relation with her. Her voice, however, called for a rude gaze from the outspoken Zorn. His lashes were curly and thick, his eyes a solid blue, wide and seeping into her. If he were to wear a wig, he could easily pass for a woman. "Are… you Children of Rima?"

"And what of it?" Zorn said, raising his hand to a passing server.

"My brother was sent by Preisen's High Maiden to search for you. Your… friend here told us you would be here."

"And what exactly do you want with us?" The tall man smiled. "Sorry, these dimwits didn't introduce me. I'm Oscern Grate."

"Elene Harrow." It was easier to smile at someone who didn't speak with vulgar words.

"Thing is, we don't know why Preisen wants you two." Lucan massaged the side of his head. "Damn you, Zorn, I think I'm bleeding from the ear. You're going to regret that."

"Let's not change the topic. Care to tell us where in all that is good you have been?" said Oscern. "When you didn't come back from the battle, we went searching for your body in Grazen Fields and found nothing. We were called back to Vinol and then…." He looked at Zorn, whose anger receded. "Believe it or not, we ran into some strange things."

"Strange? You go first," Lucan said. "Because I've had my share of weird things going on."

"Well," said Zorn. "After you disappeared, King Pann assigned us to another battle. A recently hired Rima Child joined us." Zorn took the tankard that belonged to Lucan and finished it. "Thing is, he was never on our side."

"He tried to kill us," said Oscern.

"So, we fought, and that confused everyone."

"Then they fled."

"Am I telling the story, Oscern, or are you?"

"Sorry."

Zorn slammed the tankard on the table. "Anyway. We followed him out of the battlefield. You know, with my powers, that was easy.

But he could up the ground by just whistling. Luckily for me, I was too fast for him, but he certainly tried to bury Oscern. Took some work, but together we took him."

"Here's the strange thing," Zorn said. "When he died, his body stunk. Nothing like a fresh kill, but like he had been dead for weeks."

"Like Sulfur," said Oscern.

Lucan went silent that moment, drumming his fingers on his tankard. "That man was hired by Major Rudra."

"Major Dickhead?" said Zorn. "He tried to kill you, didn't he?"

"You opened your mouth and got the bite," said Oscern.

"Yes! I got the bite." Lucan briefly glanced at her. "And I keep getting it. Rudra impaled his sword through my chest." He unbuttoned his shirt and showed them the dressing that wrapped his upper chest.

"Skiar," stammered Zorn. "How did you survive that?"

"Don't know. We both fell into a sinkhole, and next thing I knew, I wound up washing away by the river's current." His stare shifted to Elene, who immediately looked away.

Oscern made the connection by the look alone. "So, I'm assuming Elene here must've played some role?"

"Yeah, I drifted to her Riman village, except instead of giving me the help I needed, she tried to send me to Skiar's embrace. It was sheer luck that her sister was there to stop her."

"You tried to kill him?" Zorn said with a surprised chirp. "What kind of Riman are you?"

"Just so we're clear, I'm not a follower of Rima or your Skiar," Elene answered. Zorn released a loud, huh, and Oscern said a short prayer. "Look, your battle with Avery was at our doorstep. Lucan could have been a killer…no, he *is* a killer. But he could have been a danger to my village, so I made a choice."

"Yeesh." Zorn raised his hand to the nearby server and ordered a drink. "Before we continue anymore, any more stories, I'm exhausted from the travel. Let me put some food and beer in my stomach before we continue, alright?"

His friends were nothing like the Riman Children from Melodia, certainly not like Vance, Caspian, or Otto. Zorn's demeanor seemed to be more like Lucan, irritated and indifferent to other people's feelings. Oscern, to her relief, seemed gentler and more honest.

By sunset, Arrow Den was swarmed with more unfamiliar faces filling up the tables with their friends or partners. She had sat in the chair for hours, and the place felt like a new environment.

Women and men of the night started parading around the tables, searching for a client to entertain. While Oscern and Zorn ordered their meal, Elene went to get some fresh air. The place felt stuffy, and she grew tired of Lucan giving her that annoyed look whenever he talked about his wound.

Outside, she started dreading the idea of going back. His friends were found, weren't they? Wein needed her. Then again, Lucan had just reunited with them. It was best to give them time.

Now and then, some men invited her to a drink. She ignored them, deciding it would be safe if she lingered near Arrow Den and stared at the street. This place was a beacon of outlaws by how many came to enjoy the night.

The blur of the passing people and wagons slowed down when a carriage nearby came into view, capturing not just her attention but unbinding the pent-up grief and anger she had recently cultivated. Taking a ride was a man with a cigar. What he wore brought her to her feet. That green vest with the tree swallows she hand-sewed for Wein!

Elene rubbed her eyes and looked again. The color and every stitch on that vest—it had to be.

As soon as she went into the street, a horse pulled back and neighed. The driver shouted vulgar words at her, but she ignored him and went to catch up with the carriage. She wedged with the crowd, bumping into their shoulders as she cut through. But by the time she made it, the carriage was gone.

Heart racing with rage, Elene hurried back to Arrow Den. If Lucan and his friends were made aware, maybe there was time to catch that man! She raised her skirt and paced up the stairs. A man whistled when he saw her pantalettes, so she dropped them and slowed down instead. She saved herself from a few trips but was successful in making it back to the others.

To her surprise, two new people joined Lucan's table. From the look of their revealing and loose garments, they were the nightly company. Without minding them, she squeezed back into her seat. Immediately, they quieted down and looked at her.

The woman who had been holding Lucan's arms was probably Rose. The other who lovingly held Zorn's hand must be Junen. Both smelled like flowers, that much she was certain because there was no fragrance earlier.

"Lu—" Her voice was tossed aside by their laughter. They were resuming a conversation they had picked up before she arrived. "I think I saw—"

Junen twirled, swaying his robes while Rose clapped.

Swallowing hard, she hankered herself to her seat.

Oscern ordered a beer and surprised her when he handed it to her. "To ease your nerves."

"Thank you."

"I appreciate you found Lucan," he said, half smiling. "Even if you two met in a polarizing fashion."

Lucan must have heard them because he harrumphed.

Elene gave him a darting eye. It was already long ago. He stared back, his silver eyes unblinking.

Rose seeing this, moved his chin so Lucan could only look at her. Did she really think she would be bothered if she touched that Killer? Elene drank her beer, unbreaking eye contact. Lucan must've noticed because he tried to look back at her, but Rose kept his chin from facing hers.

"I'm sorry about your brother," Oscern mentioning Wein moved her attention to him. "While you were away, we agreed to join your people to Preisen."

"But you just got here," Junen whined, petting Zorn's hair back.

"Hey, I don't make the decision," he said. "That's up to Lucan."

"You guys," Lucan said sternly.

"I mean, it's decided."

"Well," Rose said, smacking her lips. "Perhaps we can give that farm girl a job in the meantime. I'm sure there are plenty of customers who wouldn't mind something homely."

Zorn's eyebrows rose, and Lucan drew his attention to his tankard. Elene ignored her bright eyes and cooled the heat with her cold drink. She was picking a fight for the wrong reason.

Rose chuckled, drawing her silk sleeve to her lips. "You poor thing. If you like, I can bring something to replace that holed dress and little stitching around your corset."

Whether it was the beer or the fact that she let Gourd's killer go, a wave of heat rushed to Elene's head.

Junen whistled and pursed his lips. "Stop it Rose. You're scaring her."

Elene calmly set her tankard down. "I'm not scared by cheap things."

"Cheap!" Rose released Lucan, nearly pushing him off his own chair. Her stare went from playfulness to the same sneering look Maiden Camilla would give her. "I'll have you know I'm the top-paying woman of Arrow Den."

"And my father's wool costs more than you could charge a whole year."

Zorn spat his drink and laughed. "Lucan, you're right! This woman spits fire and ice!"

Rose stood from her chair. Her corset pinched in her waist just like Mother and Terra's. Just how could they breathe?

"Lucan," Oscern said. "Are you going to let them go at it?"

"What for?" Lucan hadn't moved a finger since Rose got up, arms relaxed on the table. "You know how Rose plays, and Elene could have let her be."

"Pardon?" That belligerent fool knew how to shake every fiber of her body. "Since when did you see me take the high road?"

Lucan shrugged. "Never, and it's an embarrassment when you're five years my senior and act like some frivolous little girl."

"Skiar." Zorn chirped, red in the face. "Are you calling her a hag?"

"And who told you my age?" Elene tried to take control of the room, her heart thundering in her chest.

"Who do you think? Your younger sister."

"I bet she's more lovely," Rose commented.

Lucan smirked. "She can walk straight, I'll tell you that much. This one can't do it without tripping on something or getting distracted by any little noise. I bet she can't cross the street without risking getting run over."

Elene snatched Oscern's tankard from his hand. It had more volume than her own. "Did nobody teach you how to bite your tongue?"

Lucan stared down the tankard but didn't move. "Do it," he challenged. "Nothing you do surprises me anymore."

"That's right, have at it," Zorn encouraged. "He pisses us off too."

Throwing the tankard was easy, but it felt like a tug of war. Her muscles were willing, but the hurt just wanted her to give up and leave.

"No." A tight pinch in her throat was growing. "I didn't come to be ridiculed or mistreated." When her voice broke, Lucan looked at her. "But you could have just told her to stop. Or do you have no respect for your seniors?"

His lips parted, but nothing came out of him.

Elene returned Oscern his tankard and squeezed out of the table, holding onto her tears until she made it down the stairs.

CHAPTER 20

LUCAN

Whispers and snores from passed-out drunks replaced the laughter and banter of the third floor. The mood of the place mellowed down, leaving only a mess of dishes and spilled beer the servers were given a chance to clean up after.

Lucan rubbed his left eye and yawned. He didn't enjoy drinking himself drunk, so as soon as he felt a little woozy, he stopped.

Zorn was slumped on Junen's chest, who rather watch him sleep than leave his side. Junen had strong feelings for him, but Zorn hadn't been the same since Ace. His heart was beyond anyone's reach.

Oscern had been giving him the stink eye since Elene left. A new worker had taken Elene's chair. She was trying her luck with Oscern, who flat out pretended she wasn't there.

Tired of his narrowing eyes, Lucan opened the discussion. "You can always tell me what's on your mind, O."

"Go and apologize, *Major Dickhead*."

Lucan leaned back in his chair and yawned. "You're displeased? Since when did my humor bother you?"

"I never said I liked it. It's dry like gin and cuts people open." His gold-colored eyes dropped at the woman who listened to him, eyes widening that he was finally speaking. "Some women are sensitive to their age, you know? And you deliberately took advantage of that."

"I did not."

"Her being your senior?" Junen tossed his opinion, still combing Zorn's hair back. "She may be gullible, but those were some pretty

picked-out words. Especially with Rose being eight years *your* senior."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Rose said, giving Junen the stink eye.

Lucan circled the mouth of his tankard with his finger, half emptied with the remaining lukewarm. "Need I remind you that you're defending the woman who wanted to leave me to drown? If she had gotten her way, you would have found my swollen, gooey body at the end of the Beaven River."

Oscern groaned. "But she lost one of her people and might lose her brother because of us. Think about that next time you open your mouth."

Lucan rubbed his face and exhaled. Oscern just knew how to get a reaction out of him. "Was already planning to go back anyway, just thought she might've come back."

Rose leaned in, her robe nearly slipping off her shoulders. "You're not leaving anywhere until we make up for the time we lost together."

"Thought I told you I don't have any money."

She blinked repeatedly, then squeezed his arm. "Then you can pay me *next* time."

Lucan slowly got up, half woozy from sitting long and drinking. This is why he tried not to go overboard. "Not tonight. Need to make sure that Little Heathen made it to camp."

Rose released and crossed her arms. "Brute. Next time you show your face again, don't come looking for me."

"Sure, you always say that." Lucan nodded at Oscern. "I'll see you and Zorn first thing in the morning at the gate."

Rather than agree, Oscern gave him that look, the 'you're better than this' look. Before leaving, Lucan flicked Zorn's nose.

He grimaced and groaned.

"Don't hurt my vanilla pudding!" Junen chided.

Just a few blocks from Arrow Den and the lively place grew quiet. Guards still patrolled the neighborhood streets. Since this was the closest path to the campsites, Elene must've taken the same route, and since it had been over an hour since she left, she should be asleep by now.

A family was walking up the steps of their home. By the look alone, they seemed well off, and the area had nice townhouses, after all.

Guiding the little girl up the steps was her brother. The parents had gone inside, but he made sure she went in first. He looked at him for a moment and hurried inside, shutting the door.

Protective, huh? Lucan rubbed his jaw. Maybe he misdirected his anger at Elene for the wrong reason. Wein was unconscious because he told him it was a good idea to sell in Mudburrow. Gittle had probably seen more than she ever did in Preisen, and Gourd was gone. *Suck it up, Lucan, there's a better time to pick a fight, and tonight wasn't it.*

With the new chill at night, a low fog roamed the campsite. Lucan approached, ready to catch some sleep. Pete was wide awake, Rüfus was snoring by the fire, and Gittle was fast asleep in the wagon with Wein. The person missing from the group stopped him from going any further. He hurried back into the gate's entrance, thinking maybe she was lingering around. He waited at the door.

"What's your business?" a guard asked. "No loitering at the gates."

"Sorry." Lucan hurried up the streets, sensing the guard's piercing gaze until he took a sharp left. It was better if he lingered in the darkened alley, just as he had done in Lyrin Town. Few dared to come through at this late hour, and he had nothing to offer a thief.

He tried to calm his breathing and steady his racing mind. The steps of the nearby locals were passing by, the clanking carriages—their groaning wheels in a constant loop.

Focus Lucan. Focus. His mind's eyes unveiled the tunnel again, and he glided out, his sight expanding as he soared over his body. He glided back to the campsite, and as he thought, everyone but that turban-headed woman was gone.

Rotating back to Mudburrow, he sped through the streets, the lamp posts blurring until he got to Indigo Street. The place was slow and clear of thieves and vendors. Word must have spread about the stabbing.

Lucan swept through the busy streets, his vision blurred through wagons, the citizen's voices echoing in his mind. He started chanting,

'maroon dress, grey top, and black corset,' but no woman in his view matched that description.

Having to think of that same person only brought back the slap she gave him. There was no remedy to first impressions, and after a second and third streak of tomato soup flung at him and her elbow wedging into his wound, the mental image of her made him more aware of the anger and frustration he had towards her.

As he glided through the streets, he stopped. His third eye had reached its limit. He turned back, finding himself in an aristocratic area of the city, white marbled pillars with shrubs and black gates protecting privileged homes.

The hiss and screeching of stray cats sent shockwaves through his temple, disturbing his third eye. His sight unveiled clean streets, a four-story inn, and several jewelry shops. This wasn't a place hoodlums would linger as guards frequented the area, and still, the same sinking feeling lingered in his chest.

From the corner of his view was a narrow street that led through an alley wedged between two buildings. The noise there emitted sparks of gold light. There seemed to be a struggle, but it was out of his range. At that moment, he saw a glimmer of light, the golden tassel she always wore.

Lucan snapped back to his body and ran up the street. Pete and Rüfus couldn't help when they had Wein and Gittle to protect, and Zorn or Oscern were miles away.

The way up the nice streets was blocked off, gated, and guarded by security. Turning to an alleyway, he followed the barriers of the gate until he squeezed into the backyard of a home. The dog there barked but seeing it leashed, he had enough time to get through.

Once he recognized the pillars and posh shops, he went to that narrow street, recognizing the same apprehension it gave him, like something heavy was lingering. There, the silhouette of a person was panting over a slumped body.

"Turn around and come to the lamplight," Lucan said. The figure froze, aware of his presence.

Slowly the shadow moved and followed his command. Coming to face him was Elene, eyes wide. Her blouse ran red and down to her skirt. On the ground, a man curled up in his blood.

Elene's breathing was fast, heaving like a rabbit that had been outrunning a fox. "He… he…. he."

Lucan guided the body to its back. The dagger missing from her holder dived deep into the man's chest, possibly the heart. The blood-stained vest he wore, the bird stitching, was identical to Wein's. He knew that design because Wein only wore it when he opened shop.

Leaning back, Lucan looked at her, her stare frozen on the ground. "Elene. I know why you did it… but how do you know you got the right guy?"

"He… he's wearing Wein's vest."

"But we didn't see who attacked him or killed Gourd. What if the killer sold it, and you just impaled an innocent man?"

A sharp gasp reverberated, and she looked at her hands, unblinking, even as the tears ran down her cheeks.

Lucan stepped back from the body. The blood was starting to leak. He took off the dagger and wiped it on the man's trousers. Such weapons shouldn't be left behind. "Were you seen?"

Elene was squeezing her temple, eyes still widening at what she had done. She had to have known the risk, or perhaps she was taken by her rage and went for the heart. Either way, he couldn't assure her that her actions were justified as he wasn't there to see who stabbed Wein and killed Gourd, and neither was she.

"Elene!"

"N—no." Her teeth were chattering. "I mean, I—I don't know."

If any bystander were to see the bloodstains on her, they wouldn't forget—especially when she stood out with her turban and tassel. Mudburrow still had its laws, and their punishments were just as severe.

"I need to turn myself in," she said, rubbing her nose.

"Sure, and you'll never see your brother again."

Thinking he heard a noise, he shuffled back to the narrow street. As dark as this place is, a murder happened in the high areas of the kingdom. The punishment would be twice, and with a cold kill like that, Elene would hang by morning.

"Come on," he said, turning from the body. "We need to leave quickly."

"No… it wouldn't be right… I took a life." When the words left her, it brought her to slouch. "I took a life."

"Let's go." Lucan firmly held her shoulders and nudged her back to the street.

"But I just committed a crime!"

"For once, Elene, shut your mouth." He forced her to leave the alley, tugging her and nearly dragging her feet when she didn't pick them up quick enough. "Wipe your tears and suck them in. If you want to see Wein again, you'll have to carry that burden because Mudburrow's judges won't be as forgiving as you think."

"But…"

"Hush, I think I saw an inn two blocks from here." Taking Elene's cloak, he wrapped it around her to hide the blood. His arms wrapped around her shoulder, and he told her not to budge from him.

"Maybe they'll understand…?" Her eyes were wide and glossy.

He looked back at the street, searching for that stupid inn he swore he saw. "Some kingdoms have a ruthless justice system. Take Vinol for example. King Pann got rid of one of his own sons."

"Why?"

"Quiet." A guard came towards them. Lucan relaxed his facial muscles and squeezed Elene closer. He nodded at the guard, who nodded back but carried a lingering stare at their clothes. Obviously, neither she nor he looked like they belonged here. "It's a long story," he continued. "But his name was Ace. Oscern, Zorn, and I could work within Vinol's army because of him."

Ahead was a four-story building with clean double-panel windows with the wording, Glass Crane. Even at night, it gave off a porcelain look, not hiding it was expensive, but they were out of options. Lucan sank into his pocket and brought out a coined purse. Zorn should have really checked his pockets after punching him like that.

At the counter, the clerk dusted the paintings before noticing them. "Welcome to the Glass Crane. I'm Mimi, the proud owner of this respectable inn and soon-to-be mother." Mimi saw something was amiss. She studied them as that guard had, lips pressed but not saying much.

"I'll take your best room," he said, changing his voice to a high note. "My wife and I went to Arrow Den, and you won't believe the scuffle we got. Some brute spilled his beer on her precious clothes, and I had to defend her reputation."

Mimi smiled awkwardly now. "Well, that is quite unfortunate. Are you visiting then?"

"Why yes." He leaned his head against Elene's Turban, and her shoulders squeezed in. "It was our anniversary, I'm sorry we came looking like this, but my coin is good."

He took out Zorn's coin purse. Mimi didn't take his payment, nor did she reach for the shelves to provide him a key. Something wasn't connecting, but what could it be? Did he sound insincere? Did Elene's face give them away?

"I'm sorry," Mimi said. "But we only have a suite with two single beds."

"That's perfect." Mimi raised an eyebrow. "I mean, that would be perfect if it included a bathroom."

"Of course." Mimi smiled now, relieved that he didn't become upset by the beds. It was heaven-sent as far as he knew.

"Breakfast is at six. I hope that's not too early, seeing it's such a late night."

"That will be fine." *Just hand me the damn key already.*

Room two-hundred and two was more spacious than Lucan anticipated. The center fashioned a round table with cushioned chairs, the two beds in the right corner, divided by the six-panel window that faced the street. A room divider for privacy, silk robes on the couch.

One of the maids who escorted them to their room was prepping the bathroom while another started the fireplace. At the door's threshold was Elene, who hadn't taken a step into the room.

Five gold coins for one night. He left Zorn with silver and bronze now, he swore he had more, but he must've lost them gambling on his way to Mudburrow.

"Tub is hot and ready," the maid said, trotting to the exit. "We left extra towels in case you need them."

The last one nodded at Elene, who barely acknowledged her.

Lucan took off his cloak and held it against the light, looking for stains. "You going to come in?" Elene looked up, eyes sunken. "Go

clean the blood and get yourself washed. I'll be back, going to see if anyone noticed the body."

She took a few steps but didn't act, even as the bathroom was open and the steam was escaping. "That man is still in my mind."

"That's sort of expected after your first kill."

Elene's sad eyes found him. Before she could say anything, he shut the door and locked the room with the key.

Back on the street, Lucan went around the block rather than the way he went. Once he found the opening of the narrow street, the place was lit, and the crowd of people was there.

Officials were already inspecting the body. He moved to the front and asked what had happened.

A man who stood nearby shrugged. "Bastard got nailed with a dagger."

The officials were digging into his pocket and taking out a tobacco pouch, folded paper, and a coin purse with the etching of the letters W.H. With a vest that looked just like Wein's and those acronyms. It couldn't be a coincidence.

"Does anybody know him?" Lucan asked.

The same man spat at his question but didn't answer. From the looks of it, he did know him but didn't like that he mentioned him. "Why are you asking, boy?"

The lantern was placed on the man's face revealing a scar under his chin.

"Alright." One official waved his arms around. "This is an active investigation. You'd do well by going home and locking your doors."

To keep that man's prying eyes off him, Lucan was among the first to leave, following the crowd out of the crime scene. On his walk back, he relived the scene in his mind, what he saw in his mind's eye, and what he saw when he arrived.

Elene may have avenged Gourd and her brother, all the clues pointed to it, but they would never know for sure.

Damn it all. If he hadn't pissed her off, hadn't said those words, she wouldn't have been in this mess. She didn't need to kill blindly because she still felt cheated by Gourd's death and her brother's wound.

Mimi, seeing his return, welcomed him back. He smiled at her to mask the stress and headed back upstairs.

Back in his room, he found Elene had taken the bed on the right. She laid with her back against the wall of her bed, coiled up under the blanket. Going to the bathroom, he found the tub of water had been drained. He checked it for any droplets of blood, but Elene had been careful. There was no sight of blood anywhere. She must've drained it before asking for a refill because her corset, blouse, skirt, and cloak were hanging to dry, along with her undergarments and her pantalettes. Her bra and underwear and Turban were the only things missing.

Lucan scooted a chair from the table and sat down. He untied his boots and took them off. The socks he tucked inside had holes on the end. Pretty soon, he would see all his toes poking out.

Leaving his cloak on the chair, he went to his bed. Elene could only stare at her feet, tucked under her blanket.

"That man had Wein's coin purse," he said. "Gourd said the one who attacked him had some mark under his chin. The one you got had it."

Elene's dark eyes moved to him. "Even if he was him, it doesn't change what I've done." She looked at her hands. "It was so easy—just like when I was going to push you into the river only… this time, I've actually done it."

"Dammit, Elene, what happened?"

Her lashes fluttered, and she sank into her knees. "After I left Arrow Den, I saw him again, that man with my brother's vest. I followed him through the city, but by the time I saw how far deep I was into the city, my thoughts sobered up. What was I going to do, anyway? Demand a thief to return my family's coins and my brother's vest? It was during my walk back that I ran into him again. He asked me what business I had following him. And just like that, the anger and hate came back, seeing that man wear Wein's vest. When he left, I nearly lost him in that street, having a smoke. I accused him, and he got angry and pushed me against the wall. He didn't see what I had in my hand. It happened so fast. I reacted but still…" Elene sank her head into the sheets and breathed.

"Well… we best get some sleep while you can." He yawned, weary from the chase, and lay on his bed. The soft mattress held his weight nicely, a perfect change from sleeping on the ground. The

bed sheets were warm and carried a nice aroma. Perhaps it was worth five gold coins.

Elene hadn't replied, so he turned and faced the wall. There was not much he could say, anyway. Seeking vengeance never guaranteed it was going to feel good or turn out right. His own mother told him not to avenge them, and for all those years, he long thought of what that meant.

This must be it.

A whimper opened his eyes. He hadn't realized he had fallen asleep until he found himself staring at the wall again. Facing the bed across from him, Elene was in the same position, back against her side of the wall, looking like a statue, limbs frozen, breathing so faint he couldn't see her chest rise and fall.

"Get some sleep," he told her. Her sad eyes went to him and narrowed. "What? Did I strike your nerve again?"

"I know you hate me." Her voice broke, either from having a dry throat or from being to the point of bursting into tears. "I've done everything under the moons to deserve your unforgiving words and your cruel stares."

"Skiar, woman, just get to the point."

She inhaled and covered her face. "Just for tonight, just for tonight, can you… hold me?"

Lucan rustled from his bed. She had completely lost it. If she was going to torture herself all night, why would she add more by asking him that? "Come again?" Perhaps he misheard.

"Can you pretend we don't hate each other? Can you pretend I'm not unbearable?"

"Why would you want me to do that?"

Elene placed her clenched fist on her chest. "Something is missing. A part of me that was once there is gone, and every time I shut my eyes, I see myself sinking my dagger into that man's chest."

"Oh, for pity's sake." Lucan faced the wall again. "Holding you will not make you feel any better. Sleep will."

What a ridiculous request. Matias and Wein surely have coddled this woman well into adulthood.

The muffled sobs behind him started to come. He leaned slightly on his back, finding Elene had pressed the pillow to her face so she could weep into it.

Skiar. He scooted to the corner of his bed so he could face her. His toes curled on the carpeting. "Aren't you a little too old to be held?" Elene moved the pillow down. Even with tears in her eyes, she was giving him a mean stare. "Why are you giving me that awful look?"

"If you will not do it, then get out of my sight."

"Me? Leave?" With words like that, she might as well stab him next. "Do you not know how much I paid to get us a room?" Rather than look at him or respond, she dug her face into her knees.

"Fine, have it your way—not like I can get any sleep with you sobbing away." He went for his boots, stepping into the light by the fireplace. She had been feeding the fire all night so her clothes could dry.

Ridiculous. If she wanted company, Arrow Den had plenty of male workers. At least there, he could get his own room and get some shuteye.

Once he opened the door, he gave it a hard shut. She could lock it herself. At the stairs, he slipped into his socks, followed by his boots. Elene, sulking on the bed, kept coming back.

She killed someone. The one person who accused him of being a killer had become one herself.

Hell. Lucan opened the door, and right away, Elene looked up. He locked it this time, threw his untied boots on the floor, and approached her, fully aware that he agreed to hold that Little Heathen in his arms.

Elene smudged her eyes and moved to the end of her bed for him to sit beside her. It was awkward now, and he was gently tapping his fingers on his knees.

The room was silent, but he could still hear the hooves of horses passing by the street. No doubt the place was being searched for the killer, last name, Harrow.

Her lashes were still heavy with tears. If she could cry all night, then he didn't want to see it through. "Well, let's get this over with." He scooted to the end of her bed so his back faced the wall. The pillow was cool, and the mattress was just as comfortable as his.

Elene gaped at the space he left for her. Rather than join him, she kicked the blankets off and walked to the end of the bed, where the fireplace's light illuminated her figure. He thought with her

undergarments hanging to dry, she had been naked, but she wore his surprise women's lingerie. The fabric was a greyish-blue color. Ruffles layered her bra, and where her underwear wrapped her waist.

"Maybe this isn't a good idea." She started rubbing her arms, nervously looking around as if the wall had eyes. Her plump buttocks shimmered from the room's glow. Then there were her breasts, he tried not to look, but he was certain her bra was not offering enough support. "Terra wouldn't want this."

"Terra?" "I won't do anything besides hold you. Look, my trousers are still on."

"You're shirtless."

"It's hot, and you've been stocking the fire all night."

"But…" Her hands went to her chest. Her actions were innocent, cautiously glancing at the space of the bed and back at him.

At her own accord, she returned, her figure stepping into the moon's light. Lucan gave up trying to be virtuous and observed the figure walking to the bed. Her thighs were voluptuously thick, with no space between her legs. Her waist wasn't as narrow as the women who tightened their corset, but the curve of her hips accented its natural appeal.

His view was cut short when Elene sat on the corner of the bed. From the way her hands clenched the mattress, she remained hesitant.

He had already set aside his pride. It was her turn lay hers down. "Listen, I know why you want reassurance. You can't get any peace in your soul, so you're seeking comfort in the physical sense."

"Do you find me strange?" she asked.

Certainly. "Forget about what I think. What you're feeling isn't new. I still haven't forgotten my first kill."

Somehow his words got through to her. Elene's shoulders dropped, and she went to lay across, back gently against him. When he scooted his hand under her neck, his bone popped in his attempt to reel her in. Before embracing her completely, he reached for the blanket and covered them.

At the very least, his job was done. The intolerable woman got her way and was in his arms. "Want to take your turban off?" he asked. "Makes little sense to sleep with it."

She didn't answer. Why was he asking, anyway? She never took that thing off. The closeness of their bodies must be too much because she kept shifting her head forward, perhaps so his breath wouldn't brush up her neck.

Minutes rolled by, and she began to tremble. Then came slight sobs. Lucan lost track of time because he opened his eyes again. He had fallen asleep until Elene's movement had woken him. She spun so she could face him. Before she had time to look at him, he shut his eyes right away.

"Lucan?" she whispered as if someone else might hear. "Lucan."

He didn't respond. He said he would hold her, not talk her feelings out. Her shoulders squeezed in, and her fingers slid through his arms until her face sunk into his chest. It was so sudden he moved back to create some distance and looked at her. Sensing he was awake, she looked up. Her big eyes swallowed his attention, her tears glimmering from the window's light.

"Careful," he said. "My stitching is very tender."

For a moment, the necklace around his neck caught her eyes before she looked away. "You're incredibly warm."

"Yeah, and I also don't normally hold women in bed. Especially not without some reward."

Her eyes softened, and her lips curled a smile. "Carnal man."

His attention span could only hold out for so long. He gave in and looked at her cleavage. "You're right. And if you let me, I can do more than just hold you."

Her widened eyes surprised him, but she rejected him by shaking her head and burying her face against his chest, across his wound. Lucan chuckled from the tickle it gave him. What a bizarre and unexpected feeling. Her hair didn't smell nice, and the turban didn't help, but her forehead felt like a soft plum against his skin.

"Who was your first kill?" her voice filled the room again.

"I knew you wanted to talk."

Her muscles tensed at him calling her out. "Figured maybe you could help me sort my thoughts out."

Tired of his arched back to evade her, he moved his shoulders in and gently rested his chin on her head. She squirmed, which stopped him altogether. "You alright?"

"Yes." Puffs of her breath warmed his chest. "I'm not used to this nature of physical contact."

"Oh…"

"Can you begin? Your story, I mean."

He inhaled and looked back at the same window, guiding its light through. "Zorn, Oscern, and I were kids, staying in a small village where a Riman farmer fostered us." Lucan shut his eyes. The memories came so strong he squeezed Elene.

"Lucan?"

Her voice grounded him, and his hold loosened. "He had other motives, and they were not charitable. Before he could harm Oscern and me, we fled to his barn to hide. Zorn was behind. We thought him being the fast one, he could catch up, but it seems the man had targeted him from the start. At least, that's what I felt when he took us in. As Zorn was being dragged from us, something inside me broke. I grabbed the hayfork and pierced the ends through his chest like fork on cheese. I've never heard a man gargle to death as he did, don't think I ever will."

"How old were you?"

"Bout' eleven years old."

Elene pressed her fingertips against his chest. It was such a foreign reaction he looked down. She was tracing a scar below his collarbone. Goosebumps ran up his shoulders at her touch. "You were so young—I can't imagine how you coped with it."

"Nothing to cope with. The bastard got what he deserved."

"You thought that at eleven?"

Lucan swallowed hard. "No, I didn't sleep that night. Nor was I embraced like a certain someone, but Zorn, Oscern, and I huddled against one another to get some sleep. That morning we robbed that bastard of his coin and goods and left. But we learned something that night. Our home was gone, and adopting a new place would not fill that hole."

Elene inhaled, and her eyebrows dropped. Something was always troubling her mind. "Lucan, after that experience, killing at a young age, facing awful people, how can you believe some celestial being like Rima is real? If Skiar were so great, why is all the trouble blamed on some demon-like Murella or the Demon of the Deep?"

"Elene, you're asking why colors have color."

"It's not that complex."

"How would you know if you don't know Rima's scriptures?"

"You're wrong there. I've read every page in that little pocketbook." She surprised him a little, as he doubted she knew anything.

"Then you know the Demon of the Deep wouldn't allow any civilization to stand. Darkness and destruction is his nature, and the light invaded his creation. Someone always said that darkness and light will always find each other, tethered to destroy one another."

"But you suffered, haven't you? You've said so yourself, you can't settle in one place, so what good is there after nothing good has followed you? Why cling to a being when it doesn't change your situation?"

"The only place a thought like that will take you is to some philosophical maze. Our existence is beyond human understanding. All I can share is my experiences, and no matter how cruel my life has been, I'm still a Riman."

Elene looked at him, eyebrows pushing into one another. "Even though you and your friends behave like the last people to follow her?"

Lucan had to move his head back to look at her. Her eyes, pink from crying, locked on his. Under the moon, there was a sparkle in her dark eyes he hadn't known. "I believe in Rima because I just do. Now go to sleep."

Elene shut her eyes briefly but opened them after. He held his breath when her finger brushed a scar on his neck. "That… looks painful."

"Not as much as the one you elbowed."

She snorted, face pressed to his chest. "About that… I'm sorry."

"Hmph." Why was she apologizing now? If he remembered correctly, she was demanding an apology from him. The words echoed in his mind, but he couldn't tell if it was the truth or a lie. This wasn't the Little Heathen he was used to talking to. "You mean it?"

"Mean what?" Her voice sounded tired this time, like she had attempted to sleep and he had woken her.

"Your apology." He should just let her sleep. He wanted that, after all.

Her eyebrows constricted, but her eyes remained shut. It seemed like he offended her by asking, but seeing her grow slightly upset gave him that answer.

Lucan looked back at the window. The way the moon's light peered through reminded him of Aelith's grand walls, the comfort of his bed, and the wind chimes that hung on the ceiling. His mother would tuck him in, but she wouldn't leave until she told him a story.

"Our sun and the moons shed the same light, but they have different purposes. The sun invites us to play, to take from the day life's nourishment and heartaches, but the moon opens our hearts and reconnects us with the inner part of ourselves. We must always see what reflects from our soul, so we can be prepared for the next day."

A slight snore sent him looking down at the woman in his arms.

Asleep, Elene looked like a different person. All those tense muscles in her face smoothed over, and her bottom lip hung as if she had overworked it from how often she bit her lip.

Slowly, his eyes closed.

It's more than believing Little Heathen. It's because I'm a celestial.

Lucan opened his eyes to the concave ceiling. The streets were muffled with chatter and passing carriages. In his arms was a woman, lips sweetly puckered as she slept. Suddenly, it all came back to him—the crime scene, Elene covered in blood—the long talk they had before they fell asleep.

With ease, he slowly moved his arm from under her neck. She scrunched her face but didn't budge. The only way to get off the bed was to crawl over her, but if he was going to do it, he had to do it without waking her.

Lucan moved the blanket they shared back, exposing her bare skin and undergarments to the cool room. How he wished he had Zorn's power to levitate over the bed and escape the arrangement, Elene wrapped him in. He raised his leg over her body. He seized his breath, his weight sinking into the mattress as he leaned over her.

Why am I nervous? I've escaped many nightly encounters many times. He shook his head. *What am I talking about? Nothing happened, and if I'm in this predicament, it's because of her for making it weird.*

The moment his left foot touched the cold ground, he hoisted himself up.

Elene must have sensed the shift in the mattress, and without a blanket, she was shuffling, breasts bouncing up and down as she fixed herself.

Lucan swung the blanket over her body and turned. His heart was rattling, and there was heat coursing down his body. With more urgency than before, he shuffled to his bed to lie down but spun at the sound of a knock on their door. Was it the officer? Did Mimi sell them out?

Elene shot up after the next knock, gripping the blanket. Turning to him, her stare fell to his crotch, eyes slowly widening at his morning wood.

CHAPTER 21

LUCAN

Lucan snatched his shirt and slipped into it, and went to answer the door, tucking his manhood in the right place. He took a few breaths of air and slowly opened the door.

"Good morning, sir." The new voice had a youthful chirp, but it wasn't Mimi. He widened the door, and without asking, two maids stepped in, bringing a round breakfast tray. Another rolled in a cart decorated with tea and coffee and a basket of fruit. "Would there be anything else?"

"Uh… no." And just like that, they were out of the door.

The smell of breakfast and an awkward silence followed. Knowing she was in her underwear, Lucan grabbed the silk robe and left it on Elene's bed. She promptly took it but waited until he went to the table before putting it on.

Slowly, she riled herself up and took a seat across from him. Now and then, she would glance at him and then glance down. The tray they rolled up had everything a person could want, hot tea, bread and butter, sausages, poached eggs, and sliced mango.

"Did you get some sleep?" he asked.

Elene smoothed her hands over her head wrap. "A bit." Before she picked up the butter knife, she looked at him. "Erm, I'm sorry about last night. I don't know why I asked that of you."

"You make it sound like we did more. It was just two bodies sharing the same bed."

Elene's focus went back to the food, and she started spreading butter on her toast. "I'll pay you for the embrace."

"I'm not a working boy. Not now, not ever."

Her shoulders trembled, and her smile widened. "You are if I pay you."

Lucan snorted and shook his head. Her buttered toast neatly went on his plate. Surprised at first, he didn't address it.

"The least you can let me do is pay you for this expensive stay." The second buttered toast she put on her plate. "I know you had no choice because it was the closest."

"Keep your money. I told Zorn he would pay for that punch, and he did by treating us to a fancy inn." He's really going to want to give him another after he finds his gold coins missing.

Lucan opened the lid and scooped the first serving of poached eggs on her plate.

Elene, noticing what he had done, used her fork to serve the sausages on his plate before hers. Her face ran a serious look like she wanted to say something but deprived herself of the opportunity.

The clinking of forks and knives, the clock on the wall ticking while they ate. Deemed carrying a conversation unnecessary, not with the Little Heathen doing better than last night.

Elene poured herself more tea. Her eyes shut as she slowly exhaled. "I still hate you, Killer."

Lucan wedged his bite of toast on the roof of his mouth. "You don't say?" He chewed promptly and swallowed hard. "Cause that makes two of us." A small smile formed on her lips. A second later, it was gone. Perhaps he imagined it. That or he was still sleep-deprived.

"Hey." Her attention was his when they normally avoided him. "What you saw earlier. It's something men can't control."

Her lashes fluttered as if mentioning it sent her back, but Elene didn't nag or squabble with him.

Lucan took a bite of his sausages and watched her, head down, focused on her meal. She was behaving strangely, had been, but since when? "And you're welcome."

"Hm?"

He rubbed the back of his hair. "Back at Preisen, you thanked me for helping you out, didn't you?"

Her eyebrows knotted together. It looked like she was more disappointed that he mentioned it, but he didn't address it. He was walking on thin ice with her, and he would not fall under it again.

The long bath did wonders to the body, especially to his wound. The standing mirror helped him examine his old wrap. The bandages he took from the apothecary were still with the others.

A soft knock startled him. Elene's voice was on the other side, asking if he was finished.

"What do you want?" The moment the words came, he realized his mistake. She was quiet, and he had already felt a cold draft come in between. He grabbed his shirt and went to open it, just in case she still lingered there. Elene had frozen but was startled to see him. "What is it?" he corrected.

"Here." She presented new linen with enough wrapping to patch him up. "I asked Mimi if she had any to spare and gave me a bit of ointment."

Lucan took them. He was about to shut the door before he bit his lip, thinking. "Can you…" It felt like swallowing nails to ask. "Can you help me?"

Elene, nodding, still carried a worried look, perhaps by how he answered her knock, or maybe helping him was hard on her as well.

Outside, Mudburrow's gate was long and quiet. The campsite the group reserved was empty. They couldn't have left without them, so they must have been searching for them.

Elene carried the leftover toast and sausages they didn't finish. The wrap felt snug but breathable. She was careful, eyes often narrowing at the blemished wound. She had the same concern as the doctor he saw a few days ago, but rather than ask, she wrapped him up.

Just as the Kingdom was behind, she stopped to stare at it once more. She was going to carry what she had done on that street all her life. Lucan continued, hopeful that Zorn and Oscern would show up.

Elene was looking ahead, searching for her father's wagon, Fior and Ivory, and hopefully Wein in a better state. "Why now?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"Why did you say you're welcome when you could've said it in Preisen?"

"Oh, well… that long wait had me thinking of other things, and your words didn't register. I mean, I didn't realize you had thanked me until you were walking away." He rubbed his nose and shrugged. "Let's face it… talking to you is really hard."

Elene harrumphed. "And you're not?"

"What? I'm a breeze once warmed up."

She gave him a fuming look. "You have been anything but warm to me, and before you say another comment, I the same to you, but last night at Arrow Den was different. You ridiculed me about my age."

"Can you blame me? You sorta act—" Her narrowing stare left him gulping his words. "What I mean is… you can be klutzy for your age." Her lashes flickered at that comment. "Fine. I won't bring it up again."

"I never asked for your age." Elene's words brought him to glimpse at her again.

"Didn't I say I wouldn't bring it up again?"

"Yes." She held the bag of leftovers closer to her chest. "What are you a year, two years younger than me?"

Lucan rubbed his chin. "I'm twenty-three."

"Oh," she frowned, lashes flickering. "You're barely into your twenties, and I'm near the end of mine."

"Elene—"

"No, now I know why you said that." She marched ahead of him. "Come on, they have to be nearby somewhere."

Why was she getting pent up about this? Was age really an issue when it was just a measly five years? Or was this a woman thing he didn't understand?

Uphill, a cluster of figures was standing beside a wagon. A large man, seeing them, whistled and waved. Bellowing out of his chest was Rüfus's voice. Zorn and Oscern were there, holding true to their word. Rüfus stature was only dwarfed by Oscern's massive build.

Elene ran up the road but didn't make it far before she tumbled from the sharp incline of the ground. Lucan winced at hearing the air expel from her lungs. She picked herself up at that moment, still gripping the bag, questionably unphased by the fall, and continued.

Lucan picked up his feet to catch up with her. He was going to ask her if she was alright, but the rigorous look on her face repelled his effort to try. He called her a klutz earlier, so perhaps silence was the better choice.

Gittle was standing from the seat, the worried look on her face swept away when they got close. That poor girl had been through so much, and she still had the heart to worry about them.

"Where were you two?" Pete said. "We were worried."

"We ran into some bumps," Elene said. "It became too dangerous to head back safely, so I stayed with Lucan at Arrow Den."

Something told him she would not tell them what happened last night, and it was not for him to say anyway, so Lucan confirmed her words with a nod.

Zorn, hearing this, chuckled. "That's not how I remember it."

"Shut it," Lucan told him.

Elene gave Rüfus the bag of food. "Where's is he?"

Pete pressed his lips tightly and gestured her to the wagon. As soon as Elene leaned in for a look, she screamed. She gave the rail a shaky grip, but just as she gave herself that boost, her legs wobbled, leading her to land back on the ground. That fall and scare must have gotten to her. Like he had before, Lucan grabbed her waist and gave her that boost.

This time, touching her felt like she was the one warming him.

"Hey," Pete said. "She got it."

"What?"

Pete inhaled, his eyebrows dropping over his threatening gaze. "She can climb that wagon by herself. She had since she was a little girl, so just let her work it out."

"Ouch," said Zorn.

Lucan said nothing. What the hell was Pete getting so worked up about? He climbed the wagon next. Wein was awake, covered by a wool blanket, leaning on the rolled-up straw mats.

"You're alive." Elene sank to his feet and wept. She gripped the wool to her face, covering it completely. "After Gourd died, I thought you would never wake up."

"Hey…" he said weakly.

"I waited and waited, hoping that maybe if I stayed near you, you would have some reason not to leave me."

"Elene… I'm sorry for putting you through this." Wein gave her head a few little pats. "After I came and saw you were missing, I'm the one who became worried sick."

"Damn it," said Rüfus wiping his eyes.

Pete cleared his throat. "Not to interrupt you two, but we should really get back on the road.

Since the wagon was emptied of the Harrow's trunks, the space gave everyone room to fit in, but it didn't make everyone calm. Oscern wasn't saying much, and Zorn threw a fit after he discovered he nearly emptied his coin purse. He was so red in the face he refused to talk to him.

Gittle, who sat in the front seat, would sometimes look at them, drawing her big curious eyes at his friends. Zorn paid her no mind, but Oscern would give her a nod.

Wein mainly kept to himself on the road. Gourd's death was recent news to him. Elene would sometimes turn and look at him before focusing back on the road. She seemed to have noticed he was taking the news to heart as he was the sole survivor of that attack.

"They're not usually this grim," Lucan whispered to Oscern.

"Do you trust them?"

"Their people found and took care of me, so yeah."

Mudburrow's mountain ranges reserved a cool temperature. Above their heads were the infamous mountain goats, their black hooves balancing their weight on their highest cliffs. They were a territorial bunch with black beady eyes that watched them as they crossed. Anyone who got any closer would have invited themselves to a confrontation, and against the cliff, they had the high ground.

"Wish the kid was here. He could've taken one down." Rüfus walked with a slouch, hand on his ass from sitting all day.

"Why didn't you buy hunting gear?" Zorn said, eyeing him to show he was in a prissy mood. "We're going to starve before we get to Preisen."

"We're lucky they didn't take what we brought to camp," Pete said, hand on the rail while he watched the goats stare at them. "We

can stretch Gittle's last coins if we trade with the merchants on the road."

Elene's sudden movement caught his attention. She was looking at Gittle, who, in turn, was observing the goats.

"I'm sorry," he heard her say. "Back there in Mudburrow for snapping at you."

Gittle lowered her gaze. "Do you dislike me?"

"No, it's nothing like that. You are young and a victim of all of this. I don't get along with the Maidens back home, so naturally, I had my reservations. Then Wein got hurt, and we lost Gourd, so… it all piled up on me." When Elene faced her, the sun traced the edges of her lashes. "You've done more for my brother than I could, so for that, I'm indebted to you."

Gittle, smiling, scooted closer to Elene. It must have meant a lot to her that they were close.

The Rustling leaves of Bamboo Forest endlessly followed them down the trail. Once more, they were going against the sunset, as little light was casting a dark shadow. Now and then, Wein would shift and move, drumming his fingers against his lap, asking Elene if everything was alright.

"Relax," she said softly. "If you get upset, you'll pull something."

"Are we there yet?" Zorn was in his maddening mood again, counting the little coins he had left in his coin purse.

"No," Elene answered softly.

"What about now?"

"No!"

Oscern being the gentle giant that he was, grew a liking to Gittle. In return, she was curious about their home village, asking who his parents were. Oscern answered truthfully, masking the horror of how it all ended.

"My mother was a Maiden, and my father was an artisan, a gardener mostly who took care of the home. He raised my four siblings and me while my mother served the temple."

"Who taught you to do your hair?"

Oscern could mask any pain in his memories with a smile and that soft tone of voice. "My father, he was a jewelry maker when he wasn't chasing after my siblings and me."

In return, Gittle revealed more to him than she did to any of them. She was a generational Maiden who was to lead Preisen through her family lineage. "I'm still learning," she said.

"What more learning do you need?" Rüfus said. "You should have seen her attack the darkness with her dagger."

Gittle smiled. "There are girls who are much better at this than me. That's why I volunteered to go. Maiden Trini was hesitant, but my mother convinced her since we Maidens learn best on the field."

"And are you disappointed?" Zorn said. "In finding us?"

"You two differ greatly from other Children of Rima," Gittle admitted, head tilting sideways. "From the way you behave, my mother would call you the fungus that molds fresh bread."

"I'm curious what she would call Lucan," Elene chimed. "Unbearable stink jar, perhaps?"

Gittle knocked her head back and spilled a laugh.

Lucan's eyes shot at Elene. Instead of that irritated look, she trapped him with her smile and warm dark eyes. He soon dropped his gaze and peered at his boots. Was she joking? Or was he forgiving her by thinking she was?

Wein had one eye open, looking at him. He must have thought he would say something to dig at Elene for her comments.

"We're not the best of folk," Oscern said, remaining open-minded about their companions. "Having lost our village so young and not settling with adoptive parents, we may have picked up some bad habits. But each of us has dreams and goals we wish to achieve."

Zorn chuckled. "I'm sorry, Oscern, but marrying some run-of-the-mill sex worker is not exactly a goal."

"Skiar." Lucan covered his face. "You just had to say it like that."

"What?"

"That was overkill, and you know it."

"Well *excuse* me, but you're no better, or have you forgotten about what you said to that one at Arrow Den?"

"Shut it, both of you." Oscern was popping his knuckles as if showing what he could do to them. "If you two dimwits must know, Delilah had a rough upbringing. She ran away from home at fifteen

because her parents tried to marry her off to a wealthy old man. She worked a decent job before the men she met along the way filled her with lies and promises. In the end, she ended up alone and with three mouths to feed."

"Story as old as time," Zorn whispered under his breath.

"What I'm trying to say is everyone paints their own story, and sometimes that brush is in someone else's control. In the end, we make decisions we're not proud of, fall into potholes we can't get out of, but don't think for a second any one of you is walking with a white canvas."

A sudden jerk left them bobbing their heads and shifting them to the back of the wagon.

"Nobody moves!" exclaimed Zorn, peering under everyone's boots. "I lost a silver coin."

Rüfus and Pete immediately jumped off the wagon. Lucan went to his feet for a closer look. The area was marked by the dead. A group of travelers was scattered on the road, their mutilated bodies left to rot under the sun.

CHAPTER 22

LUCAN

"Just go through them," Rüfus whispered, sword already out. "Nice and slow."

Gittle had her hand on Elene's arm. Remaining as still as possible. The wagon remained exactly where the horses stopped.

"Hey," Pete said softly. "It's alright, just move the wagons back and steer around."

Lucan got off the wagon and marched ahead, hand firmly on the hilt of his sword. The ground was a pool of blood. Whatever cut these poor folks dragged them and, by the drops, flung them across.

Elene's breathing quickened. Gittle gave her shoulder a little shake, but it didn't help. It was the blood, the sight of seeing the dead so recently after her first kill.

"Elene, are you alright?" Wein asked.

She gasped and wiped her face. "Y-yeah… sorry, I got something in my eye, and I was trying to get it out." She rolled her shoulders and eased the horse's back as Pete suggested.

The scene really got to her.

"We should clear the bodies." Oscern's weight eased the wagon's burden. "You two scout the back in case the assailants are still here."

"Good idea," said Rüfus.

"On it," Pete said.

Lucan peered at the wagon. Zorn was still lying down, eyes dropping from being drowsy. "Come on, get up," he said.

Zorn yawned and turned. "Let's just go. I'm sure a bunch of thieves did it. They must be gone by now if the loot is gone."

"We still have work to do," he said, tapping his boot. "Get off your ass."

"Leave me alone!"

"You're acting like a fool," he said, marching ahead, sword out. Fior snorted as he passed him. He stopped and petted his shoulder. "It's alright."

Oscern wasted no time. He grabbed the abdomen and carefully dragged it off the road, apologizing. The guts and organs came out gushing and leaving a trail.

The moment Lucan grabbed the cold dead hands, the touch of death crawled up his spine. He dropped the arm and pressed his hand to his chest, watching his vision blur in and out.

"Lucan," Oscern's voice was muffled. "Lucan!"

The noise of the Bamboo Forest returned. He rolled his shoulders and took the hand again, and dragged the body away. One by one, the limbs were put to the side. With each area that was cleared, Elene slowly guided the horses forward.

"Poor bastards," Oscern said. "Look at their fists, clenched tightly by surprise before they were cut."

"It's because of the stupid war." Lucan moved a torso, dragging a lot of the spilled innards. "If this gets any worse, Vine Road will become a raider's den."

The look of fear in her eyes hadn't left, and her grip on the reigns was shaky. This was his fault. His words pushed Elene to leave Arrow Den and run into that bastard.

"Elene," he said while moving a leg from her view. "Remember how delicious that roasted duck was?"

Elene blinked, her focus moving to him. "Yeah."

"Why did you like it so much?"

"I was hungry," she said in that irritated tone. Her shoulders dropped, and she took a deep breath. "Well… besides that, I liked the sauce. It was sweet and tangy."

"When we go to Vinol, I'll treat you to the same dish and others if you're up for it."

She nodded again, her focus narrowed on the road as the wagon went into motion.

The rest of the bamboo forest was clear, and the open road breezed through. There were no suspicious trails when they left the

forest, just like there weren't any when they entered. The assailants weren't waiting for them inside.

"See any traders nearby?" Rüfus asked. "I'm hungry."

"The place is clear," Elene said.

There was not much to spare on the road. Zorn was hoarding his supplies, and Oscern was running low from sharing his own supplies with the group.

"If those traders weren't killed, we would have had something to eat," Pete said.

"Or we could have encountered what the hell got them." Zorn took a bite of his apple. The bastard had heart, but he had cut himself from having any sympathy for strangers.

Vine Road was empty, and for a moment, it felt like they were the only ones in Pleada. The day still had some light to give, and he would like to cover some more ground.

"I think it's time we discuss what Maiden Trini shared in Preisen," Lucan said.

"Ah yes." Zorn winked at him because he couldn't include himself. "Just hearing that one of us transformed into some lunatic has been leaving me antsy."

Wein glanced at Pete with a wincing look. "How much do you know of Rima's fight with Murella?"

"Murella was defeated," said Oscern. "Rima's victory calmed the maelstrom of the world's ending."

Wein nodded. "When we told Maiden Trini that her son viciously attacked my sister. She asked me the same thing."

"His name was Greison," Elene said.

"Yes," Gittle supported. "Greison."

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to be insensitive." Wein rubbed the back of his neck. "My headspace still isn't exactly there."

"What we witnessed in Preisen still frightens my core." Pete was wiping his dagger, furrowing at the sleek shine. "Greison was dead, but the Maidens surrounding him were performing an exorcism. We didn't understand until Maiden Trini explained only…"

"Out with it," said Zorn.

Wein took a deep breath. "Maiden Trini believes Rima didn't return to the heavens with the sole purpose of easing Pleada's calamity. She was passing her power to folks like Gittle and you

because Murella may still walk Pleada. The world's ending wasn't stopped. Rather, it was put on pause."

"Murella is dead," said Zorn. "Every scripture I read said she was defeated. Not one Rima village we visited says otherwise."

"Well, defeated is a vague word," said Rüfus.

"And what do you explain of what happened to Aelith?" Pete added a heavy worry in his voice. "The slaughter and dislocation of Rima's Orphaned?"

Lucan leaned back and exhaled. Oscern and Zorn were slowly shaking their heads. They were in disbelief, and he knew why. When Aelith fell, there was no Murella, just a monster who could be a loyal follower of the Demon of the Deep.

"What does that have any connection to Murella?" Oscern said. "Rima's Orphaned witnessed was a beast, not a woman."

Wein rubbed his light beard, looking more sick than serious about what he was going to say next. "They believe it may have to do with the Fallen, or in this case, why some who were said to have been deceased have risen."

"Skiar," said Zorn.

"Anyway, that's all the High Maiden to say. It seemed she wanted to be careful and seemed eager to find any Child of Rima to find out what you possibly knew. That's why when we told her we were taking Lucan to Mudburrow, she asked for your presence. But enough of that, that's why we're heading back to Preisen, why I'm invested in finding out more."

For the night, the fire was set. Only the tents, an iron pot, and a few logs were all that remained from the robbery on Indigo Street.

Wein, who slept on the road, was wide awake, hand pressed gently against his stitches. Zorn ate the loaf of bread he had brought along, chewing while watching the fire. Oscern broke his and shared it with everyone, giving Gittle the bigger piece. For a man who couldn't feel pain, he had a big heart. It was just a reminder to him that Delilah was blind or had taken for granted the kind of father he could be for her children, and Oscern only thought of the risks.

Rüfus grumbled as he dug into his bag and grabbed his bottle of wine. He raised it towards the stars. "To the kid. Skiar knows you proved your worth—wish you knew I teased you because I admired you." He gave it a hard drink and passed it to Pete.

Pete raised it next. "We miss you already, pal, and don't worry about your family."

Wein barely held the bottle. His eyes were glossy as he looked up. "You were your family's pride, and the only brother Corie had. You were the youngest in our group, but you always wanted to be around us. What you did was brave, but if you're hearing me now, Gourd. I'm sorry." He gave the bottle a swig and passed it to Elene.

Elene smiled at the bottle. "Don't worry about Corie. I won't break my promise." She drank it and went to give the bottle to him. Lucan almost couldn't take it.

"Umm." What was he supposed to say? "You were the level-headed one who had the most kindness in the group." Lucan gave it a hard swish and exhaled. The little hands for the bottle were Gittle's. Her furrowed eyebrows and fingers curled for the bottle bringing him to glance at the others.

"I'm not too sure about that," Oscern said.

Lucan gave her the bottle anyway.

"Those who pass on to the light stay in the light." She gave it a drink, squirming after the flavor.

There was only the farmland ahead. Little private roads stretched for miles, leading into tiny towns he never cared to visit. Most of the plot was divided into strips where field workers plowed the land. The soil was light, with oxen pulling the plow. Even as the sky ambered, they sang their folk songs, working the field until dusk.

Several women looked up at them as they passed. They smiled, not once breaking their lyrical tune.

Elene hummed along until they were no longer in sight. The language in her hums was bland, and there was no message to translate, but the tune was nice to his ears.

From a distance was a jingle. Four horses pulling a red wagon. The wood was colored red with a green top. Yellow trinkets of flowery designs marked the front. Five more followed behind. It was a caravan of Gypsians.

Elene moved the horses to the side, giving them more than enough room for them to pass.

The leader was a tall man with a broad build. His black beard was braided down to his chest. He sported a green top hat with a red feather in the back. Up close, their wagon was grand and twice the size of Wein's.

"At last." Rüfus waved at them. "Hey, wait!"

The leader whistled, which made the others stop. There's no doubt about it. These groups of men were from the Red Guild.

"Excuse us," Pete said. "We're looking to make some purchases."

The leader grumbled, gloves slowly gripping his reins when he looked at Fior and Ivory. "Sorry, but with the war so close, this season is not a great time for Vine Road prices. Our business will do better in Mudburrow."

His voice left Wein to grip his merchant hat. He placed it on his head and heaved to sit up. Elene asked him to remain still, but on his own, Wein got to his feet, winning the leader's attention.

"Hey, Ahmok."

The leader seeing him, scratched his beard. "Wein Harrow." He snapped his fingers and whistled three times. "You look like shit." Other Gypsians with red feathered hats got off and opened the side of their wagon, pulling a table and chair to open their business. "The Vine Road price with a discount for a friend in the trade."

"You know him?" Elene asked, a small smile on her face for the leader.

"We were stall neighbors in Lyrin Town. He initiated me to the Red Guild," Wein said, holding his side. "Ahmok. Be wary of the road ahead. The Bamboo Forest has corpses… and in Mudburrow… we lost a friend, and I nearly saw my last days there."

Ahmok took his grey gloves off and stretched his thick fingers. "Mudburrow is a trader's dream and hell." He got off his seat and climbed down. "But tell me what you found inside Bamboo Forest."

Wein's legs wobbled, causing Rüfus to get off and help him back down.

"I'll fill your friend in," Oscern said. "You sit before you move something that you shouldn't."

Wein wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Maybe later, but first, I just need to relieve myself."

Rüfus went to help him find some privacy.

Oscern donated what he had, deciding to trust Elene on what they needed for the road. Zorn didn't even spare a copper. He didn't want to part with a single coin, not caring to remember he had eaten the leftovers Elene shared from the Glass Crane.

As the sun started to sink, Lucan leaned against the wagon, watching Elene, Gittle, and Pete go from trader to trader.

When Wein returned, Ahmok was waiting for him. "I got a syrup that will help you with that pain. In the meantime, I need to know everything that happened to you while you were attacked. We will need to report it to the Guild Members."

Wein frowned. "Ahmok, I don't want to cause trouble."

"If you were a single trader, that would make sense, but you're one of us. You may not be Gypsian, but we take care of our own." Ahmok helped Wein to his wagon, where they talked from prying ears.

Lucan used the change from the inn to buy some salted blocks from an old man. There was no point in looking at the others coinless. When he returned, Elene was back. Pete and Gittle stayed back to look at little trinkets, beaded necklaces, and earrings.

Now they had food for the rest of the journey, turnips, tomatoes, carrots, and potatoes, a few dozen eggs, a fresh set of knives, a cutting board, and wicker baskets to store the vegetables. The iron pots were of the few things that weren't stolen, so there was no point in replacing them.

Elene was on her tippy toes pushing the items in as far as she could. He thought she needed help climbing on until she grabbed the ledge, pressed her boot on the wheel, and holstered herself up.

Seeing everyone busy, he went instead to Ivory and Fior. He broke the salted block in half and offered it to them both. "Thanks for sticking with us this far," he said. "Oscern weighs like an ox, and with Rüfus in the back, it probably didn't help to push those two along."

"Lucan," Oscern said.

Lucan jumped, thinking he heard him, but he was calling him over to Wein and Ahmok. He spun, chest nearly bumping into Elene's. She reeled back, eyes wide at him standing so close.

Normally he would turn the other way, but he felt relieved she was nearby, staring at him as she did in the inn.

"Watch where you're going, Little Heathen," he said with a grin.

Surprised by the eyes, she smiled. "*You* watch where you're going, Killer."

"Here," he said, giving her the other salted block. "I don't think they were finished."

Ahmok was covered in heavy grey garments, and his muscular arms bulged when they crossed. He carried a long frown, hair braided to the side, and his red-feathered hat differed slightly from Wein's. The tip was dipped in gold paint.

Instead of introducing them, Wein shared Ahmok had run into some dangerous encounters. "He saw corpses," he said quietly this time. "Walking around at night, killing travelers."

Ahmok nodded, his voice bellowing. "Be cautious in the dark, especially in these regions."

"We heard that story before in Lyrin Town. Are you sure you saw the undead and not some lunatic?"

Ahmok grumbled. "To us Gypsians, the road pulses in our very veins, but Vine Road beats like my own heart, and this region between Mudburrow and Lotter's Mountain has become a grim place marked by shadow and death."

To keep the road to Preisen close, the camp was set in an open meadow. Ahmok said to steer from forests, and Wein was not taking the chance.

As the light was fading, Oscern and Pete volunteered to keep a lookout. Rüfus went into bed for his early nap before his turn, and Gittle was just as alert, scoping the place. Wein got tired of the wagon and asked to be allowed to rest on the ground. He leaned his back against the wagon's wheel, facing the fire. The useless one was Zorn, who lay on his back, one foot raised over his other knee.

The clatter of pots and knives that came from Elene was likely her usual clumsiness, but there was a chance she was just as tense as everyone, feverishly mixing and glancing at her brother to make sure he was fine.

"I'm hungry!" Zorn said. "Cooking maid, hurry up!"

Elene gave him a snapping look that won a chuckle from him. Wein gave Zorn a threatening stare and shut his eyes after. He often helped her with the heavy lifting when Elene needed it. There was no point in waiting for Zorn to get his ass up, and Gourd, who often volunteered to help her, was no longer with them.

Lucan left his post and went to her. The drop tailgate was lowered so she could do her prep for the meal without hurting her back. With little light to spare, she moved with speed, chopping the potatoes into cubes.

"You're going to pop a vein if you let Zorn get to you," he said.

She shrugged and went to grab the handle of the cast iron pot, but Lucan took it instead. Seeing this, Elene took what little space remained, but his grip didn't loosen.

"I got it," she said, blinking profusely but refusing to look at him.

"Elene, leave it to me."

Her stare fell to the floor, but she slowly drew her hands back. He carried it to the fire and hung it over the iron hook.

Elene returned with the wooden spoon, nearly touching his shoulder as she sprinkled some herbs and mixed them. Seeing her close again brought him back to that night at the Glass Crane. The flame illuminated her dark eyes, allowing the brown shade around her irises to glow.

Back at her workstation, Lucan peeled the eggs while she chopped the cabbage. He felt her stare a few times, but he pretended he didn't notice. Those eggshells were stubborn to get off. After he finished the last one, Elene scooped some coarse salt.

"What are you doing with that?"

"Pouring it into the soup," she said.

He took her hand and took it instead. "I got it." He feared she would trip into the fire or tip the iron pot and get burned. Skiar, why did he imagine that? He went to the flame and tossed salt into the soup.

"What's that smell?" Wein asked.

"Cabbage and potato soup." Elene started setting the wooden spoons and bowls aside.

For the remainder of the night, Lucan volunteered to keep watch so everyone could eat. Aside from Rüfus's snoring, there was the clang of the spoon and bowls.

"Hey, Lucan, aren't you eating?" Zorn asked.

"No," he said, staring into the night.

"Why not?"

"I'm not hungry." Elene and him long established an agreement that anything she cooked, he wouldn't touch. Like it happened with no warning, a jab in his chest left him touching the ache.

"Lucan?" He clenched his jaw, taken by her voice. Elene was wide-eyed, staring at his chest. "It still hurts?"

"Sorta," he lied.

"Here." At this angle, it was hard to see, but she had offered him a bowl of soup.

"What's this for?"

She shrugged. "You need to eat."

"But I thought."

"You helped." She placed the bowl in his hand. "It wouldn't sit well in my conscious if I just let you starve." When she made her way back to the campfire, she halted, nearly bumping into Oscern. Apologizing, she hurried back.

Oscern's colored eyes glowed as he observed him. "Maybe we should ask Gittle to treat you. Then you wouldn't be suffering."

"No," he grunted. "Too risky."

"Have your new friends suspected you?"

"Not in the slightest."

Oscern glanced at the sleeping Wein. "I was skeptical at first, but they seem like fine folk."

"Their village is a little nestling place. I like the place. Hell, I think I want to live there."

Oscern gave him a sly smirk. "I was wondering why you got along with them so well."

"Once you see their oak tree, you'll understand." Lucan rubbed the sore area once more.

"Oscern, Lucan," said Zorn. "I hear something… murmuring from afar." His feet elevated from the ground, alarming the others.

Pete and Rüfus went to guard Wein and Elene. Gittle's had her dagger in hand, eyes wide open.

Lucan kept his sword steady, surveying the darkness at what could snarl at them.

"Show yourself," Zorn said, circling the camp. "Come on, I want to know if the dead can come back from the grave."

A pair of white eyes flickered in the night before it faded. Zorn stopped right away. He fell quiet as the rest.

"Great job, you just pissed them off," Lucan said.

"Not as pissed off as I'm with you," he grumbled. "You stole my coins, imprisoned us to this Skiar awful wagon trail, far from the city, from anything nice!"

"Enough, you two!" Oscern's alarming voice startled them.

Another pair of white eyes came from behind, shoulders slanted, head bobbing.

Pete cursed. The other that vanished reappeared, manifesting behind them, eyes blinding white. His gurgling throat spilled streams of black liquid from his lips. Fior and Ivory pulled back and neighed. Seeing the figure come for them, they picked up their hooves and fled.

Elene cried for them to come back, but as she was about to run after them, Wein grabbed the hem of her skirt. "Don't you dare," he panted. "You don't know what's out there."

Gittle was beside him, dagger raised toward the darkness. "I don't understand," she panted. "This isn't the shadows of darkness that attacked us before. This is something different."

CHAPTER 23

LUCAN

A shadow swept through the camp, nearly missing Zorn's blade. A man in a long purple coat swung his arm around, causing a dark film joined by tiny glowing light to film over them.

Rüfus and Pete charged at him, but the man was fast. The weapons clanked and sparked, but they were not hitting his blade. In return, his kicks sent them to the floor. As the blade came down, Lucan swept in and blocked it with his sword, causing a spark between the metal.

"Get him!" Zorn shouted.

Before the blade moved back, Lucan raised his blade against it and forced his opponent off. The sword returned with a whooshing force but he parried it. In safeguarding his swing, he forwarded the same strength. Once he understood the enemy's limit, the exchanges started to fasten, leaving sparks as they shifted back and forth.

From his peripheral, Pete was about to join in, but Oscern held him back. "You don't want to get in his way."

As the exchange started to speed up every second, the attacker started a different method, counteracting his blade when he got the change. His left foot inched him, and the sword came across, the direction ready to cross his chest.

Lucan leaped back, and when the arm reached its length, he dove in, steel reverberating against his. The flurry of the motion quickened, leaving only sparks of light against the dark.

"Look at him go!" Rüfus said. "Take him down Lucan!"

The man drew back, and his hair fell over his dark and narrow eyebrows. "Lucan?" he said. "Friend?"

That voice. It couldn't be.

The man took a few steps back, keeping a safe distance from him, and moved his cloak back, revealing his face.

"Caydon," Lucan said. "What in Skiar are you doing here?"

"I'd like to ask you the same thing." He nodded at Zorn and Oscern, quickly acknowledging them. "It looks like you met your friends. I apologize for my reaction, but your group came at me without giving me a chance to explain."

"And you're…" Zorn asked.

"The name's Caydon. I'm a Child of Rima." The man pulled out his gloves, showing a glowing ring on his middle finger. "Of course, I'm not one of the dead. Speaking of them…"

The grunting pale-skinned bodies growled, searching, sniffing for them but not leaving, almost like they knew they were nearby. Their hunched and long arms swayed side to side as they walked around the campsite, not once interested in going through.

"Your ability." Zorn sheathed his swords. "It's some form of concealment, isn't it?"

"Since the cat's out of the bag, yes, I can repress the awareness of just about anything through suppression of all senses. The barrier also serves as a shield." Caydon crouched closely to inspect the moving corpses. "Anyway, as long as you stay in my circle, we're safe."

Wein grunted to his feet. "Then I guess that means there's more of them." Elene helped steady her brother's balance, her focus looking to see where Fior and Ivory went.

"You've run into them before?" Caydon took out his pipe and gave it a few pats on his palm. "Then I suppose no one is safe."

"Mind explaining?" Pete said.

Caydon peered at the diabolic creatures, their lame posture shifting back and forth. "Remember how I shared that I was traveling with a group of friends? Here they are. These men are my comrades."

"Children of Rima?" Lucan whispered. "No… not again. I… I don't understand."

"That's what Greison looked like." Elene's voice lifted the focus to her. "Those shards of black glass, he had them protruding from his skin after he tried to take me."

Caydon frowned. "Who attacked you?"

"It's a long story," said Wein. "But seeing them again, walking, I feel terrible for not believing my sister sooner."

"My friends were taken by something that rotted their bodies from the inside out. Though they are gone, they have kept Rima's powers, bearing the strength to tear limbs." After seeing the scared Gittle, Caydon grew silent, observing the little girl. "Are you… a Maiden?"

Gittle stepped back a bit but nodded.

Caydon went to one knee. "Maiden of Rima, can you do an exorcism on my friends and put them to rest?"

"Is that why you haven't killed them?" Oscern asked.

"No, they can't be killed. Their skin may look like tarnished leather. Not even the sword can damage them. Their body will eventually fuse back, looking worse than before."

"I thought an exorcism was just for those possessed by an evil spirit," Zorn said. "A sickness caused by darkness or a curse."

"An exorcism can also take away Rima's powers and send them back to Skiar, but something is tying them here."

Gittle sniffled, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Forgive me. I hadn't learned exorcism yet." She covered her face and whimpered. "Is that… is that how Greison was going to look if he remained in the waterfall? All on his own?"

"Gittle, come here," Elene called. The little maiden ran and went into Elene's arms. "Don't think about that, alright? Nobody expects you to fix this on your own."

"She should rest," said Wein. "This is too much for her."

"I agree," said Oscern, turning to the tent. "Is that man still snoring?"

"He probably emptied his bottle of wine before bed," said Pete.

For the night, Elene took Gittle to bed. Caydon took his place by the fire and stuffed his tobacco into his pipe. He promised everyone they didn't need to keep watch under his barrier.

"Your powers don't wear out?" Zorn asked. "Not that I plan to share my weakness, but levitating from the ground can be tiring after a mile."

"Oh, my powers activate by my mere will. No expenses are required on my part."

"Huh," said Zorn.

When Elene got out, she froze again at the sight of the undead walking around. Her focus then shifted to Caydon. Despite the fright, she worked a warm smile for him. "Your skin looks better."

Caydon smiled back. "And I'm glad I got to see you again."

Lucan cleared his throat. "What are you doing here, anyway?" His heart was beating fast. "How did this all happen, and what does it all mean?"

Caydon scratched his facial hair. It had been growing since they last met. The puffs of his smoke covered his eyes. "My reason for coming to the Northern was to find that answer to what happened to my friends. Mason was the first one we lost. If you recall, he was the one who could go through walls." The undead Caydon pointed at was more of a hollow skeleton who wore a green, torn coat. "At first, we thought it was the fever since it had made him delirious. So much that we had to tie him down. Mason's partner, Lily, who was a Maiden, was the first one to suggest we perform an exorcism. But the others were unsure. Exorcisms are powerful and painful to the one it's performed on. Some have died by the torture, and since we didn't know what Mason was going through, we didn't have his consent. But the following night, we woke up and found Mason missing. He had gotten out of his ropes, but they looked like they were untied by Lily. She was dead, strangled to death by his own hands. A few days later, my friend Rowan started to suffer the same fever. His gift to turn any liquid into purified water turned into a slimy substance that glowed green."

"Hell, if this is some contagion, then we need to get away from them," said Zorn.

Caydon shook his head. "I'm sorry, but running away is even more dangerous."

"Look, I've seen my share of troubles to believe in the undead walking, but undead Children of Rima? What if we're already infected? Gittle here could be..."

"Maidens cannot be infected," said Caydon. "Their bodies are bathed in light, that's how they can draw light out their daggers, and we cannot. Since I've been traveling, I haven't run into a Maiden fall under, and Lily, who spent more time trying to treat Mason, had no symptoms. As I've said, you all remain safe under my veil, but we'll have to wait until daylight. Before dawn, my rotting comrades will leave and hide where darkness lingers."

"This…this is maddening!" Zorn got up and went to confront the hollow faces. "What are you looking at, you pieces of hornshits!" The two undead snarled as if they sensed him near.

Elene got up after and looked in the opposite directions, where Ivory and Fior fled.

"Elene… don't step out." Caydon was nearly half getting up. "You'll agitate them."

"Our horses are still out there… is there any way we can get them?"

"I'm sorry gorgeous, but it's not worth a try."

"But—" Elene grew closer to the barrier.

"Are you daft woman!" Zorn stomped towards her and pulled her back in. "Do you want to get mauled by them? See which of their gifts will cut you open?"

"Let go of me. You have no right to touch me."

"I will as soon as you stop worrying about your stupid lil' horses. We have worldly problems at hand, but of course, this must mean nothing to you."

Seeing he hadn't let go, Elene smacked his shoulders. "Release me!"

Zorn inched closer. "And what is a heathen like you going to do about it?"

Just as Oscern and Wein were about to move in, Caydon grabbed Zorn's shoulder and pulled him away, making him stumble back. "Easy, friend, you're frightening her."

"Why you…" Before Zorn straightened himself, Wein took his shoulder and moved him back. His other leg was out, causing him to trip and fall on his back.

"You son of a bitch!" Zorn climbed back to his feet. Just as his fist raised against Wein, Oscern took it.

"Easy there," he said. "Your mouth did it."

"Listen here." Wein wasn't finished with him. "I will share no patience with you like I have for Lucan. You say one more mean comment or agitate my sister, I'll leave you on this road."

"You hornshit."

"The hornshit is you. You're not even worth being the flea off the back of a feral dog, and you're supposed to be a Child of Rima."

Zorn laughed, untouched by his comment. "Sorry, I didn't meet your standards."

"Wein," Elene said, taking his arm. "It's okay. He's not worth you reopening your wounds."

Wein hobbled back and moved from Zorn. In anger, Zorn pushed Oscern but only moved him an inch before he left the fireplace and sat on the opposite side, back facing them.

"Quite the drama queen, isn't he?" Caydon sat back down by the fire. He started cleaning his pipe again, probably prepping it for another smoke.

"Please excuse him," Oscern told Wein. "He doesn't take bad news lightly."

"Just don't let him do this again," said Wein. Elene was still on her feet, nervously twirling her hair tassel. "Are you going to join us?"

"I can't. I need something to do." She went to the chaos of bowls and spoons and started to pick them up.

The night felt like the stretch of winter, endless and cold. The dead's groans and moans kept them restless. From the looks of it, nobody but Rüfus and Gittle were going to sleep.

"Got any water to spare?" Caydon asked. "I got some coffee if you men fancy having a drink."

"I'll prepare it," Elene said from the wagon.

"Thanks, gorgeous." Caydon ignored the brother's stare and focused instead on him. "And you, you're quite a swordsman, aren't you?"

"Mercenary work," he answered.

"Is that why you were holding back?" Caydon said with a sly smile.

"Oh, you mean like you were?" The fight was brief, but he noticed Caydon had a limp about him. "Your scars are gone, but you don't look any better."

Caydon explained to everyone the whole ordeal of staying near the undead was to keep them from attacking other people, but that also put him in dangerous confrontations with robbers, murderers, and animals that could put his life in jeopardy. "I'd have lasted more if I had more energy," he said. "Can't recall the last time I ate."

Hearing this, Elene went to the wagon. By her focus alone, he already knew what she was going to do.

As smoke came out from his nostrils, Caydon's gaze followed Elene. If she went one way, his stare was behind her. It was starting to annoy him that other men could do the same, and he couldn't stop them.

"You can't keep herding your friends around," said Oscern, "what you're doing is too perilous for one man to do alone."

Caydon looked at the fire. "It's not something I thought I would do for long. I've been tracking Mason and Rowan for three months, losing them here and there until they led me to the Northern. Think the battle with Vinol and Avery brought them here." He exhaled, releasing more smoke from his nostrils. "But I'm not alone. I meant it when I said I was looking for my friend, but I haven't been able to find him in Nemdrin, so I've been keeping these guys occupied circling back to Nemdrin in hopes he was just delayed."

"And who might he be?"

"His name is David. You'll find his Riman power remarkable. He can create copies of himself and teleport from one location to another at least a dozen times."

"Damn!" Zorn shouted for them to hear. "And here I thought *someone* had better powers."

"Why aren't you with him?" Lucan asked, ignoring his jabbing words.

Caydon dropped his elbows on his thigh and slouched. "Forgive me, but I lied about something. David and I were from Estiria, the Riman village Avery destroyed. That's where it started, where talk of the undead became a rumor all over Hacelen."

"And your friend? What does he know?"

"David isn't a people person, but he could seek better answers by reaching more Riman villages. Meanwhile, I do what I know best, and that's keeping Mason and Rowan in line."

"And here we are," said Oscern. "Do you think perhaps Skiar brought us together?"

"I'd say it was just a stupid coincidence." Caydon gave Lucan a slap on the back. "If this Riman hadn't approached me outside of Lyrin Town, I wouldn't have befriended them when our paths crossed again in Lotter's Mountain. But seeing how things are now, Skiar blessed you two with this one."

"Oh sure!" Zorn shot back. "A mighty annoying blessing that steals coin purses."

"Go suck a toe," Lucan said. "Caydon, is it possible that my friends are corrupted and don't know it?"

Before Caydon could answer, Elene gave him the soup. He smiled wider, and his cheeks bloomed red. "You are too good to me."

"And you saved me again," she answered. "I'll come back with your drink."

Lucan rubbed his chest. That discomforting feeling was back, and it came whenever those two conversed.

"The reason I trust you two aren't corrupted is because of your Maiden." Caydon moved the spoon around and scooped the content into his mouth. "If any of you were corrupted, me included, your Maiden would have sensed it."

The night persisted with the aroma of potato soup, coffee, and smoke lingering around them. Pete was nodding off, rubbing his eyes to stop it, but he lost the battle when he said he was going to rest his eyes for a bit. Wein had the coffee, but he hardly sipped it, staring at the fire, saying little. Oscern was on his feet, keeping watch, despite Caydon's assurances.

"Listen, I think our encounter is more than just reuniting. Why don't you join us to Preisen," said Lucan. "The Maiden there would want to talk to you."

"The thought crossed my mind the moment you told me your destination, David could be there, but I have to keep these guys occupied and stop them from killing more innocent people. I was in Maycove before this and could barely get out. People are stuck there, taking refuge as Vinolian and Averyan forces are bringing the war there."

"Again?" Lucan rubbed his temple. He thought Vinol had the upper hand, drawing the war south. If they start seeing that Children of Rima can be corrupted, they could turn on them next.

After another hour, Wein was fast asleep. Rüfus was still snoring, and Pete had napped, but he was awake and chatted with Oscern. Zorn had to be asleep. No posture of laying sideways with his head resting on his hand would convince him otherwise.

Worst of all, the undead lingered, corruption in the flesh. Their sunken cheeks, their clothes were torn, all the color gone either by wear or whatever corrupted them.

Elene was one of the restless members. She climbed the wagon and sat on the tailgate to watch the moons. Lucan stared until he saw Caydon grab his blanket and mug of coffee. Elene jumped when he placed his blanket over her shoulders. She had crossed her arms but unfolded them after five minutes of sitting together.

Alone by the fireplace, Lucan observed them. When he offered his mug, she took it.

Whatever they were sharing in conversation, he couldn't hear. Between the pause of breath Rüfus had between his snores, he saw their lips moving but nothing more. It seems Caydon had blocked their conversation completely.

From what he observed, Elene would smile and nod, and Caydon would cross his arms like he was the insecure one.

Elene's back straightened. He was sure of it by how her tassel rocked. She then spun back. As Lucan realized she was looking directly at him, she turned back. Caydon, who watched, chuckled and went back to talking to her.

What the hell was that? Bothered but unwilling to approach them, he leaned back and stared at the vast endless stars. His mother used to say each star represented a soul taking place among the celestial realms. Taking the necklace, he held it against the sky. His father could have been around more and shared with her any fears she may have had but couldn't tell him. Instead, he gave her the luxurious necklace to make up for their lost time. His mother hoped he would pass the necklace to the person he wanted to spend his best moments with but for what? Why watch a spouse age like his father when celestials lived long lives?

The chilly morning had come, and the dead were gone. The birds chirped among the shifting, swaying branches. Underneath the shade were Fior and Ivory. They didn't go far and were tied back on the wagon.

Caydon was studying the ground, seeing where his comrades had gone to find refuge from the light. He was still talking to Elene, showing her how he tracked his friends.

"It's an arduous task, I'll tell you that much."

"It sounds like it." Her voice sounded like how she talked to Wein or her father, bright and cheery. "You'll be alright, won't you?"

"Now I have to," he said in a teasing tone. "Don't want to worry you."

"Elene," her brother said. "Come on."

"Coming!" She didn't leave but offered her hand for him to take. "It was nice talking to you."

Caydon took it, taking only the fingertips and kissing her hand. Elene's tanned face was red as she walked back to the wagon. When she looked up, she saw he was staring at her. The blush faded, and she firmly returned to the wagon.

"Still think she's a toothache?" Caydon was standing next to him, watching her climb into the driver's seat.

Before he could say a word, a grumpy Zorn hollered at him to hurry up. "We can see you two have the hots for each other. Just kiss already so we can hit the road!"

"Just for that, you're waiting longer!" Lucan shouted.

Caydon chuckled. "You have great friends, really."

"Who likes to be a pain in the ass."

Caydon had a familiar fabric tucked into the pocket of his coat. A handkerchief with sunflowers that belonged to that Little Heathen, and she allowed him to keep it? The hole he had on his sleeve was stitched by the same yellow thread she carried in her belt.

"Why did you ask me that?" Lucan asked.

"Hmm?"

"About Elene being a toothache?"

Caydon smiled and placed the food she had wrapped for him in his bag. "Because you looked like a lame duck when I got near her." Lucan scoffed. "Oh? Did I hit the nail on the head?"

"She doesn't have that effect on me."

"Yeah? I caught you staring at us all night. I bet you're dying to know what we chatted about."

Lucan rubbed his nose. "Whatever you thought you saw, you misunderstood. I noticed you two got along quick. It took me this entire journey and back for us to agree on some things."

Caydon gave the pocket with the handkerchief a little pat. "Some people get along easier than others. Especially when the attraction is natural and mutual like she and me."

"Then I'm glad she found her match."

"Didn't know someone could say that with gritting teeth."

"I was not—"

"Unlike you, I have to take advantage of these short encounters with her. Don't want to lose my chance."

"As if I want any chance with that klutz."

"Oh right, you two got some wild history, killer versus heathen, right?"

"There is no versus. That Little Heathen wanted to push me into the river while I bled to death."

Caydon hurled a laugh. "Was that before she dug her elbow into your wound?"

She told him that? "Before." Caydon grabbed Lucan's shoulder as he heaved for air. "Oh, you go on and laugh. It didn't happen to you after all."

"Lucan," Oscern was calling him now. "We really need to go."

"Here." Lucan returned the flask he once gave him. "It's not the strong stuff, but I got a refill at Arrow Den."

Caydon took it and smiled at it. "Perhaps when I'm done chasing the dead, we can all enjoy a nice cold beer—that would be nice, wouldn't it?"

"I'll hold you to it. No more running into each other like this."

"That's a promise."

CHAPTER 24

LUCAN

The melodic songs of the maidens rang as Preisen's gates opened. Maiden Trini came in her armor, her long dress flowing underneath. Standing beside her was the other Maiden who left Gittle in their care. Gittle hopped right off and ran to her, hands raised to her like any child. Her mother smiled, opened her arms, and embraced her.

"Thank you for keeping her safe," she told Wein.

"I promised I would keep an eye on her."

"Mama," Gittle said. "I need to know how to do an exorcism."

The mother frowned, eyes blinking. "Goodness Gittle, why the sudden interest? You're too young."

"A lot happened on the road. We will explain on the way to the temple," Pete said. "But we brought the Children of Rima you asked for."

Maiden Trini looked at Zorn and Oscern. She was studying their light. They could tell them apart with a glance without needing to look at the mark on their finger. "Come inside," she said, turning to Elene and him. "You two may wait for our return."

"No, not this time," Lucan said. "I need to know what's going on and why."

"Your friends will inform you once we are done."

"Lucan is a faithful Riman," said Oscern. "It's been the three of us for a long time, and we would like for it to remain that way."

The High Maiden's apprehensive look didn't falter. "Gittle, what do you know of this man?"

"Lucan?" she asked, turning to him. "He is a little mean, but I trust him."

"And the woman?"

"Don't bother answering Gittle." Elene moved the horses to the resting stables. "I want nothing to do with Riman concerns."

"Sister," Wein said. "Maybe you should come inside."

"Not a chance. I'm sure you won't need my insight on any conversation you'll be sharing."

"Very well." Maiden Trini entered the gates, and everyone else started to follow her inside.

Gittle released her mother's hand at that moment. Elene's back was turned, but she stopped moving as if she knew the girl had gone to her. "Will I see you again?" she asked.

Elene slightly cocked her head to the side. "You mean after what happened, you would want to?"

"I do."

At that moment, she faced the little Maiden. Blinking a few times, Elene's smile swept over her face, contrasting her frowns and anger. Whenever she did it, her joy knew how to radiate out of her eyes. "If that's what you want, I would love to see you again."

Gittle, smiling, hurried back to her mother, but not without waving goodbye.

As the guards started to close the gates, that irritated look on Elene's face hadn't changed. Despite how well she got along with Caydon and Gittle, she still wanted nothing to do with Rima.

Any other day Lucan would take her acid-spewing words as the Little Heathen he knew, but today was different. From here on, it had to be different. This wasn't about believing or not believing but what their world was coming to.

As they entered the gates, the view stole his breath. An entire land opened up, meadows running for miles, hills and mountains in the distance. Lucan turned back, finding the gates were miles away when they only made a few steps.

What was this? Had they entered a new realm?

"This is how our White Oak protects us," Gittle said. "Bigger on the inside and preserved by our Grandi trees."

Rüfus and Pete followed behind. They had been here but admitted it still surprised them.

Wein marched ahead, refusing any help, saying he was tired of feeling like a burden. Lucan caught up to him, but only because a thought that long sat in his mind remained restless.

"What's her story?"

Wein wouldn't turn to him. "What're you talking about?"

"Elene… last night was a living nightmare indisputable to any sane person, but she's not taking our situation seriously."

"That's just how Elene is."

"Are you sure? I think it's more than just her grim outlook on Rima. Personal or not, I'm missing the clues."

Wein frowned and scratched the back of his head. "Listen Lucan. This isn't the time to talk about my sister or ever in this case. It's her past to tell, not mine. Now, can we please focus on the present?"

Lucan didn't press on and looked back on the road. Rising and standing as a tall pillar of light was Rima's White Oak. There was still a long way to go before they reached the town, but Preisen was large. The place was mostly fields, woods, and dirt roads. There were many little hills where homes were made of wood and brick.

Dense pine trees were scattered across the village. Music was playing in the distance, followed by the prayers sung by children.

A line of Maidens around their age was passing by. The moment their eyes flashed at Zorn and Oscern, they recognized them as Children of Rima. One smiled, and another waved. Zorn paid them no mind, and Oscern always had Delilah in his mind.

"Whoa," said Lucan. The road was descending downhill, the road spiraling underground to what looked like a crate scattered by streets and homes. "It looks like a beehive down there."

"That's what we said," said Pete.

"This is a natural phenomenon," Maiden Trini said. "Our oak tree burrowed her roots down, but as you can see, she offers us shade and protection.

Downhill the tight-knit homes spiraled to the lower level, where a grand White Oak tree grew.

"We will be going," Gittle said, following her mother to where their temple was. "Thank you for everything! May you stay in the light!"

Wein and his friends wished her well and thanked her for joining them. Zorn hardly paid her mind, but Oscern gave her that same nod of acknowledgment.

For the rest of the way down, Wein spoke to Maiden Trini closely, sharing everything that happened, from waiting for Oscern and Zorn to losing Gourd. After he revealed what happened last night, there was no surprise in her eyes at the undead walking.

"I apologize for sending you out like I did," she said. "After Greison died, I was desperate for answers. You weren't the only ones I sent out. Most of my Maidens returned empty handed. But a few days ago, it turns out much of what I sent you for has already been answered."

"Then why did you still take us in?" Oscern asked.

"Because you are still Children of Rima," said Maiden Trini. "It's imperative that every Riman comes to understand the situation we're in from here on." She turned slightly to Wein and his friends. "You have served Skiar well, but I took a risk asking you to aid me. Gittle's mother was afraid to send her off, but that is how our Maidens become great leaders." Her stare dropped to her sleeves, long and glowing traces of gold from the light. "But this has led to the loss of one of your companions, and for that, you have my sincerest apology."

"I know what you're saying," said Pete. "But none of us were prepared for what could have happened."

The lower they descended, the more it looked like Rima's White Oak soared to the sky. Her long branches drooped over the houses, offering them shade and protection.

Preisen's children wore long tunics with a pinched colored blue belt that wrapped their abdomen. The sleeves were adorned with colorful designs. They played like any child, getting their clothes dirty as they ran under the tree's roots.

A skinny slinky man with blond hair watched a group play ball. He wore a long jacket with several pockets. He stood out from the rest and looked nothing like the people of Preisen. He turned, perhaps sensing them. The mark on his finger was glowing, but why? He didn't seem to be using it, and nothing abnormal was happening.

"More Children of Rima," he said, looking at Oscern and Zorn but overlooking him.

"They were the first I sent for," Maiden Trini said. "And Wein here has information that may help you."

The man didn't smile or introduce himself. He stared at them, eyes narrowing with each person he passed his focus on.

"Excuse me," Maiden Trini went to his side to face the rest. "Melodians and company, this is David."

Wein stepped back and looked at his friends. "It's him."

"You know me?" David said it with less enthusiasm than Wein's surprise. "Or at least, you have heard of me."

"Yes," said Oscern. "We met your friend, Caydon."

David's smile squeezed for a second before his lips parted. "Then it seems there may be some hope." His body faded until he vanished into thin air.

"Skiar!" exclaimed Zorn.

David's figure took its place, but it was the black mark instead of the glowing ring on his finger. "Sorry, that was my copy. This is my true self. Where did you last see Caydon?"

"Not two days ago. A mile south of Vine Road."

David's stare went to the High Maiden. "It's time."

Nodding, she left his side. "I will inform Maiden Retta to join you."

"What's going on?" Zorn said. "Why the sudden urgency?"

Rather than answer, the High Maiden left promptly and made her way to the temple. David made his way back up the road they descended.

"Hey!" Zorn said. "I thought we were here to talk."

David gave out a tired sigh. "Maiden Trini can keep you up to date, but I must go. You see, I've been looking for Caydon. He failed to show up at our meeting points. No thanks to the corruption he decided to follow." He grabbed his hat and placed it over his head. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Hold it there," said Lucan after he tried to leave again. "Caydon said it was you who didn't show up to the meeting points. He waited for you in Nemdrin."

"False. I left a copy of myself for an entire month should he stop by. We never met."

"Then we should have convinced him to join us," said Wein.

"You would have jeopardized Preisen if you did."

"Mind being more straightforward?" Lucan's heart was beating fast. "Hey, I'm talking to you."

Rather than look at him, David looked up at the rustling trees above. "Caydon has become a Fallen, or that's what I call them, a tainted Child of Rima."

Lucan shook his head. He looked nothing like the undead. He looked better than the last time they met. He ate, laughed, and talked to Elene all night.

"You must be mistaken," said Oscern. "Maiden Gittle sensed nothing wrong with him, and Caydon said Maidens could notice a tainted one."

"He hasn't changed yet," David said. "But when this occurred, he was with his brethren. One by one, they fell, Mason, Lily at the hands of Mason, and Rowan. It's only a matter of time."

"And why are you unscathed?"

"When this occurred, my copy was with them, but soon, even my copy started acting erratically. We still don't know for how long it will be, but the exposure of the fallen passes from one Child of Rima to another."

"Sparing only Maidens," Zorn finished, placing his hand over his neck. "Are you saying we're goners? Soon this whole world will wipe out men like us?"

"That's what Caydon and I were trying to figure out." David looked at his hand, forming a fist but closely looking at the mark on his middle finger. "But for now, you two should be safe. Caydon's barrier protected you before the dead got close, as long as he didn't change, and from what you say, he hadn't."

"But what if he did?" said Zorn. "What if we're already tainted and don't know it?"

"Then I suggest you tag along with me. I don't do well with company, but you might rest easier if you stick with me for a few weeks."

"Did he know?" Lucan could only remember Caydon's tobacco, his teasing, and his smiles. They agreed to meet again for a drink, not like this, not where he would be a hollow, walking corpse that could tear limbs. "Did he know this would happen?"

David's blue eyes were unsettling, but he had a hard time showing his worries. "He knew the risks in following his brethren. I told him

it was a stupid idea and that he should get an exorcism, so he won't end up like them or be impossible to kill. But he needed his gift to find his friends, to hide, to steer others from falling victim. In his eyes, Rima's name and the victims mattered more than his imminent doom." He rolled his jacket back, showing his other hand covered in scar burns. "After what we went through, he's all I have left of Estiria. The least I can do for him is stop him before he becomes unkillable."

"You have a noble friend," Oscern said. "He saved us when those undead fallen came."

"It's like Caydon to be selfless like that." David covered his scars and asked the group to follow him. "After Estiria was burned to the ground, it took a long time for us to realize what went wrong. Our pain was focused on getting revenge, on getting back at Avery for what they'd done. We didn't seek help at the time. High Maidens are meant to protect their oak tree, and Estiria never had one."

"But you're just as important," said Lucan. "You're Rimans."

"That's not how the High Maiden of Villena saw it. She only saw what Avery had done for the war, not to them, and after all the High Maidens talked on the matter, they decided it was a cruel war crime, but since it had only happened to Estiria, they did little."

"I'm sorry," said Pete. "We're guards of Melodia, and everything you're saying is new to me."

"There is much the High Maidens don't share with their people. Maiden Trini is the only person who has taken my pleas seriously. More so after I told her that Caydon wasn't born in Estiria. He and his friends were Rima's orphaned."

"Shit," said Zorn. "Shit!"

"Something the matter?"

Oscern rubbed his large hand over his face. His gold-colored eyes moved to him. Lucan nodded silently, giving him permission. "He's one of us."

David patted his chest, taken by the reveal. "You men are from Aelith?"

"No way," Rüfus whispered. "Lucan, you too?"

Lucan nodded. Caydon's laugh surfaced back in his mind. His kind dark eyes and the strange sense of belonging when he first met him. Now he knew why.

"It's been years since we ran into another Aelithian," said Zorn. "Hell, we may have run into them in the past, but we don't reveal where we came from openly."

"Then it looks like this has become a personal matter for you as well. We need to find Caydon and the others so we may test Lily's idea and see if an exorcism will free them."

"We'll join you," Zorn said. "Won't we?"

"Of course." Oscern seemed surprised that he had said nothing, and his silence got Zorn to glance at him.

Coming back was High Maiden Trini. "Maiden Retta will be waiting for you at the gate."

"Very well," David said. "I will wait for you three, but don't linger, or I will leave."

Maiden Trini told him to be with the light, arms crossed. "Since David came to us, I've been communicating with other Rimans using our temple's spire." Her eyes moved to Wein and his friends. "We will inform Melodia of Gourd's passing, but it's time for you and your companions to return to Melodia."

"Are you sure?" Wein said. "Isn't there anything we can do?"

"You and your people have done more for me than I could ever ask for. You returned my son and found more Children of Rima to spread this message. We'll provide you with a new wagon along with supplies and enough food for your return to Melodia." Maiden Trini went to the nearest root from the Oak tree and placed her hand on it. "I will take a branch from our oak tree and burn it. Please give the ashes to Gourd's family. It will not be much, but I hope they accept our condolences." She nodded at Wein's friends and left.

Pete made their way up the road. Wein followed at his side. Rüfus, who was behind them, stopped and turned. "Lucan, aren't ya coming?"

Lucan couldn't answer, not at this moment.

"It's alright Rüfus. He's back with his group, and he's needed." Wein didn't second guess him. Without asking for an explanation, the three went back up the path.

It was painful to see them just accept his silence and leave like that. In a way, he expected they would respond like this. Wein was principled, Pete understood the situation at hand, and Rüfus was no fool. As Rimans, they knew when to be selfless.

Lucan stared at the White Oak, hoping to draw in some wisdom. Her branches swayed from the wind in the distance. Summer had gone, and deciduous trees were changing the color of their leaves, declaring fall's arrival. Maple trees had already changed their green hue to a more saturated carrot pigment. But Oak trees had more resistance to the change of the season, their colors preserving their evergreen look for a little while longer.

Damn it. The altering of leaves wasn't the knowledge he sought for.

"Hey." Zorn snapped a stare at him. "Don't tell me you're going with those country folk." Lucan's silence made Zorn laugh and slap his hands against his thigh. "Open your eyes, dimwit. This is what we were warned about when Aelith fell. The burning and killing are back."

"We never saw any undead," Lucan corrected. "And I thought you didn't believe in any forest folktales?"

"Sometimes seeing is believing, especially when undead Riman Children now roam Pleada, or do you not care about what happened to *our* people?"

"I want to find Caydon—I really do, but Wein and his group. I can't leave them like this on their own, not after what we know what's out there."

Zorn crossed his arms and leaned to one side. "Those two guards are going to be fine protecting one another, along with that one defensive trader and his heathen sister."

"They sacrificed a lot for me, for you two."

"I can't believe you." Zorn's porcelain complexion was turning red. "Sorry pal, but I'm not buying your hornshit."

Lucan searched for wisdom in Oscern's eyes, but he was avoiding eye contact with him. "What is your problem Zorn, really?"

"My problem is that you don't want to admit it."

"Admit *what*?"

Zorn looked around him, making sure there was no one in a hearing shot. "You don't want to face the past. You want to pretend we're going to hide for the rest of our lives."

"That's not what it is."

"Of course it is! I remember that very night we were told to hide and not seek revenge, but this is different, Lucan, and you know it."

"So, you want to take in vain Nati's words?"

Zorn pushed Lucan hard, causing him to stumble back. "Don't bring my dead sister in this, don't you dare!"

Lucan heaved, hand pressing against his chest. His anger was twofold and boiled over the pain he usually had to bear. "Since when did you pick your morals? We spent three hard years in Vinol, and for what? To kill for coins and use them to bury nightmares that always come back!"

"We were starving kids that nobody wanted to adopt, and the older we got, the harder our life became. Or did you forget what happened to us after Marca nearly got us killed?"

"It doesn't matter. You're making unsighted decisions without looking into the risks, just like Caydon and his friends did." Sweat was accumulating on his brow. That push wasn't hard, but the pang of pain in his chest was growing.

Zorn, seeing this, frowned. The look of pity was unlike him, but he carried it. "Look at yourself, Lucan, Children of Rima can heal from wounds quicker than the average man, but your body bears every scar you crossed with death. You can't even heal from the wound on your chest. Let's face it, that puppet body you've been wearing is failing."

Lucan shut his eyes. "The state of my body has nothing to do with our situation. I don't complain about the pain because the village that took me made me realize we had lost our way. This war stopped us from caring about the world. It distracted us with a routine focused solely on coins and company. We know what it's like to lose everything, and yet Estiria fell, and the ones who acted for the good of Pleada were Caydon and his group. That's why I want to ensure a safe passage for the Melodians, they took me in, and I won't abandon them now."

Zorn huffed but said nothing.

"My concern is who's behind all of this." Oscern's voice of reasoning finally dived in. "And you're wrong about saying we're following David blindly."

"I'm aware of the urgency to find Caydon," Lucan answered, seething through the confusion he felt and pain. "I'm hit plenty by the news."

"Yes, you two seemed to have gotten along quite well," Zorn sang. "I'm surprised you two didn't kiss when you said goodbye."

Lucan breathed for patience, but Zorn was a mosquito. He knew how to draw blood out and leave him feeling anemic. "Look, I'm not saying we should ignore it. I just want to do right by the people who brought me here."

"Skiar," Zorn spat. "You keep repeating the same rubbish, but it's not going to make it any more important than what we have with David."

"Zorn, sometimes you can be a soulless twat. In case you have forgotten, one of Wein's people died on this journey." Patience could get the hell out of his way. Zorn never had the palate for it. "Instead of giving them your condolences or thanks for the ride, you did nothing in the Bamboo Forest, you refused to share your food, and you complained for the entire road because you were mad at me over coins!"

"Rightfully so!" he defended.

"You want to know what I did with the coins I took from you? I gave Elene shelter because she killed a man she believed killed Gourd and nearly took her brother. If she had been caught, you know what King Duaro would have done, just like you know what King Pann did to Ace." Zorn inhaled like he had given him a kick in the gut. His eyes became glossy, but Lucan didn't stop. "None of this would have happened if they didn't join me. And you can call me a hypocrite for suddenly caring for people I met over the summer, but I won't forgive myself if something happens to them, just like I have never forgiven myself for putting you two at risk countless and countless of times. Now I put this new group under the same peril, and I'll be damned if they end up like us! Broken, starved from any peace in their hearts, and lost like Caydon's friends!"

"You know what?" Zorn's voice broke as tears fell down his cheeks. "We don't need you." He levitated from the ground and glided up the road.

Lucan swallowed hard. His throat was pinching, but he resisted the tension it had on him. He would not break. He would not show it bothered him.

Oscern uncrossed his arms. He looked over to how far that sulking drama queen had gone before narrowing his eyes at him. "Did you have to mention Nati and Ace?"

"Yeah? Well, thanks for sticking up for me."

"I would never do something foolish like pick a side between you two. Last time I did, you two ganged up on me." He smiled at him as if to offer him hope, but what came out was the opposite. "Either way, you can't help us, Lucan. Not when we don't know what we're facing. If this is related to what happened to our home, then you can't be a part of it."

"I already told you. I'll find you two once the Melodians return home."

"And your body? Your reflexes are still quick, but if you push yourself, what will become of that hole in your chest?"

"I'm fine—"

Oscern closed in. "Don't put in vain Aelith's sacrifice just because you want to be a hard ass!" His voice towered and shot towards the branches. It was rare for him to be this troubled. Perhaps the news did get to him. Perhaps his fight with Zorn bothered him. "You said so yourself. You are tired of being the one to make the decisions."

"O, look."

"Not a word. You're tired of leading us? Then this one decision you're going to have to respect, so don't butt in."

Zorn was at the top already, arms crossed, waiting for Oscern to join him. As the big guy left, Lucan followed his steps.

"Find Caydon," he said. "Please."

"We will."

The clouds were piling over one another, growing darker and rumbling in the distance. It was past midday, and the chill in the air lingered longer than the last few days. The tiny wagon he followed from a distance stopped, probably so they could see if he was still behind. Since he left Preisen, Lucan wanted to be alone, so Wein gave him that space by going ahead of him, and before he knew it, they were about half a mile away.

The wagon went into motion but moved slower this time. The few folks that passed him would nod and continue by. Others were in a rush, hoping to beat the rain.

A man who was pushing a handcart in a hurry stopped to ask him if he was interested in buying his spices. From the looks of it, he carried powdered cayenne pepper, crushed red chili pepper, and turmeric.

Lucan barely looked at him. "I have no coin."

He heard the man mutter under his breath and leave.

Wein's group was the first to enter the bustling little town. Maycove served as the rest stop between Vinol and Nemdrin, but it didn't usually have such an unruly sight. Hordes of wagons, carriages, and carts surrounded the town.

The streets were crowded. Families were sitting on the street, and children were crying in their mother's arms.

By the time Lucan caught up, Rüfus and Pete were missing. Wein explained they went to ask if the passage north was safe, and Elene was with the horses. Ivory wore blinders, and with the noise, she started reassuring Fior all would be alright.

Wein, who got treated in Preisen, had reclaimed the driver's seat. He still wore the Red Guild's hat, probably for protection.

"So, think your friend Ahmok is going to avenge you for what happened in Mudburrow?"

Wein leaned back and exhaled. He could see his breath leave him and evaporate. "Guess I'll find out when I run into him again."

While they waited, those who looked like civilians were grumbling, sharing awful, scrunched stares as if he cursed their mothers. Because the region was in an active war, the way north was likely blocked by several tax gates. King Pann did this to help his economy but at the cost of the poor, who wanted to evade the war.

Rüfus and Pete returned, panting. "The toll fee for the way north is twenty silver coins."

"Fifteen?" Wein looked at his coin purse. "We were lucky to get one gold coin from Maiden Trini."

"There's also another twenty silver coins," said Pete. "One halfway and another before we get to Vinol, otherwise, they leave us at the Dalen Hills."

"Sounds like King Pann alright," said Lucan.

"This holy war is going to be the end of us," said Wein.

"That's not all of it." Rüfus blew hot air into his hands. "Folks warned us of the aftermath of a recent battle. The survivors say it's too dangerous to go off Vine Road as the battle hasn't ended."

Wein looked uneasy. "So, you're saying if we want to be safe, we have to pay forty silver coins to get to Vinol."

"Wein." Elene climbed the wagon. She wore a long cloak with a hood for the cold, but she still had her pride. She still wore the same burgundy skirt with the white blouse. "It's getting dark, and we have to rest the horses."

"I agree," chimed Pete. "We'll need to find a tavern, or we'll freeze our asses here."

Among the many taverns, Dice'n Hog was the least packed and more spacious. The building was elevated, with cemented stone steps that led them to a warm room. Adjoining the entrance was a spacious porch, with seats bystanders took to shelter themselves from the rain.

The place smelled like wet dog and beer. Shoulders grazed against one another, and the loud chatter made it impossible to hear Wein. He followed the waitress to a recently emptied table. The surface looked sticky from spilled beer and grease from what they ate. With no complaints, the group sat and ordered their drinks.

"We're obviously not the only ones unsure of paying that ridiculous fee," said Rüfus.

The cost of going off-road was a worse fate. He had fought for Vinol and seen how little the importance of a bystander's life is amid battle. The place was filled with endless jargon. A pocket fiddle player sang, surrounded by dancing women.

He could sense the tension in the room. Most of the people had a look of fear, with bags and dark circles under their eyes. It could well enough be induced by the war or what Caydon was trying to prevent. If anyone had run into an undead, then that was just another reason to cling to Maycove.

"It's not too late to follow your friends." Wein was staring at him. His hair was damp from having gone out to relieve himself. "You're not obligated to join us."

"We already talked about this," he stammered. "I promised to reimburse you all for taking me this far and what your father left in your care."

The laughter of his sister brought him to turn to the other table behind him. Elene was playing dice with a group of old men, chatting and sharing what seemed to be jokes she had to whisper. His stare focused on her back and down to her spine. He vividly remembered the ruffles of her underwear, the shape of her hips, and the curves of her buttocks.

"She's taken," Wein said with a slur, causing him to blink away.

After another hard drink, Lucan wiped the fuzz from his upper lip. "Terra already told me." The brother should be relieved he had just noticed her curves. And it's not like he had a choice when she asked him to hold her. "When does she meet her groom-to-be?"

"Soon, that's for sure." He leaned back, bumping into Pete. With every drink, he was losing his serious uptight self and becoming jollier. "Where the hell is Rüfus?"

"You know where Rüfus is," said Pete. "That man should never marry."

Lucan rocked his tankard back and forth. "Can't blame him. Melodia has an obsession with marriage."

Wein downed his tankard. "I take it Aelith didn't practice arranged marriages?"

That was the first time he mentioned his home. It was no secret anymore that he was an Aelithian. "Try not to say that too loudly, don't need the attention. Also, the only arrangement we had from birth was to wash our asses."

Wein chuckled. "Oh yeah? And what did you do? Life as a Riman in Aelith."

"I grew up like any boy, learning Rima's words by heart in the ground city."

"Ground city?" said Pete. "And that's…"

Lucan raised an eyebrow. "You mean you don't know?"

"I know," Wein chimed, cheeks bright red. It was unlike him to be this talkative. "Aelith isn't called a holy city for no reason. The mountain region is the home of floating rocks, from small pebbles to massive ones."

"And the main ones float above the ground city," said Lucan. "That's where the first temple resides. The place was inaccessible to the public. No one but the High Maiden and her exclusive community was allowed to live up there." A pinch in his throat stopped him from saying more. Zorn's words came back, leaving him squeezing the tankard's handle tight. He could still remember the smooth pavement that led out of the temple. Nati, standing guard, her smile and pride for the place she died defending. "Then it went to shit." He slammed his tankard against the table, bringing beer to pour out and startling the others. He moved his chair back and left.

Pete called him back, but Wein told him to leave him be.

Outside, Lucan scowled at the pouring rain. Customers bumped into him from blocking their way. His dragging feet led him to the nearest bench. It was long and rickety when he sat. A couple was in the far corner, hands over each other.

The rain poured hard against the stone. The unprepared were running for cover, crossing the streets in a hurry with their cloaks over their heads. Seeing the puffs of clouds leaving his nostrils, it must be chilly. He grabbed his coat and covered himself. Best to blend with the others.

The pressure he felt in the tavern returned, growing tighter with each breath of air. Was it because he mentioned Aelith? Or because his fight with Zorn still bothered him? They had fought many times before. Their way of making up was forgetting, but this was the first time they argued and left. Then there was Caydon. Since he had never met him in his childhood, he must have seen the place burn from the ground city. If he had known he was one of Rima's Orphaned, what sort of conversations would they have had?

A woman in a dark red skirt stopped his thoughts. Elene had left the tavern. She skimmed the area until she saw him. While she approached him, she noticed the couple making out and quickly looked away. "I thought you were going to leave us for good."

"Just needed some air."

She exhaled hot breath on her hands and rubbed them. "I overheard Wein and Pete saying you're still upset over your friends."

Lucan shrugged. Rather than tell her, he focused back on the pouring rain. It wasn't her business to pry, and just because they had a moment in Mudburrow, it didn't make them friends.

The change of weight shifted the bench. Elene sat beside him, hand clutching the bottom seat. Her attention was on the customers climbing up the steps to enter the Dice'n Hog. She left without her cloak, and he could tell she was regretting it by how often her shoulders trembled.

Taking the corner of his cloak, he guided it around her other shoulder. In response, Elene scooted her hips next to his. He opened his mouth, ready to tell her not to misunderstand.

"Lucan." Her small voice took his words. "Are you always this warm?"

"Every man is a walking furnace."

She chuckled and looked at him. "Not this warm."

It's not like he could tell her it was Rima's blood that kept him this way.

Her gaze dropped, and her back almost sulked. "Tell me what's on your mind."

Ah ha, so she was going to pry. "What for?"

She stretched her legs and tapped her boots. "I don't know… I thought maybe you need to vent out your feelings."

"No thanks."

Her stare shifted to the grey clouds, lips pursed while she thought about it. "Say the first thing that comes to your mind."

Lucan shut his eyes, "Look, Elene, I don't know why you think this is a conversation worth having, but it's not going to remedy anything."

"That's not what came to your mind—"

"I shouldn't have let them go with me, alright?" He leaned back and rested his head against the wall. "There, I said it."

"It's not too late to catch up to them."

Lucan shook his head. "No, I mean, they shouldn't have jumped off the wagon with me. I thought my father would return, and so I refused to leave Aelith. We were starving by the winter, and when we did leave, I convinced them to trust that farmer who opened his home to us—the one I killed."

Elene's eyes widened. "But you saved them," she said. "You saved each other."

"It doesn't matter… there were countless mistakes I made along the way. Wrong turns, getting us lost, and still, Zorn and Oscern stuck with me. Saw me as their leader, thoughtlessly following me when I could fail them again."

"Oh Lucan." The moment he felt Elene's fingertips on the back of his hand, he yanked it away. Her eyelashes fluttered at his rejection. In response, she crossed her arms. "Sorry, I was trying to console you."

"Don't. It's strange coming from you."

"Wow." She pressed her hand to her chest and looked away. "Well then, I better let you have your alone time."

The moment her weight left the bench, his heart wanted to jump out of his chest. If she left, then she was going to take the air from his lungs.

Fearing he would suffocate, he grabbed her wrist. Elene stopped, but her narrowing dark eyes were looking back at him. It was wrong of him to ask for her company after he brushed her off like that, and she didn't hide that she was hurt.

"Just sit next to me," he said. "That's all I ask."

She lingered for a few moments. She could have stormed inside or said some words to him, but she calmly sat down, leaving a gap between them.

Lucan scooted to her and covered her again from the cold. She blinked a few times, looked at him, and dropped her gaze. He would be a fool not to think his behavior troubled her. "Look," he said. "That anger I've been carrying was thrown at you when you didn't deserve it."

"You call that an apology?" She sat hunched, and her large almond-shaped looked up at him. "You're not having a great day, so I'll drop it."

"I'm sorry, Elene."

Her eyebrows rose. "Uh..."

Lucan leaned closer, hopefully offering more of that warmth she seemed to appreciate. "Now you're the surprised one?"

She half smiled and shrugged, blinking away, noticing how in inched towards her.

The clod of heavy boots coming their way startled her first. It must've been some intuition or luck that she thought one of their own had discovered them.

At the tavern's entrance was Pete, his stare shifted to the arm Lucan kept around her arm. His eyes turned into daggers as he marched to them. He pulled Elene from the bench.

"You're not supposed to be doing this," he whispered, glancing at the tavern's entrance. "If Wein saw you two like this."

"What are you talking about?" Elene asked.

Pete blinked at her. "What do you mean what I'm talking about?"

"I thought Lucan left us," she began. "That's why I left the tavern. He looked so miserable I decided to keep him company, only I forgot my cloak, so he let me borrow his." She looked at him, the corner of her lips curved into a smile. "Of course, a Killer like him wouldn't lend it to me like a real man would."

"As if you deserved it, Little Heathen," Lucan answered back.

Their response calmed Pete down. He released Elene, apologizing, and rested his hands on his hips. "We ran into a Gypsian group. They're heading to their forest and are offering to let us join their caravan. If we head north from there, we may avoid the battle."

"Out of the question," said Lucan, drawing them to look at him. "I've fought many campaigns for Vinol outside of the Gypsian Forest, and that's the one place everyone is paying a hefty price to avoid."

"Well, you're going to have to take your concerns to Wein because he agreed to join them." He gestured for Elene to follow him. "Come on."

"Gypsians," Elene said, touching the gold-colored trinket on her head wrap while she followed Pete. "Never imagined we would join them on the road. Mother will be very displeased."

"Wait until you see their leader," Pete said as they entered the tavern.

"What's his name?"

"It's a woman."

CHAPTER 25

ELENE

Gypsian wagons had a unique roof shape with bold, warm colors about them. Their wheels were large, and the red bow-top roofs stretched over the body, as it was also their living space. Lorenza, who was their leader, spoke mostly in her native tongue, raising it sometimes to the point of breaking her vocal cords, a distinction from Ahmok, who had no accent. She rode on horseback like a rancher, riding to the front and back of the caravan, her wavy brown hair bouncing wherever she went. Her colorful layered dress flowed as she and her men went ahead to overlook the open space ahead.

Lucan was sulking in the back. He and Wein had argued the night before and that morning. He was against them joining Lorenza's people, but Wein said they had no other option. If they were to sell everything Preisen gave them, they still wouldn't be able to make enough money to pay the toll fee. Lucan stopped trying to convince them to turn back, but he still complained.

"Pick up the pace, or we won't camp at sunset!" Lorenza returned, chanting the same words, her accent strong but with a melodic tune. The women of her group wore colorful head wraps, but Lorenza wore a felt hat with the Red Guild's feather in the back. The snap brim was lengthy and flat, and the top had a single dent.

As they journeyed north, Lucan was observing the fields and hills, scoping every turn. He and Lorenza were doing the same job, guiding her horse around her caravan and to them, who followed closely in the back.

"Don't expect to come out of this with our lives," Lucan said right when Lorenza passed them.

"This is just the way things are, yes?" She slowed down her grey-spotted horse and kept up with their speed. "The world is just as dangerous as this road."

"I much rather avoid danger if I can help it." He wasn't letting up. "If we're caught by Vinol or Avery, they won't ask us whose side we're on."

"This I know," she answered. "My people have died at Vinolean and Averyan's hands. This is how life is, and to be worthy of it, one must adapt." She rode her steed ahead and raised her powerful voice. "Sun is setting, we continue for one more mile, and we camp for tonight!"

The parked caravans made a circle. Inside, various campfires lit the place. Despite the chill in the air, women were by the fire, talking to their families like it was a summer's night. One had her breast out, feeding her chubby baby in her arms.

After seeing several chickens lose their heads, Elene hurried to make her honey pancakes on her iron skillet. She was out of her pink floral dye and had no strawberry honey, but she wanted to cook among the women.

With the wagons open, she marveled at the furnished interior. With such little room, there was much to see, cabinets and drawers neatly carved and painted. Chimneys burned brightly as smoke was emitted out of the vents of the roof.

Several gypsies were walking out with a flute, violin, and bucket. To Rüfus's delight, every Gypsian wagon had a barrel of beer with plenty to be shared.

Elene left two plates of her honey pancakes for the other Gypsians. The woman smiled and said something in their native tongue. Their little children and their curious eyes stared at what she left. Being unable to understand what they were saying, she nodded out of politeness.

In no time, stews of meat and vegetables were passed around indiscriminately. Pieces of grilled chicken seasoned in pepper and lime were shared. For dessert, there were plates of poppyseed bread, rolled sweet bread stuffed with cheese, and caramelized candy.

Rüfus set up camp closer to their wagon. Fior and Ivory had eaten and were resting for the night.

Lucan returned, dragging his feet to their company.

"Well?" Pete covered himself with two blankets. He had gotten a serious cough since they left Maycove and had the shivers.

Lucan plopped on his seat, frowning at the fire. "They told me to go back, said enough of them are keeping watch." Those sharp silver eyes of his started to hold her stare longer than before. The moment his gaze shifted to her, she looked away.

The night was young, and to the Gypsians, it seemed like their gathering was a form of celebration than resting. Rüfus would leave them, chat with the Gypsians and return with more plates of food. Rather than drink some wine, Pete drank the chamomile tea a young Gypsian offered him.

Wein barely touched his food. He would shift in his seat and observe the Gypsians and look disappointed when he looked away.

"Looking for someone?" Elene asked.

Wein went back to eating.

Pete, capturing her inquiry started to chuckle. "I knew he was ensnared the moment they met."

"Who?" She had her suspicion that a certain someone caught her brother's eyes.

"It happened at the Dice'n Hog," Pete said. "Lorenza, seeing Wein's Red Guild hat from the back, must have thought he was a Gypsian. She snuck behind him, covered his eyes, and said something in her language. Wein thinking it was you, smiled and looked up. You should have seen her surprise when she realized she covered the face of a stranger and the red-faced brother of yours staring back with his mouth hanging open."

Wein plucked a dry grass and flung it at him. "That's enough sharing."

Elene and Pete broke into laughter.

Wein's sudden take of air stirred Elene's attention. Before she asked why he looked so tense, a figure sat right next to her.

"That was a delicious cake," Lorenza's voice startled her with a mug of beer. Her eyes were brown, kissed by hues of green. Their focus moved to her turban, bringing her to touch it.

"I cut my hair," Elene explained. "That's why I'm wearing this."

Her glossy lips pursed in a smile. Up close, she smelled like roses. "What on Earth made you do that?"

"She lost a game of dice to a master player." Wein took off his hat and smoothed his black hair back.

Lorenza released a light-hearted laugh. "Elene, you are brave, and I love the gold tassel. We made this, yes?"

"My brother bought it for me when he joined the Red Guild."

Lorenza looked at Wein, who swiftly avoided eye contact. For how long had the apples of his cheek been flushed pink?

The music met no end, and the laughter of the Gypsians tickled her ears. The shadows of their bodies brought her to look up as they danced around the fire.

Lorenza got up and offered her hand. "It is time to dance." Elene glanced at her brother, bringing Lorenza's eyes to narrow. "Why are you looking at him?"

"I'm afraid my brother might tell our mother about us associating with Gypsians."

"Elene," Wein stammered.

"*Mucka*, this is not Melodia." Lorenza clapped her hands. "Come on, everyone must dance. This is life, and it must be enjoyed." She took her hands and led her from the group.

In the heat of the dancers, Elene stood still, watching women and men of every age partake in the feet stomping and the beat of the drums.

A young Gypsian girl took her hand and gently twirled her around. Another clapped approvingly and took both of her hands and guided her in circles. Their smiles poured into her chest, their light feet easy to follow. Blushing, Elene moved with them, spellbound by the strums and beat of their tune.

Rüfus was dancing already, shirtless and spinning so fast she broke into laughter. Pete was standing nearby, cocooned in his blanket but shifting left and right.

From the fireplace, Lorenza took Wein's hand next. His face was beet red as she guided him with the others. He didn't make it far before another woman tried to take him, but Lorenza spun him, keeping him as her dance partner.

Wein was privy to his romances, and nobody in the village ever won his interest. Seeing him so flustered by Lorenza, who he had

just met, she wondered what was different about her that the women of Melodia didn't have.

The boulder that wouldn't move was Lucan. He was glaring at the fire, arms crossed like some grumpy stump that wouldn't wither. When a woman tried to take him, he crossed his arms and denied her offer. Rather than take offense, she ruffled his hair and left, leaving him to smooth his locks to the side.

Elene reached her hands towards the stars and spun, watching them spin with her as her vision blurred. The crowd started to clap and cheer at a quicker and faster pace, circling around a pair that danced in the middle.

Wein had frozen over, watching Lorenza push her hips right and left, her hips then shimming the dangling ornaments around her waist. One arm was in the air as she circled around him, him turning, following her eyes.

Rüfus stumbled back, nearly choking with laughter. Elene didn't know what was funny until a large, taller Gypsian had Lucan over her shoulders. The Gypsian Lucan refused to dance with had brought her reinforcements, guiding them to the crowd.

When they put him down, Lucan tried to shoo them off like flies, but the Gypsians surrounded him, hips shimming around him.

Elene's laugh lured his stare. This time, she didn't look away.

"I saw that." Lorenza bumped her hips with hers. "You like him, yes?"

"Hate him, actually." Wein was missing. "Where's my brother?"

"Went to get us a drink. Come, the night is still young, and we don't know what tomorrow brings." Lorenza took her hand and led her toward Lucan.

"Oh no—I couldn't!"

"Why not?"

"It's like throwing two tom cats in the same room. We'll just bite and scratch each other!"

Lorenza laughed and nudged her into Lucan's arms. Her left foot didn't make the extra step, and she slammed into him. His thumbs squeezed her shoulders before she slid off. Those wolf-like eyes ensnared her breath and froze her like she was his prey. Against the light, his pupil had a tint of color she didn't notice was there.

Lorenza clapped, bringing her and the music back. "Dance! Come on. Dance!"

Lucan didn't take her hand, moreover, he didn't move at all. He released her and left the caravan to be alone.

Tugging at her dress, Elene headed back to sit by the fire. Maybe he was still upset, or maybe it was her—if it had been Terra, he wouldn't have protested.

A hand softly touched her shoulder. Lorenza sat next to her, bottle in hand. "I'm sorry. I thought I saw a knot." She took the cork off and handed it to her. "

"Knot?" Elene took it and gave it a swig.

"You know… something you can't untie, so it sticks out when you look at it."

"He and I never got along." The wine had a sweet aftertaste, so she gave it another drink.

"Tell me more."

"I nearly got him killed after I refused to help him. Since then, we aren't exactly on friendly terms."

"Not exactly?" Lorenza tilted her head. "This is a trick statement, yes?"

"We were worse before, but honestly, it's expected for me to not get along with Rimans."

Lorenza seemed confused by her response. "Then why do you remain in Melodia? Why not seek a better, happier life?"

Elene ran her hand up her arm. "I did something, and people haven't forgotten. The only way I can atone for my transgressions is to fix my wrongs."

Lorenza and her team of riders led everyone through the open plains, plagued by a heavy fog. The bells the Gypsian hung were taken down, as she wanted complete silence. It was only the hooves stepping over the plains, the motion of the caravan, the creak and clank of a steel axle.

Wein peered at the fog, the lantern's glow was from the wagon ahead of them, but the fog masked the body. Last night, after the Gypsians had gone to sleep, he and Lorenza stayed up, sitting by an

empty campfire. Seeing them together brought her back to her long chat with Caydon. After some awkward exchanges, they grew comfortable in sharing their lives, but the night went by too fast, and the sun had risen.

"You like her?" Elene asked.

"Like who?" he said in an irritated tone.

Elene chuckled. This was coming from the man who rejected five marriage proposals, the one who never introduced her to anyone special, and looking back now, it didn't matter because his relationships didn't last.

Pete's sneeze brought her to look back. He was rubbing his nose, eyes drowsy from his sickness. Rüfus was half snoring, and Lucan was frowning at the way ahead. When he saw she was looking at him, he looked away right away. Was he still angry about that dance?

Fior and Ivory stomped back, heads bobbed forward as the wagon shook to a stop.

"Whoa." Wein pulled the reigns to get them to follow his cues. "Come on."

Fior jumped, huffing as if something had crawled underneath. With them at a standstill, the lantern they followed was gone, and the fog surrounded them.

Ivory, sensing Fior's stress, started to go against the reigns, refusing to move forward.

"What's gotten into them?" Rüfus said, noticing the struggle.

"I-I don't know." Wein whistled. "Come one, we're going to lose them." It took some attempts before he managed to get them to move. Fior was still young. Perhaps he grew sick of the road.

The fog covered the way for a few feet, and for a moment, they thought they lost them. Lorenza's shouts were heard from afar, telling everyone to pick up the speed. "Hurry!" she bellowed as she galloped around them. "Soldiers are coming!"

Elene peered at the opening, and Lucan had taken a stand, cursing under his breath.

The caravans picked up their speed. One horse went out of line, forcing the driver to move them back in line. Fior and Ivory stepped back, grunting and huffing. Wein had to grip the reins to keep them steady and remain in control.

Lorenza, seeing their stressed animals, shuffled her steed back. "Wein, hurry!"

"I'm trying!"

Elene raised both hands over and smacked their backs. Fior and Ivory kicked their feet and sped. Wein grabbed her waist moments before she tipped over. Like following the leader, Ivory, and Fior picked up their pace. Lorenza seeing them in motion, went ahead, guiding her people. The riders who followed her had torches, waving them around at the force that may be coming.

Elene held on tight. The baskets and food tumbled between Pete and Rüfus. Lucan gripped the end of the wagon, searching for the danger, teeth clenched and one hand gripping his hilt.

A rumble came from the distance, but it was impossible to see where it was coming from or if they were going in the right direction, but Lorenza's shouts pushed them forward.

"No!" Lucan took Wein's shoulders. "We need to stop the wagon now!"

"Are you insane?" he panted. "We can't!"

The riders were back, waving their torches, shouting at the rumbling to stop.

Lucan cursed and slammed his fists against the rail. "You don't understand. We're about to be hit with King Pann's heavy force cavalry!"

The ground quaked, quivering the bits of pebbles at their feet. A bellow cry swarmed from the north, followed by the loud clatter of hooves. Her brother's stare froze, wedged between fear and the unknown.

"Take cover under the wagon, everyone!" Lucan's command pulled them back. "Hurry!"

Rüfus hopped off the wagon, and Pete got off next.

The arriving force came like a shroud of shadows and cut through the fog and revealed horses larger than any horse she had ever seen. Their powerful legs broke through them in a charge, leaving only a gust of wind. More and more sped through, slamming into the wagon and the caravans like they were tall grass.

Fior and Ivory stepped back, whining and tugging the wagon sideways.

"We need to free them," Elene said, shaking as other cavalrymen passed them. "They'll trample Ivory and Fior!" She grabbed her dagger and went to Ivory first. Ivory knew they were in danger and started moving back. If it wasn't for the blinders, he would've caused a mishap.

Wein made his way down. There was no time to pull off the hanes and collar. His dagger sawed through the thick, sturdy traces.

"No, stay in the cart!" Lucan's silver eyes widened when he discovered her. "Elene!"

"Give us a moment!" After freeing him from the yoke, Elene moved back and slapped Ivory's behind. He charged ahead, following in the horse's direction.

Fior pulled this time in the cavalry's direction, wanting to follow where Ivory went. He dragged the cart sideways with his muscles, whinnying at his attempt.

"Careful, I'm going to free you," Elene said as Pete and Rüfus steadied him. "Just promise me you'll both come back."

Her ears hurt from all the uproars, the screams of Lorenza's people, but she and Wein didn't stop. Her arm muscles were stiff as they carved through the leather. When she tore through the traces from the yoke, everyone moved back.

Fior kicked back out of fright and fled.

Panting for breath, Elene felt Wein tug her to the wagon. The next moment, her view was distorted. She saw her boots in the air, the ground beyond her reach, and a strange wind that lifted her.

The next, she plummeted to the ground. She heaved, griping her side as the wind was knocked out of her. Hands firmly on the soil. She ducked when a horse jumped over her.

Standing over their toppled wagon was a man in green garments, a glowing band over his middle finger. "You're all in the way," he said.

"Wait!" Lucan recovered to his feet, hands raised in the air. "I serve King Pann's army. I work under Colonel Finsley."

The man wasn't moved. "Finsley is dead, so now you work for nobody." The stranger's hands sparked. He leaped in the air and planted his fist on the ground.

Elene saw bits of what she could, of her brother and Lucan being tossed aside. Rüfus and Pete were missing. When she realized she,

too, had been picked up by the wind. She watched the twelve beautiful caravans, their horses, and the wonderful people she danced with suspended in the air.

CHAPTER 26

ELENE

The crashing came first, then the cutting of her elbows. The wagon was out of view, and the fog kept her from seeing her brother and the others. Elene crawled on the floor, wincing whenever more and more horses swept by her.

A toppled caravan was ahead. A Gypsian man and woman were trying to make it for cover. The contact was instant. Their bodies were caught under the legs of the horse, trampled like they were cotton balls under a boot.

Seeing their bodies lay motionless, Elene balled up and hugged herself.

While the ground quaked, she started to cry, waiting for the cavalry to crush her. For a moment, the shaking stopped, and there was a brief pause. She could hear herself breathe.

A growl swept from behind her, bringing goosebumps to rise on her back. Instead of heavy hooves, a large brown dog stopped his advance and veered in her direction. The adrenaline moved Elene back to her feet. The neighing of the horse forced her to look for the next incoming horse. Instead, a soldier drew his blade and steadied it where it would meet her neck. Before she could move out of the way, her foot got caught with the legs of the dead Gypsian, and she fell, missing the sword's strike.

Picking up her feet, she nearly slammed into a passing horse. Her body twisted as she tripped and fell on her back. The barking dog was ready for her, waiting for the horses to pass so he could dive for her.

Elene crawled into an unhinged door and squeezed through. Blankets cushioned her fall, her hands brushed the broken portraits, and the smell of flowers scattered the interior. Her nails clawed the wood as the end of her skirt was pulled. She rolled on her back and sent her heel straight for the dog's nose.

She went to keep the door shut, but the dog pushed through. Her body pulsed as she crawled over the cabinets. The glass broke with her weight and cut open her palm. As blood dripped, a tight pressure sunk into her boot and started to shake her leg. The growling dog had sunken his teeth. Foam was pouring from his black gums as he tightened his jaw.

Elene grabbed a broken vase and struck his shoulder. The dog whined, but that only made him angrier. The dog leaped and snapped at her, his weight overlapping her. She gripped his neck while his teeth snapped.

"Get away from me!" She grabbed the fabric scissors she kept in her belt and raised the point against him.

A whistle perked the dog's ears up. He moved back and went to answer his master's call.

Elene lay in the fetal position, holding the cut in her palm. Her fingers throbbed from the splinters burrowing into her skin. The ground was thundering again. Vinol's cavalry was coming. "Wein," she mumbled between her sobs. "Terra, Mother, Father."

The door opening in the caravan opened her eyes. Something was shuffling inside, and before she could take a look, a hand took her shoulder. Elene sprang back and screamed, raising the piece of wood over her head and swinging it.

"Help!" she cried. "Wein!"

"It's me!"

His silver eyes open the safe place she's been searching for since she was separated from Wein, Rüfus, and Pete. She flung her arms around him and squeezed. This was the third time he found her, the third time he appeared when her situation was powerless. She didn't know how or why, but she clung to him and whimpered.

Lucan took her shoulders and pried her off him. The rough manner surprised her until she noticed something glazed his hands dark red. Something moist smudged her lips, and an iron taste

seeped through her teeth. Her quick breaths escalated. Blood was oozing from that same old wound on his chest.

A battle had birthed in their surroundings. The racket and cries didn't stop. The clash of swords, the booming in the distance.

"We can't stay," Lucan announced, his voice determined. "I need to take you back to the others."

"N—no." She shuffled from the debris and moved back into the caravan, but Lucan pulled her back in, nearly yanking her toward the opening. "Stop!"

"We have to go!" He was short of breath but squeezing her arm tightly. "Get ready to run."

"Lucan, it's too dangerous—there are b—bodies out there—it meant nothing to those soldiers. If they don't crush us, those ravenous dogs will tear us apart!"

His stare was brief, but she caught more in that second than she ever did on the road, eyes heavy with sadness.

"Elene." His right hand cupped her cheek. Cold blood smudged her skin. His hand was shaking. No. *She* was shaking. "You don't need to see any more than you can handle."

A sharp pain pinched the side of her temple, and before gravity took her, Lucan lifted her in his arms. His breathing was hoarse, and the brush of his unshaven chin prickled her forehead. The sensation was back again, a feeling she only felt when he held her.

A warmth of comfort and safety.

The sound of blades, of groaning men, echoed in the crevasse of Elene's mind. She remembered opening her eyes, and finding herself on the ground, watching Lucan fight an Averyan soldier. Then everything faded the noise, her sight, everything.

A wet nose smudged Elene's face. She grunted and moved to her side. Then came another soft, slimy lick. Fior staring back at her. She smiled and brushed his head. "You came back." Standing beside him was Ivory. "Did you two stick together?"

Fior moved back, leaving a flickering light to pierce through her pupils. Wood cracking and pops of embers flying on the ground. Everything hurt as she got up. Her eardrums were plugged, ringing

as the world still spun. The first thing she could make out was a group of Gypsians huddled together, survivors who solely looked at the ground.

"She's awake," a muffled voice said.

The shadow coming towards her took her shoulders. His blue eyes didn't blink as he placed his hand over her forehead. "How do you feel?"

"Wein," she said, relieved to see him. "Everything aches."

Wein took her hands and helped her back on her feet. "Thank Skiar, you broke nothing." The side of his temple was swollen, but he seemed alert.

"Don't say that." She moved sideways and saw her hair tumble over her shoulder. She touched it, realizing she lost her turban. Leaving as it was, she looked for the rest. Pete was on the floor, holding his arm. An extra shirt was used to keep it steady.

"It's broken." His lips were busted, his clothes torn and charred like he had gone through a chimney. "Wagon almost got me, nearly popped my arm off from my shoulder."

Rüfus came from behind her. His arm had been wrapped, but she could see some of the blood had gotten through. "Got into a few encounters with those Vinolean and Averyan bastards, got cut but not deep though, just a bit on my arms."

Suddenly his silver eyes flashed back in her mind, and his calm voice when he apologized. "Lucan!" she said. "Where is he?" Rüfus frowned and looked at Wein. "What—what is it?"

A scream detonated.

Elene glanced over. Not far, there were people hunched over a body who screamed.

"Keep him still!" Lorenza shouted.

Elene picked up her skirt but saw that dog had torn the bottom and exposed her pantalettes. Every step pulled something on her hip, made breathing painful. She pressed on, just to see what they were doing. She thought they were treating Lucan until she found a body left alone, leaning by a stump. The same hand pressed over his chest.

"No." Elene limped toward him, her heart squeezed at his condition, bathed in blood from head to toe. She went to her knees and reached for his cheek.

Hot.

He was alive.

Wein's steps stopped behind her. "Rüfus being a tall build was easy to find amid the battle," he said. "He had already found Pete, who found Lucan lying on the floor. We stuck together as we tried searching for you until we lost sight of Lucan. The next thing we knew, he appeared out of nowhere, slumped with you in his arms. Looking at him, it looked like he fought like hell to get to us. That wound of his reopened, and now he's suffering a fever."

"Everything happened fast," she mumbled. "One second, we're freeing Fior and Ivory, and the next, I'm suspended in the air by who knows how many feet." Elene moved back and sank her hands to her face. The dogs barked in her mind, the creaking of the caravan and Lucan stepping in to find her. After that, everything was a blur. Who knew what he faced when they got out, what he had to do to keep her safe. "It's my fault. Lucan got hurt because of me."

Wein gently smoothed her hair back to keep it from overlapping her face. "No, it was my fault. Lucan never wanted us to go."

"That man has good intuition, yes?" That strong voice was Lorenza. Even with the hell they went through, she managed to smile, wiping her hands off the blood. The man they were treating had gone quiet. The other Gypsians who were trying to help him were hugging one another. "This is not your brother's fault but mine. My people would faithfully follow me to hell, but I suggested you join me."

"We had no other option," Wein said. "We were in an active war zone."

Lucan groaned, pulling everyone's attention to him. His breathing was growing labored. "Don't worry," said Lorenza softly, placing her hand on his forehead. "We stitched his wounds and gave him something strong to knock him out."

"He needs a place to rest," Elene said. "Can you take us to your people?"

Lorenza frowned. "I'm sorry, Elene. I explained to your people that we do not open our doors to outsiders. Non-Gypsians who dare enter will face heavy consequences. You understand this, yes?"

"It's a pretty ridiculous rule considering the state we're in." Rüfus had heard them. "We wouldn't be alive if Lucan hadn't warned us."

A Gypsian man came, bringing the spotted horse that belonged to Lorenza. She took the reins and nodded at him, saying only words in their language. In one hive mind, the people went on their feet and entered their forest.

Lorenza watched them leave, eyes heavy and glossy as she gestured them goodbye, brushing her hand from her chin and back. The man who spoke to her repeated the same gesture and left.

"Well then," she said. "I must get going."

"Going?" Wein followed her to her horse. "Where to?"

"I will go back and search for any survivors." She adjusted the belt held on the reins.

Elene couldn't believe what she was hearing. "It's too dangerous."

"I know this." Lorenza raised her skirt to mount her horse. She wore no underpants, showing her bare legs and the blade she kept under.

"Wait." Her brother stopped her again. "Why are you going alone?"

"Leaders do not need followers when their destiny calls them."

Wein rubbed the back of his neck and peered at the forest before him. Lorenza's hard exterior softened, and it seemed she was waiting for him to say something, but her brother shut down as she feared and said nothing.

"Until we meet again," Lorenza told Elene, smiling but looking slightly disappointed in her brother.

The moment Lorenza turned, Wein took her shoulders and kissed her cheek. Startled, a smirk cornered her face. She mounted her horse this time, nodded at them, and left.

He couldn't see her anymore, but her brother lingered, watching the space as if she was still there.

"And now we're left with our current problem." Pete winced as he got up. "Aside from not getting any more help from those Gypsians."

"What… what is it?" Elene asked. What of all that has happened could come next?

"The wagon is destroyed. Everything, all the supplies Preisen gave us. Gone."

"That's right. Everything went up in the air when that Child of Rima used his powers to move us out of the way."

"At least we have our lives," Rüfus said. "Except now we don't know how far until Vinol and Lucan here hasn't come to."

"We know it's north," said Wein. "At this rate, we can't stay. We'll have to continue and get to Vinol one way or another."

It was awful to hear their destination was the kingdom that nearly got them killed. But it was too late to turn back, too dangerous to venture into the forest they weren't welcomed.

CHAPTER 27

LUCAN

The rumbles of laughter pulled Lucan from his deep slumber. Breathing hurt, and every muscle in his body ached. Against his will, he rode the painful wave, taking every inch of steel that pierced through him again. Major Rudra was there as his witness, standing in the dark open field with a dislocated arm and bent leg. The campfire's light blazed his smile, choking the air in his lungs.

Lucan reopened his eyes and heaved for air. The same campfire was there, the men sitting by it, rolling their dice on the ground. He rubbed his eyes and peered at the open field, finding the space empty.

"Lucan," Wein said. "Good to see you're awake. You really gave us a scare."

"Where are we?" His voice was hoarse, and he had been leaning by the stump of a tree.

"We're at the end of the Gypsian Forest, not far from Vinol."

As the fire crackled, Rüfus threw dice on the floor. "Less than three!" he exclaimed.

Lucan groaned to his feet. The campfire started to bounce and sway.

"Take it easy." A blurry Pete was sliding a long stick through a headless snake. Its head, skin, and guts were thrown nearby. "You have been suffering a fever the entire time."

"Why am I shirtless?" He was wearing a cloak, and the wool's designs were one of a kind, the type Elene and Wein wore.

"They were ruined," said Rüfus, who took his turn with the dice again. "You were soaked in blood from head to toe."

The diabolic moment flashed back, Lorenza's people up in the air and the wild eyes of the Child of Rima, who swept them like a pile of leaves. Elene's screams compelled him to cut through many soldiers. At the time, he didn't know if the blood on him was more of his or his enemy. He ran his fingers down his neck, finding his necklace unscathed, every diamond still in place.

By the fireplace were his boots, neatly placed on the side. It looked like they were washed. He found his socks inside and slipped into them. He curled his toes, thinking his pinky would stick out like it usually did, but the holes were patched up. A burgundy fabric replaced even the thin area for his soles.

"Elene did that." Wein rolled the dice in his hand. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit."

"You caught a fever, but we made sure you stayed cool. Fior and Ivory took turns carrying you." Wein threw the dice. "I lost."

Rüfus smacked his hand on his lap. The horses were awake and grazing, but the person who usually accompanied them was missing.

"Where's Elene?"

Wein pointed behind him. "She's right there."

Lucan's neck bones popped when he awkwardly turned. He searched the dark region for her turban, any movement she was near. "Where?" he said. "I don't see her."

Wein shot a glance at him like he was demented. "She probably had to relieve herself." He moved from the campfire. "I'll go see where she went. Nobody miscount my dice roll."

Lucan groaned to get closer to the fire and kept his hands against it. He wouldn't have done this if he didn't feel like he had lost a lot of blood.

"How much longer to Vinol?" Rüfus asked, arms crossed and faithfully waiting for Wein's arrival.

Lucan measured the forest. It's a good thing they reached the Gypsian Forest with their lives, though by the snake Pete was cooking and the missing wagon, they were screwed. "Hate to say it, but were nowhere near the city."

"That sounds like more walking," said Pete. "Good thing Elene found that small river and refilled our waterskin, and I got us some frog legs if you can't stomach snake meat."

The Harrow siblings had yet to return. Had they forgotten the Gypsians don't like outsiders?

"You better treat us to a nice meal," said Rüfus.

"We'll eat a grand feast."

"Will there be women?" he added. "Any good ones in Vinol?"

"They're all as seductive as they come by. Just don't go for the one named Delilah. Oscern has a sweet spot for her, and I rather none of you touch her." Lucan grazed his fingers against his new stitches. The salve they applied had a gritty texture with a strong minty scent, it was Corlan leaves, Gypsian medicine.

Wein and Elene returned from the forest, walking in a steady order fashion. Following behind them were two men.

Rüfus and Pete gripped their blades and got up.

"Easy now," one of them said. "We have our daggers to their backs."

Elene was wearing a new turban, carrying a few mushrooms and what looked like mint leaves. Upon seeing him, her widening eyes glossed over. Wein remained still, glancing at Pete and Rüfus.

"What do you want?" Pete asked, blade tightly in his grip.

"Your bag of oatmeal, the frog legs, and the two snakes you caught." The man was quick in speech, like most Vinoleans.

Rüfus patted his hands against the rock they placed dice on. "We did the work to get them. Get your own food."

"I told you already," Elene said, slightly turning behind. "We don't have to do this."

The dagger point moved to her neck. "You don't get to make that call. And nothing your brother says will change our minds, we hate Rima and anything related to Rima."

"That makes two of us."

"Elene, stop engaging with them," said Wein. "And Pete, do as they ask."

Cursing, Pete grabbed the snake he had skinned and took them from the flames. "Nice and easy, alright?"

Lucan joined him while Rüfus steadied his sword. The man frowned, seeing their approach. "You two stay back. The one with the broken arm can get close."

Elene inched to the other man. "Dan, right? I'm sorry for intruding on your family. If you bring the children over, we can share what we have."

The man gripped her head wrap, nearly sliding it off her head. "What did I say—shut your mouth!" He shouted so loud she shut her eyes.

"Easy, Ryker, she just wants to help," said Dan.

At ten feet apart, the exchange would be simple, fill the basket Ryker had with their frog legs, a bag of oatmeal he didn't know they had, and two uncooked snakes for Elene and Wein.

One by one, Elene put them in his bag. She hesitated with the mushrooms and kept them firmly with her dress. "You must take the stems out before cooking them, or it could make them sick. Whatever you do, don't let them eat it."

"Dammit, Elene," said Wein. "Can't you feel their sharp daggers to our backs?

"Put the mushrooms in the bag, woman," the one named Ryker said. "Don't do anything you'll regret."

"But if you let me, I'll cook for you."

Ryker grew annoyed, but his partner was starting to relax. "If she goes, none of you follow."

"Like hell we would allow that," said Pete.

"It's alright, Pete," said Elene. "I'll explain later. You four have to trust me on this."

"Elene, think carefully," said Wein. "What could happen to you if you go alone."

"That's exactly why I'm doing this." The man took her arm and guided her to the forest. "I'll be back!"

Seeing her turn with two men opened a sinking feeling in his gut. Elene seemed confident, but there was still a chance she might never come back. Was he alright with that?

"Wait," he called, slowly raising his hands for them to see he had no weapon. "I'll come with you."

"The deal has been made."

"What deal? You robbed us and cheated us out of his sister, who just wants to help. If we lose her, we lose our best cook." Elene fluttered her eyes to the ground. The men were aware of his small limp, eyeing his condition. "I'm less of a danger than her brother and friends—but you can't let us be alright with you taking her like that."

"Fine," said Ryker. "Seeing you kept that mouth shut. No weapons. Nothing."

"Got it."

Lucan and Elene walked ahead with daggers aimed at their backs. What remained of the light paved the way, but soon they were covered by the forest's dark embrace.

The Gypsian Forest had a strange air about it, bright green leaves with dark molding barks. There was a presence here, either from being here for the first time or because he was still delirious from the blood loss.

Not fifteen minutes later, they found a wagon where the wheel had fallen off the axle. Peeking from within were two boys and one little girl, the bags under their eyes were dark, their frowns, shaky.

"It's alright," Dan said. "The woman here is going to cook for you."

Elene leaned towards the pot that was kicked sideways. The iron had grime from milled corn. She rolled her sleeves and picked it up, saying she needed to wash it. "I hear a stream nearby."

"Over here," said Ryker.

The stream was not far, just behind their campsite.

The children remained inside, eyes wide with curiosity and fear. Lucan wobbled and swayed as he leaned on a stump, his legs barely able to hold his weight. He looked at his callous hand, dirty and bloody from having nearly bled to death a second time.

How long has Zorn suspected the state of his body was declining? Sure, his bones could break just as easily as a regular man, and he lacked the strength and healing capabilities Children of Rima hold, but maybe there was a point to this. Maybe he's become frail because it wasn't meant to last.

Something uneven on the ground caught his focus. A grave.

"That's our children's mother," said Dan. "Our wife passed away recently."

"I'm sorry."

Dan blinked the tears from his eyes and set the fire. "She caught a treacherous fever. No doctor from Vinol could help us. So we left Vinol in hopes we could buy some Gypsian medicine. But we didn't make it far." His hands balled into a fist. "King Pann's cavalry nearly trampled us to death. We didn't make it in time, and now we don't know how to part with her."

"We were there too and left in this state."

Dan rubbed the scruff of his grey beard. "You'll have to excuse us. My late wife's other husband, Ryker, hasn't been taking it well. That's why he's so bitter toward that girl. My wife was like that. Always having the heart to help others, not realizing that it would get her sick and leave her children motherless."

Elene came back with the basket of frogs, washed from how the basket dripped from water. Ryker followed behind, carrying a slab of stone they must have found by the stream. With some of the salt they had, Elene seasoned the snake, carefully cutting the mushroom, stuffing them inside the cavity, and putting them by the fire.

"This is all I could find," Ryker set down a sack of what looked like milled corn.

"That'll do."

The slab of stone was put beside the fire. A small kettle bubbled with boiled water. Rather than touch the frog legs, she used two sticks to dump them in. Since they returned, Elene had dedicated herself to her cooking. She poured mint and the remaining salt into the mixing, followed by their entire milled corn.

Two boys and one girl came out of hiding, each curiously watching her pour some water into a mixing bowl. She smiled at them and gave them a small wave. They hid back at that moment.

From what he recalled in Melodia, children seemed to be her weakness, and they, in return, had a liking for her. They got closer, and he could see their sunken eyes, dirt muddled their clothes, and soiled cheeks.

Elene wiped her forehead with her sleeve. When the snake's fat juices started to agitate the flame, she would collect them in the bowl and mix them. "It's not much," she said. "But these will dry up nicely and will make a great snack with enough nutrition for your way back home."

Ryker, who watched by the carriage, scoffed. One of the boys wanted to climb his leg, so he picked him up. "We're not going back home."

Elene mixed harder now. "Why not? You have three little mouths to feed."

Dan was nodding his support of Ryker. "We were put in this situation because of Vinol, and the Gypsians only take their own. We can't go back, not after what they did."

"I get it," said Elene. "Believe me I do. Where I live, some people look at me like I'm an abomination. Living with them and their self-righteous crap every day is enough to want to pull my eyeballs out." The little girl at her side gasped. "Sorry, I mean. They make me so angry."

"Then you understand why we can't leave. Eventually, our anger will lead us to seek revenge."

"That isn't true." Elene flipped the unleavened flatbread and started stacking the cooked ones. "I haven't mentioned the good people who accepted me for who I am." Some bits were charred from the intense heat but still looked edible. When the snake was thoroughly cooked, she cut the pieces and stacked them over the flatbread. "From the stitching on your clothes, the shape of that wagon. You and your family must've had a privileged life, one you two shared with your wife. But that life isn't here. What your children remember of her isn't in Gypsian Forest, but where they share their memories the most."

Ryker and Dan looked at one another. They haven't said a rebuttal, and by the way they looked at their children, Elene said some truth. She put the remaining stack of flatbread, wrapped them in a cloth, and left it aside.

While the children started to eat, Ryker and Dan didn't partake. As they said, all the food was for the young mouths, and they ate heartedly.

"Thanks," Dan said. "For cooking."

"The oatmeal…" Elene said.

"Yes, we know how to make oatmeal," Ryker said. "You two can leave now."

"You're welcome." Lucan marched from the campsite. *Assholes.*

Elene was hesitant about leaving, her determination to fix their problems when they were in the same hole bothered him.

"Don't worry, girl, we'll head back," said Dan. "We just need one more day with our wife."

"Wait." Ryker reached into his wagon. He carried the same grumpy face but handed over a wrinkled paper. "These are the routes you can take to Vinol. I have them memorized in my mind." He poured half of the oatmeal into another bag. "This should be enough for the both of us."

"Thank you, this means a lot." Elene waved at the children. They were so immersed in their meal they didn't notice she was leaving.

Lucan led the way back to the campsite. The place was damp, and the noise of insects and frogs echoed throughout. It was sunset hour, but it was darker already in the forest. The last remaining rays of light were faint and foggy.

"You really are something, you know that?" he said.

It was getting hard to see Elene, but he could feel her smiling. "When I saw those children, my perspective about those men changed." She glanced at him, and up close, her dark eyes would have swallowed what remained of the light. "Nothing I do will make up for what I did in Mudburrow. The only way I can pay is to save as many lives as I can, even if they threaten me."

"Anyone, huh?" He certainly would not be on that list.

"Yes." Her eyes fell for a moment. "And believe it or not, that also includes you."

"Really? You spare killers now?"

"Don't be so smug about it," she said in a tired tone. "Out there, when the cavalry nearly trampled us to death, you got me out of it." A low, deep ribbit brought her to raise her skirt and look at the ground. "Well, anyway. Thank you for saving my life. One day I'll repay it. Somehow."

The incoming ribbit sent her wincing like the mere sound had bitten her. She marched ahead, urgently searching for the exit out of the forest.

Lucan chortled. "What's with the fear of frogs? You hear them in Melodia."

"You try being a girl and having the stupid boys throw them at you for sport. My hands were shaking when I had to touch the dead ones Pete caught."

"Ah." He steadied his pace and tried not to laugh so he wouldn't strain himself. At this rate, Elene was already six feet ahead. "Mind giving me time to catch up?"

"Oh." She slowed down, focusing back on where Dan and Ryker were settled. Their story was probably still hanging on her mind. When she turned back, she gasped and dodged the tree she was moments from slamming into.

"They'll be fine." After he caught up, he continued. "I think you knocked some sense into them."

"I don't know…" She followed behind him this time, arms crossed. "It makes me sad they couldn't part with their wife, that she could've been alive if those Vinolean soldiers valued human life."

My wife was like that girl. Always having the heart to help others. Not realizing that it would get her sick.

Lucan came to a full stop. "Listen, Little Heathen."

Elene was doing anything but that. She was head down, watching every step she made. A few moments later, her leg wobbled from having stepped on an uneven branch.

Lucan frowned at her behavior. For a grown-ass woman, her careless movements made him irrationally angry. Since his words didn't move her, he went to reach for her hand, but their knuckles bumped. The brush of her skin brought her to raise her skirt again.

"Is it a frog?" Her shoulders rose and squeezed inward. "Can we leave now?"

"Did you even hear me speak to you earlier?"

A frog leaped between them, and she promptly backed away and raised one foot.

"Skiar." He took those icy hands, and the response was instant. Her focus narrowed, and it surprised him that her hands still remained his, fingers uncurled, nearly dangling in his hold. "What I was trying to say is, you can do all you can in the world to make up for what happened in Mudburrow, but if that involves putting your life at risk, then what's the point?"

Elene looked at the hand that held hers. She didn't yank it away, even after a frog leaped between them. "I guess I didn't think of it

like that. When I saw Dan and Ryker's children, everything happened so fast I just wanted to help."

"Really? Even though you're accident-prone?"

"Hey, why are you saying it like that?"

"Because I want you to stop worrying me," he said coolly.

She squeezed his hand, startling him but liking the shape. Her free hand patted the sides of her turban, but her stare fell to his necklace. "I'll try, but you know I don't take advice from killers."

"Thank you." Lucan squeezed her hand back but didn't let go. "We should continue."

The corner of Elene's lips went upward. "Then you should lead the way."

Those words fluttered a warm feeling. He went on, hands holding one another. Once they made it through the dense parts of the forest, their palms were sweaty.

Facing her, he discovered she had been staring at him the entire time. He picked up a new scenery and caught from his peripheral that she chose a different one as well.

"We're almost out of here," he said to ease the pressure in the air. Why hadn't he let go of her hand? Why hadn't she?

The ferns were rustling in the distance, then came the stomping of boots and the sound of sheaths lightly tapping the belt.

Wein and Rüfus appeared, and they promptly released each other's hands.

The brother leaned in, face scrunched until he made out their faces. "Oh, thank Rima, we were worried when you two didn't return."

Elene joined her brother. "We're fine. Nothing happened."

"Why did you insist on going with them?" Wein was the leader now, and she followed him faithfully.

As Elene explained, Rüfus stayed at his side.

Outside of the forest, their campfire still burned where Pete, Fior, and Ivory waited for them. For the night, nobody ate. The oatmeal Elene was given was lighter but their only fuel for the rest of the way.

"Who's ready for another game of Winner's Luck?" Rüfus took out his dice and gave the slap of stone a smack.

"Count me out." Lucan placed the map Ryker gave them on the ground so the fire's light could show him the details. Even if they made it to the end of the Gypsians Forest, they had many more miles to cover. Ryker sketched a route he marked as the quickest and safest. Rather than go through the front entrances, they could go through the woods and enter through the west gates.

"It's too risky, but it's our only option."

For the night, Wein, Pete, and Rüfus started a new game of dice. Elene didn't stay to watch them bicker for long. She seemed to enjoy her company with Ivory and Fior, petting them, telling them how brave they had been since they left Melodia. The cloak she let him borrow was back over her shoulders.

"Do you think we'll ever get to Melodia?" Pete was rubbing his backside. Having only the ground to sleep on, and a broken arm, there was hardly any rest at night. "We've been gone for months."

"Think we should've headed through Lotter's Mountain. Better than being caught in a battle and having giant horses to dodge."

"Our fortune will change once we get to Vinol," said Lucan. "And don't you all worry, I have more than enough coins to restore what we lost and see a good doctor."

"That's good," said Elene, who was still an earshot away. "Fior and Ivory need new horseshoes."

Wein agreed, sharing that their hooves needed a good trim.

Lucan rolled the map and tucked it in his trousers. He imagined his feet swollen with blisters by the time they reached Vinol. Worse of all, every limb in his body felt like they were torn and put back together the wrong way.

He drummed his hands on his chest until his thumb traced the necklace. Maybe Rüfus was right. If they had just gone through Lotter's Mountain, they would have avoided everything. But then, what was going to happen when they returned, anyway? Everything Matias put on his son's back was gone.

The figure from the campfire left the horses and passed by them. Lucan moved to his side, just to see what trouble she would get into next. She didn't go far, just a safe distance from the campsite where she could stare at the moons.

"Again!" Pete cried. "The dice fell out of the circle."

"What are you yappin' about? It's within the line!" Rüfus retorted.

"Nobody touches the dice until I get a good look at it," Wein said.

Lucan chuckled and left their bickering game. With little food to eat, this was probably how they distracted their empty guts. The limp of his steps shifted her posture.

Elene seemed to know her time alone was invaded. "Came to look at the moons with me?"

"If that's okay," he answered.

Elene spun, hand pressed to her chest. "I thought you were Wein."

"Want me to leave?"

She looked back at the moons instead. "I don't mind."

The high moons glowed over the open field, and the breeze moved the fog around. Seeing his breath visible signaled that his companions may be feeling cold. Elene didn't seem to be shivering, but perhaps she was used to the cold from the mountains.

"Thanks for stitching my socks," he said to break the silence.

"You're welcome."

He looked back at the moons. Elene seemed to be mesmerized by it. He supposed anyone would after all that rain and cloudy days. The frogs were still in the forest, calling for their mates for the night.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"It's private." Caydon's teasing came back about not knowing what he and Elene talked about. They had to have mentioned him. Why else would she look at him with that surprised look.

"What are you thinking about?" Elene's voice brought him back.

Lucan looked down at her. Her curly lashes had a heavy gaze when she looked up. "It's private too."

"Fair enough." Elene sidestepped, her arm nearly brushing against his.

Was she cold? Was she asking to be covered like he did outside the Dice'n Hog? No, she had her cloak back. He sidestepped as well, allowing their arms to press against one another.

Elene then leaned her head against his shoulder. He froze, sensing some tension behind him.

Pete, Wein, and Rüfus stopped squabbling the moment her head leaned against him. They certainly made him believe they were invested in their game but were watching them like a store owner watches a frequent shoplifter.

"Don't mind them," she whispered. "I don't care what they think. But if you don't like that I'm doing this, let me know."

"Little Heathen, you're the last person I find intimidating." He wrapped his arm around her and moved her closer. She inhaled but didn't pull back. "What I do mind is being left in the dark."

Looking up at him, her dark eyes started to absorb the glittery stars. "What do you mean?"

"What you told Dan. I noticed some of the Melodians treat you like an outcast. I tried asking what the big deal was, but Wein says it's a story only you can share."

Elene's stare fell, and she started messing with her hair tassel. "It's a story not worth venturing."

Lucan inched toward her. "Still. I want to know."

She nocked her head back and scrunched her face. "Then you can continue wanting because it's not going to happen. I refuse to let another person give me that look. You least of all. Not if I can prevent it."

Lucan chuckled. "That bad, huh? Well, knowing that you wanted to send me back to the river, nothing you do can surprise me at this point."

Her shoulders rose, and her head spun to him, tassel slapping her cheek. She shook herself out of his hold and confronted him, index finger raised to his face. Her mouth was open, but the words were missing.

"You're impossible to tease," he mused, watching her pissed-off look recede.

"Very well. Let's make a deal."

"Now things are getting interesting."

She breathed deeply, looking unhappy about it. "Answer my question as a deposit, and I'll consider telling you my story when I'm ready."

Lucan blew the strands of hair that fell over his face. "Consider? That's not exactly a fair trade."

Those stubborn eyes flashed at him. "Take it or leave it."

"Fine." He leaned his head back and rolled his eyes. "Ask me anything."

Her focus dropped to his collarbone. "Whose necklace is that?"

The mention of it brought back her stature, her long dress as she stood at the high steps of Aelith. He took the necklace off and held it in the palm of his hand.

"You only take it out before you go to sleep," Elene noted, tilting her head sideways. "I imagined it must be special?"

"It is." Lucan took her hand and placed it on her palm. She jumped at the jewelry's weight and gave it a closer look. "It belonged to my mother."

Elene then held the gold leaf ornament against the moons. "Are those genuine diamonds?"

"Yeah, taken from Aelith's mountains."

"May I ask what happened to her?"

His reasoning reminded him to lie, to spin another damn lie. "She… died before Aelith fell."

Elene returned the necklace back and watched it dangle over his chest. "And your father?"

"That's quite a lot of questions."

Her eyebrows rose, and she crossed her arms, hopefully realizing she was surpassing their deal.

Lucan swallowed the pinch in his throat. "He's gone, but this necklace was a gift from him to her."

"Well, it's beautiful," she said promptly, as if she sensed the discomfort in his voice. "That's why I couldn't leave it sinking in the mud."

"*You* found it?"

She blinked, perplexed by his sudden reaction. "Yes, back at the Beaven River. I mended the broken chain and gave it to Terra so she could give it to you." Her eyes narrowed. "Why do you ask?"

Lucan shook his head. Women. Terra likely wanted the credit or perhaps thought he would be insulted that Elene had it. Just knowing that she found it, that she was willing to give it back…

"Why do you hide it under your shirt?" She inhaled. "I mean, you don't have to answer."

"So robbers wouldn't see it." She earned that one. "Anyway, the necklace is too girly for my taste, and my mother wanted me to pass it down to my future wife."

Elene sidestepped from him, the frame of her face facing the other way.

"Hey." He took her shoulders so she would look at him, but she denied him. "I'm not the marrying kind, alright?"

"From the way you flirted with my sister, I highly doubt that."

"The last woman I loved fed me to a group of bandits."

Her eyes bulged for a moment, but she remained steadfast, stepping back and resuming a safe space between them. He guided her shoulders to turn around so they could both look back at the moons, as he didn't like how quickly she repelled him.

"Bandits, huh?"

He grinned. "I mean, looking back at it now, Marca was only trying to survive. I guess after being with me for two years, she realized I wasn't going to provide the stable life she wanted, so she took the next best option and rejoined her old group of bandits."

"You call *that* stable?"

"It is if it means no longer having an empty stomach and a roof over your head. Marca was always a patient straight thinker, but her friends were hot-headed criminals. Add Zorn's mouth to that, and the standoff soured into a fight for our lives."

"Did you…" Elene bit her lip. "Harm her?"

"She was a lousy fighter and certainly not a jumping bean like you." Elene furrowed her eyebrows. It made him smile that much more. "Marca tried to stop them, but it was too late, and I did what any person would to preserve my life. Her betrayal hurt me, but I was still fresh on her and wanted to fix us. She refused me, called me a killer, and said that was all I would ever be good for."

"Lucan…"

"It's alright. You were right in calling me that. I've seen and done things without questioning my morals. For the last three years, it became about proving to myself that I could provide the life Marca wanted, but she no longer wanted me, and I hadn't run into her since."

"You sound like you still have feelings for her."

"We had no closure, but it doesn't matter anymore. I don't want to venture through that level of affection again."

"That's very bold of you to say, don't you think?"

Lucan chuckled at her optimistic approach. "I guess there is some benefit in having someone you care about, but love's most powerful symptom is obsession, and that leads to stupidity."

Elene rested her head back on his arm. Something was running through her mind because he could see her smiling, eyes twinkling in the night. When he asked what was funny, she shook her head, saying she was thinking about what Caydon had said to her.

He recalled that night, Elene and Caydon talking all night, and that brief moment they looked at him. "And what did he say?"

"Can't share it. It's between us."

His breathing quickened. "Do you like him?"

She smiled and brushed the baby hairs from the back of her neck. "Yes, I do like him."

Lucan moved from her, taking from her the shoulder she rested on. Elene blinked at his sudden reaction. Why did he ask her that—why did he let go as fast as those words left him?

"Hey." Wein took both of their shoulders. "You two better get some sleep, especially you, Lucan."

"Yeah." He abruptly turned around. "Forgot I need to gather my strength."

"Do you need anything?" Elene asked.

"Just look forward to the feast The Dustbowl has to offer."

She smiled and nodded.

CHAPTER 28

LUCAN

"Look at the growth of their hooves. They're in dire need of trimming."

"Which I told Lucan I could do if he just got me the tools." It was going to take more than reassurance for Elene to leave Fior and Ivory in the farrier's care. Since their encounter with those Vinolean soldiers, any trust in the locals was that much more broken.

"You want my services or not, little woman?"

Elene's unruly glare showed her dogged determination. She was no pushover and, least of all, with her horses. "I never wanted your services."

The farrier slapped his hands on his leather apron. They were cut in the middle so the hooves could go between his legs when he needed to nail the iron shoes.

His daughter, who was the hostler of the inn, patted his shoulder. "You don't have to trust my pa, but he cares and loves horses as much as you do. As the manager of these stables, I'll promise you that nothing will happen to your Fior or Ivory."

Elene raised an eyebrow. "Who told you their name?"

She smiled and fluttered her lashes to Wein. "That handsome man over there."

Wein didn't look from the tools on the wall, as if he didn't hear the compliment, back to pretending he never showed interest in the opposite sex.

"Elene, there's no use fussing when I paid them already." When they arrived in Vinol, the first place Lucan went to was the bank. He

withdrew a bag of five gemstones, fifty gold coins, forty silver, and fifty copper. "If you want those tools to do them yourself, I'll get them, but we are just as tired as them and need to recover."

"Alright," Elene said, drawing her focus to the farrier. "I'm sorry."

Her apology shifted the farrier's lips to a smile. He went back to work, leading Fior and Ivory to their own stalls.

Vinol's bustling street tightened up the Melodians like a pack of chickens surrounded by wolves. Aggressive carriages were the real danger, as were the pedestrians who walked in masses, unapologetic for any shoulder bumping.

The city planners built all the major Vinolean roads around King Pann's palace on the hill. From afar, the arching towers and lofty buildings formed a defensive wall. Those with heavy coin purses or some notable reputation had access to those streets, keeping out the good number of poor and sick beggars living in little tents in alleyways.

Elene drank the sight of the place, spinning to every corner, eyeing the lacey corsets the women fashioned. Since they looked at the moons together, they hadn't shared a deep conversation. Wein kept her near him, and Pete was always watching him.

"Look at that inn." Elene pointed at a six-story building.

Lucan caught up to her, nearly brushing his arm with hers. "You don't like the one I picked?"

"It's not that, just that it looks like a giant pearl with windows."

"Then that's where we will be spending the night."

Elene took his arm, eyes widening. "Really?"

Wein gave him an apprehensive look. Before he could say something, Lucan gave him his bag of gold coins so they could reserve their rooms. "You guys wash up, buy some clothes and get Pete checked with that arm. We can all meet at The Dustbowl for dinner, say seven o'clock." He gave them Ryker's map and circled the location.

"How will we know the time?" Pete was rubbing his belly. "Broken arm or not, I was hoping we would eat now."

"There's a wall sundial in every major bank. You won't miss the time here since banks run this place. If you make it to The Dustbowl

before me, ask for a private room, and ignore the fee—I'm paying, after all."

"Oh, I won't," Rüfus chuckled. "I'm starving!

"Where are you going?" Wein, who had grown rather quiet with him, finally spoke.

"To handle business," he said, turning from them. "You four just get ready for the trip back to Melodia."

The spices of every hustling restaurant followed him. Being back in Vinol, he could only think of Zorn and Oscern, this complicated place of laws, and the indulgence of life was their home. When he was done with his errands, he was going to need to withdraw more coins from the bank. Matias still needed to get paid, and if he came empty-handed, his irritable wife would conjure up a storm.

The little shop with a creaking wooden signpost made him look at it. As he was passing the wide window. The shopkeeper there was dusting the shelves. Their stares froze for a moment. The owner smiled and gestured to him inside.

Lucan entered the shop to make sure, and as he suspected, he caught the eyes of a familiar trader, Fredrick.

"I thought I recognized those silver eyes. You're that young man I picked up years ago."

"So, this is where you've been all this time." Lucan glanced at his store filled with borrowed items, silverware, crates of unpolished candelabrum, old paintings hung on the wall and a chandelier with a missing crystal. "You run a pawnshop, then?"

"On and off," he said, leaning against his counter. "My family runs it, and I still travel the roads in search of more valuable items."

"I'm surprised you're talking to me," he said, crossed-armed. "Last I recall, you said to pretend we never met right before you kicked my friends and me off your wagon."

"Ah, I was just angry." Fredrick waved his hands as if to dismiss the memory from his face. "But I'm no longer a Riman." He raised the necklace he carried for him to look at. "I now follow the deity of horns, Alrcar. He is the spirit of good health and prosperity."

"I see that."

"Alrcar fits my lifestyle more than some celestial being coming down to stop the world's ending."

"You still remember that?"

"Well, it was a good story, that much I'll tell you." Lucan could only nod. Deep down, the news disappointed him that his newborn faith was gone. Even though he teased him, he had hoped he was still a Riman. "Want to look at some of my items—give you a lil' discount."

"You wouldn't happen to have any ceramic mugs shaped like a buck, would you?"

"Nothing of that sort."

"Then never mind, but I'll visit next time I come around."

"Very well," Fredrick said. "May Alrcar keep you safe."

Lucan left every shop he visited with sore feet. His empty gut complained by yet another food vendor. Any Vinolean soldier or guard he tried avoiding, fearing they would recognize his face. The hilt of his new sword glistened from the light. He kept it on hand just in case someone wanted to do to him what they did to Wein and Gourd.

Before going to The Dustbowl, he met the farrier they hired. He finished working on the hooves, and the pampered horses were eating fodder while the hostler brushed them.

"I have a favor to ask," he said, hoping not to interrupt.

"Ah, did your wife ask you to check on us?"

Rather than correct her wrongs, he continued. "I need help finding a sturdy trading wagon that will fit them nicely. I won't spare any expense and pay you for the trouble."

The hostler set her brush down and left the stall. "Well, alright, though, it's quite late to be looking for a wagon."

"I can wait for tomorrow. I made some arrangements that might make the task easier for the both of us."

At the Dustbowl Tavern, the smell of steamed dumplings and broth hurried him to the front. He went to the far back where the private rooms were, and as he had hoped, they reserved a room. Though privacy was scarce here, a thin veil separated them from the main room.

The rectangular table was spacious for a party of ten. Rüfus and Pete sat together while Wein and Elene sat across from them. He sat

with the men, seeing Wein had given him that stare again. Tankards of foaming beer were already served. Silver plates of glistening roasted duck and caramelized pork were served as the main entrée. On the side were meat pies, desserts, dragon fruit, rye bread, and almond-seeded bread.

"Surr'ee, they brou' the food," Rüfus barely said, mouth full with the meat pie.

"That was expected," Lucan said.

Elene nervously looked at the sex workers who flung themselves at the men and women.

"This must be the food Skiar eats!" Pete's cheeks were red.

"You shouldn't have had so much beer before eating," Wein chastised. He shut his eyes when he saw a man lay a woman on the table. Luckily the owner threatened them to leave or rent a place upstairs.

"What would Mother do if she saw us here?" Elene chuckled. "This place is worse than Arrow Den."

"Just eat your fill so we can leave," Wein answered as the maids came and set down the special order.

A bowl of steamed buns towered over a leg of a pig, two whole chickens, a fruit platter, buttered buns, and all the beer they could drink.

The roasted duck caught Elene's stare, her lips smiling but not exposing her teeth, not like how he imagined.

"I'm in heaven," said Rüfus. "If only Gourd was here to join us."

Pete raised his tankard. "Our friend is with us, watching over us."

"To Gourd!" Rüfus sang.

Everyone raised their tankard and drank.

"Now that we made it this far, what's our next plan?" Pete asked. "Since we have money, we can afford the toll fee down Vine Road."

"Speaking of money." Elene's dark eyes focused on him. "I bought something while we were here, just a few items. I hope that was alright."

"That's fine with me." Before Lucan could go for the last remaining buttered bun, an arm wrapped him and almost put him in a chokehold.

"Oh, my sweet Lucan, I thought you dead!"

"Tabetha," he wheezed, tapping her arm. "Let go."

Crumbles of pie crust fell over Rüfus's bottom lip. Tabetha moved back and smiled. She held the chair like she would sit down, but she knew better than to go that far. "And who might these handsome men and woman be?"

"This is Elene, her brother Wein, Pete, and Rüfus."

"I heard so much about you," Rüfus said. Tabetha ate the attention and quickly left him to sit next to him. "You have?" Her fingers trailed over his broad shoulders. "You don't look like you're from here."

"I'm not—need someone to give me the grand tour."

Tabetha giggled but focused back on him. "Did you find Zorn and Oscern?"

Lucan nodded and drank from his tankard.

"Good, they were worried sick after you didn't return from battle. And Zorn, I've never seen him so scared." Hearing that felt like getting punched in the stomach. "Well, I must be going," she said. "I heard you were back, so I came to check on you."

"You're not staying?" Rüfus said, half defeated.

"Sorry, sweetie pie." She dabbed his nose with her index finger. "Delilah is getting married." Lucan shot a glance at her. "Yeah, you can tell that poor Oscern someone beat him to her."

"And who's marrying her?"

"Some wealthy mine owner who lives in a village south of Vinol. He's taking her and all her little critters. Anyway, the girls and I are going to see her off, and I better not be late."

"So just like that, huh? She left him."

Frowning, Tabetha left Rüfus and marched back to him. "Oscern and Delila were never a couple, so don't you dare blame her, and if you see him, tell him nicely, okay? I know it'll hit him hard, considering what Amaro said."

Lucan shook his head. "I—I don't know. Don't think it's worth telling him if it will tear him apart."

"That's the Lucan I know." She took his face and gave him a kiss on the lips. Her body gave the aroma of flowers, and her lips tasted like honey. "But you and I both know the truth sets you free." She winked at Rüfus. "Toodles!"

Rüfus sulked his head on the table. "She was perfect."

"Perfect eye for the coin," Lucan said, smudging his lips.

Wein had a look of revulsion, and Pete had been chuckling. Elene didn't look his way. Rather, she was nudging her brother. "Are you going to tell him?"

Wein set his tankard aside and leaned on the table. "Lucan, we appreciate what you're doing for us. We do, but we need to discuss our way back to Melodia if the road will be dangerous with the snow building up the peak of the mountains."

"I'm fully aware you want to return home," he said, taking a buttered bun. "Now it's your turn to be patient and wait. That's what I had to do when I wanted to leave Melodia. It's only fair that you practice it."

"Yes," said Rüfus. "I support Lucan fully, now, if you'll excuse me." He got up, popped his collar, and went to find his nightly company.

Pete shrugged. "I'm gonna go piss."

The clatter of laughing women made Wein tap his finger against the table. "You couldn't find us a more decent place to eat?"

"I've been to every tavern, and this one serves the best food."

His face nearly went pale. "I didn't think Vinol was this… open."

"Ah, you get used to it."

"No doubt with company," Elene whispered.

Lucan looked at her, and she looked away. "She's right," said Wein. "Rüfus is discreet about his weakness back home. But if you plan to stay in Melodia, you'll need to be as careful as well."

"You guys," he said, groaning. "I never claimed to be an angel. Hell, I never wanted you two to look at me in this light, but this isn't who I am anymore. You should have realized that when I didn't find any company to any settlement we've been through."

Wein groaned and washed his throat with more beer. "I think I'll turn in for the night." He patted Elene's head. "Don't stay out too long, and be sure to ask Pete to walk you back to the inn."

"Alright," Elene said to his back, taking his tankard for herself.

Lucan thought about what he had said. He understood Wein was in a hurry, but he couldn't fix things overnight. Maybe it was a good thing that he didn't mention how they were heading back to Melodia.

"Don't mind him." Elene was taking bites of the roasted duck. "Wein is worried at how our father is going to react when we tell him we lost everything."

"That's why I emptied out half of my savings."

"Oh, Lucan," she said. "Father will not accept it. You're better off working for him."

"Sure, if he doesn't accept my coin."

Her stare left her plate and rose to meet his. "Does that mean you're going to stay in Melodia for a while longer?"

"That was my plan unless my history with women is too much for you."

"We all have a past… so… please stay." The word 'please,' sounded like a new language coming from her. Her lashes flickered until she began to touch her face. "What are you looking at? Is there sauce on me?"

"No," he answered, focusing back on his drink.

"You're lying," she said, taking the silver spoon. "Where is it?"

"Don't believe me?"

"You? Never."

Lucan left his chair and sat beside her. Her cheeks grew redder when he leaned towards her. "There's sauce on your new blouse." She looked down, and he flicked her nose. "Thought you don't believe me."

Elene knocked her head back and laughed. He scooted his chair closer to her, and she calmed down, snatching a piece of meat.

"Here's what concerns me about your brother." He raised his empty tankard in the air for a refill. "He's uncomfortable with all this fornication, but he doesn't blink an eye when that Maiden Derli weds strangers who may not want to be together."

"Wein doesn't like it." She smiled at the server, who refilled his and her tankard. "That's why he avoids it."

"Why didn't you?"

Elene shrugged and said it was too late to do anything about it. "I was about your age when I made a Vow of Marriage."

"But those are made between Rimans and Rima but you…"

"Like I said, it was long ago, and once my partner is chosen, they'll be parading every step of my matrimony to every Melodian."

"If that happened long ago, then you were once a Riman."

She inhaled, fingers curling to a fist. "Stop. I know you want to know my past, but I'm not ready."

Lucan gave up and rested his chin on his fist. All he could do now was watch. Elene never returned to her old seat. She finished her tankard and got another refill. It seemed even without talking, she could enjoy her own company, more so now that Rüfus was gone and Pete had yet to return. Her cloak covered most of her dress, but when she moved back and forth, her one-piece dress was a berry blue, with a high collar and white sash that wrapped her waist.

"Careful with your intake," he said after she asked for a refill. "Last time you were drunk, you charged at me."

His warning didn't register. A couple in the main room had absorbed her attention. Their noses nearly touched as they talked. She smiled when they smiled, and she frowned when the woman pulled away.

A new face strode into their reserved room, uninvited, but the heels of her polished boots clanking toward them like she owned the place. She wore a ruffled dress with a jacket and neatly updo hair. Lucan blinked for a bit, perplexed that it took him a second late to recognize Delilah, looking like a woman of class, fancy hat and everything.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Delilah looked around, overlooking Elene. "Oscern isn't here?" She snapped her fingers and bit her thumb. "I thought Tabetha was lying so I wouldn't come."

Lucan crossed his arms. "Don't you have a husband to please?"

"Excuse me?"

"If Oscern had been here, what makes you think he would see your face?"

"Lucan," Elene chastised.

Delilah gave him a wayward look. "You don't need to understand my life, but you will respect my choices, and if anyone is telling him, it should be me. It won't be long before these cold mountains become too much for my—"

"Don't bother with your excuses because he's not here." What was done was done. "Now go live your happily ever after and never bother Oscern again."

Delilah marched off. The regulars who saw her tried to get her attention, but she bumped them out of her way. Elene was looking

at him, giving him a grieving look. "Before you say anything, my words were justified."

"It's just…"

"She's connected to Oscern more than she knows, and look how easily she moved on." Soulmates. That's what that Amaros said she and his friend were. A Child of Rima who could identify soulmates should have relieved Oscern's worries, but when they tried to tell him, he didn't want to know. Zorn justified he was anxious about the knowledge they had, wanting to give Delilah the autonomy to live her life.

"I don't want to pry, but couldn't you see the remorse in her eyes? Maybe she had no choice. Some people do things because they have to."

"Doubt it."

"If you made a Vow of Marriage, and Maiden Derli chose your partner, would you marry or risk breaking a sacred promise?"

"I would never make that vow in the first place, and if I did, no one should dictate my choices."

"You're still not putting yourself in their shoes."

"Well, maybe I'm not as imaginative as you."

Elene seemed empowered because she propped herself from the chair. "What if you had no choice and had to marry someone like me?"

Lucan leaned back into his chair to the point of teetering it.

Elene, noticing his shift, glanced at the table. A gloomy look soaked through her curious eyes. "That hard to imagine, huh?"

"It's not that." He knew she meant no wrong in asking. "You know the reason I don't want to marry."

"And you didn't have to take it so seriously, but it looks like I offended you,"

"I took no offense. I just can't imagine a ridiculous point of view."

"Ridiculous?" Her eyes began to water. "Of course. It's hard to imagine with someone who's five years your senior."

"Will you stop making it so personal?" Lucan reached for her hand, but she drew back. "What I said about calling you a senior… I should have apologized for that except…"

"You chose not to, and now I'm seeing why." Elene wobbled, but she stood from her chair and held her chin high. "I'll go get that rest."

Lucan got up after and haunted her steps. That Little Heathen was quick, moving through and under the moving bodies of drunks and laughing women. He moved the slender hands that brushed his shoulder off and focused only on her turban.

Skiar. Why did she have to ask him something like that?

Just as she made it out, he took her hand.

She jumped and pulled away. Seeing it was him, she relaxed but didn't look relieved.

"Let me walk you to the inn," he said while she rubbed her hand. "You've had a bit too much to drink."

"I know the way back, and this place is well-lit."

"Elene, my response was hornshit—you were trying to find some reasoning for my poor excuse, and I just left you there. You should have known your question would have thrown me off."

"And I apologized for that, didn't I?"

"Then why are you trying to leave me?"

"Because you couldn't put yourself in anyone else's shoes. Instead, you called my—other people's sacrifices ridiculous. That's why that woman didn't bother with you. She knew you wouldn't understand her struggles."

"So, this had to do more with you, then?"

Elene raised her hands to stop him. "Because I now realize how foolish I've been in allowing myself to get close to you and Caydon." In stepping back, she bumped into a passing man. Her legs wobbled, but she balanced herself. "But it won't happen again. I have to be careful from here on, I'm promised to another, and he's waiting for my return."

His eyebrows elevated. "Since we left Melodia, that wasn't something you seemed to care about, or are you desperate for affection because Caydon isn't here to give it?"

Elene's shoulders pinched in. "See? This is why I can't tell you anything about my past. It took a lot for me to tell you the impression Caydon left me, and now you're using it against me. How coldblooded can you be?"

"Elene."

"No, maybe I made a mistake." Her nose flared as her eyes thickened with tears. "I never should have warmed up to you. I shouldn't have shown you this side of me, not when you always hated the person you met on that river, the person I really am."

Lucan watched her press her wrist to her eyes. Tears rolled down her cheeks while all he could do was blow air through his nostrils. Even through her frustrations, she was showing a tender side. Maybe he did like that she was finally kind to him enough to let him watch her cry.

"I'm sorry for overreacting." She chuckled and wiped the last tear. "I want to blame it on the beer, but really, I can't. After tomorrow, I think we should keep our distance." She looked away so fast her tassel spun. Elene followed the lamp posts back to the inn at a fast pace, giving her cloak little time to catch up.

Lucan stepped aside from the crowd. If anyone touched him, he was going to blow up. Her little cries echoed in his mind. That moment at the Glass Crane, she was the first to apologize. Maybe all this time, he didn't like the Elene he first met, but rather than trying to understand that side of her, he moved on with the side that he liked. He hadn't even apologized when it mattered, like when the mug she cherished shattered into pieces.

"We should follow her at least." Pete's voice alarmed him. He had been outside The Dustbowl the entire time.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"Didn't want to admit this, but I wanted to enjoy the scenery of this place. It's beautiful."

Seeing how far she went, he picked up his feet. Elene was going in the right direction, blending well with Vinolean citizens. Still, anything could happen, and he wanted to be prepared.

"Thought Wein was with you two," Pete said.

"He was tired, and now Elene wants nothing to do with me."

"I heard. Thought you two were going to go for the throat like you used to."

"We did."

Pete snorted. "Far from it. You two argued like neither of you wanted to jab the other."

CHAPTER 29

ELENE

"Your plan is expensive." This was the fourth time Wein shared his doubts, and for Lucan to reassure him, reminding him it was he who disagreed about them joining Lorenza.

"Do you want to travel down Vinol and risk getting hit by King Pann's cavalry? Do you want to put Fior and Ivory up Lotter's Mountain again with Pete's broken arm?"

"Well, no…"

"Don't forget Elene nearly fell."

Wein rubbed his face. He was just as nervous as she, yet they followed him to the docks. Not that he wasn't trying to accept Lucan's help. Clearly, Lucan had more than enough coins and gemstones they were unaware of.

The inn she spent the night in was beautiful. Ceramic vases decorated her room with flowers that only bloomed in the summer, giving the walls a vibrant color. When Wein told her she overslept, she didn't want to leave the silk sheets, nor get out of bed, of that matter.

Lucan was yawning for the fourth time. His freckles crinkled as he caught his breath with his hand. He must have woken up early, or perhaps he didn't sleep last night. His silver look shifted to her, and immediately she turned the other way.

"What happens if the ship goes down?" Rüfus said. "I'm not a superb swimmer." None of them had ever traveled by ship. Beaven River and the lake surrounding their Oak tree was the only place any ever dared to float.

Lucan gave him a tired look. The ocean's breeze shuffled his wavy hair. "If you want, we could take a cog ship, smaller, more inclined to a pirate's taste."

"Now you're some sea expert?" said Pete.

"No, just some work me and the guys did for the royal fleet. We landed nowhere."

"You really lived a full life here, working and whoring around."

Lucan squeezed his eyebrows together. He took the jab and continued.

At the dock, the salt of the Olden Ocean breezed through with an icy bite. Seeing the grand ship close, she felt even more uncertain, as did the others.

Lucan slapped his hands against his hips. "It's going to be fine. We'll be in Appleton before you know it." His gaze shifted to her. It seemed like he wanted support, but she drew her focus back to her boots.

"Let's just do it," said Pete. "I just want to go home."

A clatter of hooves striking the surface came near. The hostler from the inn was back. Ivory and Fior's mane looked as polished as the newly equipped wagon. The body was painted red, with yellow painted wheels. The driver seats had leather cushions, and the sides had spacious compartments to store their tools.

"A good morning to you all," the hostler said. "Delivery as promised."

Elene hurried to their side. Fior and Ivory looked relaxed, better than she had ever seen since they left Melodia.

"We appreciate you taking care of them." When Lucan got close, Fior nudged his shoulder, a sign that he wanted his attention. In response, he patted his shoulder.

As people started to board, Lucan went to register them, leaving a detailed list of their belongings just in case someone robbed their new items, food, pots, tents, pillows, and blankets.

The low mist swept over the floor as she squeezed between the men. The vessel was enormous, families and children boarded without care, and animals and cargo were led with rope.

To move the horses to the lower deck, they needed to be led by the sailors. Fior nearly kicked one sailor when they brought him

inside. Normally, this was something Ivory would do when he was introduced to something new, but he wasn't alone.

After Lucan, Wein was the first to board the ship. Rüfus took a shaky step on the bridge, glancing from land and the waves underneath. Pete cursed under his breath and climbed next.

Elene was left staring at the bridge. The bells from the ship suddenly rang, compelling her to jump.

"You going in, Miss?" a sailor asked.

"Elene!" Wein called.

She held her breath and stepped up. Her foot tapped the end of the bridge, and she came tumbling down. Heat flushed to her face from the laughing spectators, but she got up and boarded the ship. Lucan, who witnessed her fall, quickly looked away, brushing his wavy locks back.

"You alright?" Her brother asked.

"Y-yeah." Elene squeezed between Wein.

The clanking lever raised the bridge, sealing them in. On the ship, the waves shifted the vessel near the port and back.

"Anything that has turrets means we have enemies to worry about." Rüfus was just as jittery, tapping his fingers against the rail. "You know, just a lil' fire, and we all go down."

"Give me a break." When Lucan passed her, she felt his eyes on her, but she didn't turn around. She would not think of what she asked, what his answer was.

The swaying of the ship against the seawater was not without the vessel's sailors. Their quick thinking and movements looked like a performance. They worked with the ropes and climbed what Lucan called the main mast.

Elene shut her eyes and took in the strong breeze. "Wait until Father finds out we boarded a ship!"

"Yeah." Wein sounded dull. "He's going to be in for a big surprise when we return."

Elene took his arm. "Hey, he'll understand."

"No, Elene, you don't know how much they depended on me to return. It's fall now, and we don't know how open he'll be to Lucan's help. Things have already been hard on us with the fewer hired hands we got in the summer."

"I know Mother has her spending habits, but Father always pulled through."

"Just promise me you'll let me do the talking?"

"Hey—we're in this together—we've been in this together."

"Elene, I'm asking as your older brother, please don't take the hit for me."

On the first night, everyone shared a room with two bunk beds. Lucan was in another across the corridor, sharing his space with a family. He probably outed himself to keep them together.

The following day, she felt the sway of the waves in her stomach. Her appetite was small, and seeing Rüfus and Pete's vomit in the bucket in their room only made it tighten. Time had a different feel among the sea, and by how the vessel ebbed and flowed, it was as if they were pushing against the day.

After urging her brother to see their horses, Wein convinced a sailor to lead them to the cargo. The cramped place had little air and smelled like feces. Chickens were clucking around, leaving their droppings wherever they went.

To their dismay, they crammed Fior and Ivory between crates of boxes. Just when she was about to say something, Wein went ahead. "Are you trying to kill them? I recall Lucan paid for them to be in stalls where there was more ventilation."

The sailor shrugged. "Ya' haf ta' take it up to the captain."

"I will."

On the deck, Elene watched a group of children play. If Corie and Theo were here, they would be doing the same thing. Wein said High Maiden Trini would notify Gourd's family about his death. He didn't seem happy that everyone would already know. Maybe that's why he's been taking good care of the ashes he kept in his pocket.

The following night, Rüfus's loud snoring woke her from her sleep. Pete and Wein were gone. Dizzy from the swaying room and feeling like the walls were inching in, Elene climbed down her bunk bed. She took the blanket with her and left the room.

She passed many rooms quietly, rubbing her eyes. At the mercy of the wind and the waves, the icy spray of the cold wind offered her

some comfort as the tight space and the uneasy shifting and groaning were too much. The stars shone above like cobwebs of light. The wind tugged and pulled her tassel in every direction.

Across the deck, she saw two figures and their familiar voices. Wein moved aside to let her lean against the rail between them. He smelled like tea and honey.

The waters were black, and little bits of light sparkled from under the crescent moons, but the stars overhead burned bright, guiding them home. The life she put on pause would return, waking up in her bright room with only the tree swallow birds as company. She missed her family, and she wanted to see Corie, but was she ready to go back to the same routine?

"Thought you were going to sleep through the night," said Wein.

"Not with Rüfus snoring like that."

He chuckled and passed her a mug. There was little warmth left, but she could smell that grainy aroma. She gave it a sip and her right eye curled from the sourness before being swapped by a sweet taste.

Lemon and honey danced on her tongue as she took more in.

"Like it?" Her brother asked. "Lucan said we needed it after he heard of our seasickness."

Elene gave the tea a hard look now. "You guys saw him?"

"You missed him not half n' hour ago," Pete grinned, resting his elbows on the rail. "By that look in your eyes, I'm guessing you're both still not on talking terms?"

Her brother looked at her with one raised eyebrow. Elene returned the mug and said nothing had happened.

"You two should leave whatever you guys started on Vine Road," Wein said. "I kept my mouth shut because it looked mutual, but that can't happen in Melodia."

"You're worrying over nothing—things are going back to just how they were."

"If you had talked to him, you would have known what your brother meant by that," Pete said. "Lucan is staying in Melodia for a while. Said that's what that big, tall friend of his wanted."

"Yeah, I know." She rested her elbows on the rail. Wein could read her face with just one look. "It was stupid, but I'm not angry at him."

I'm angry at myself. Their conversation at The Dustbowl tumbled into a horrible misunderstanding. Even if a part of her was a little curious, Lucan took her words seriously and rejected her softly. She reasoned his actions many times so she would accept them. But a part of her seemed unsatisfied. She hadn't forgotten the time he held her hand, the time he put his arm around her and shamelessly stared at her body, offering to please her at the Glass Crane. It made no sense for that Riman to risk his life for her, to reopen his wounds just to get her out of the broken caravan.

Elene adjusted her turban, frustrated that the wind kept throwing her tassel to her face. She was no better when she asked him to hold her, when she didn't pull away after he took her hand or leaned her head against his arm.

"She's a mess," Pete whispered to Wein. "First Caydon, now Lucan?"

"I can hear you," she defended. "Honestly, I came here to relax, not be talked about. I'm going to check on Fior and Ivory." Elene followed the icy breeze and made her way from the rail.

"Always think you can go on your own, don't you?" Wein gave her head a little nudge.

"That's because I knew you would follow me." She smiled and tickled his sides. He chuckled and placed his arm around her.

The main stairs to the lower deck were down a spiral staircase and through the corridors with rooms privy only to the sailors. One lingered outside of his door, having a cigarette. The smoke was bitter to her nose, nothing like the fruity lingering scent from Caydon's tobacco. At the underbelly of the ship, they squeezed through the cargo.

"Looks like they moved them," said Wein. "Come on, let's continue."

Elene followed, moving side to side between the crates and trunks. Jammed in the center was their new wagon. Tapping at every barrel she passed, Elene saw some light ahead. There was an area of stables where some of the horses were. Caught under the lamp's light, a man was slumped on the ground, knees drawn to his chest.

"Sir?" Wein's voice made the man wince.

Her brother moved back, bumping into her, heel stepping on her foot.

Elene winced and moved him off. The man was panting for air, palm open, fingers barely tracing his shirt. Wein didn't budge, so she moved around him and kneeled before him. It was Lucan, teeth clenching as he glared at the ground.

"Wein," Elene said. "Help him."

Her brother grabbed Lucan's arms and helped him to his feet, but Lucan leaned back and cried. "Don't. It hurts!"

"Skiar, what's wrong with you?" Wein went down to see his condition, allowing Lucan to resume the fetal pose.

Fior was awake, peering at them from the stall. He seemed to focus on Lucan, who must've gone down to check on them after he left the deck.

Elene took his hand, and his hurt looked up. She gave him a slight squeeze as if to encourage him to pull through. "Fior is worried."

"It will pass," he panted. "Just need a little more time."

"Talk to us Lucan." Wein placed his hand on his forehead. "I've seen you take plenty of medicine, and nothing seems to be working."

"Saw a doctor… in Mudburrow. Back when I was searching for Zorn and Oscern." He moved from his fetal position and leaned his back against the stall Fior was in. "I have a contagion of some sort, something in the metal that bastard put inside me. It's in my blood now, so I'm probably going to suffer this for the rest of my life."

"And your life as a mercenary?" her brother asked, thinking ahead.

Lucan half smiled, biting through his pain, so he could say he would be fine. Wein rubbed his eyes and peered at the surrounding cargo.

"Something the matter?" Elene released Lucan's hand. He could have pulled away, could have reminded her she went too far after she what she said in Vinol.

"You mean you didn't see it?" Wein was giving her a perplexed look. "Don't joke with me."

"See what?"

Lucan's stare froze over. He seemed to have sucked in his pain because his stare went flat. "What… did you see?"

Wein shrugged. "I swear I thought I saw a blinding light fill the room. I could see every crate and barrel for a second."

"Is that why you stepped on my foot?" Elene studied the cargo area for another presence as if the light would return.

"It was probably nothing." Lucan's eyes were shutting. "Anyway, I think I can walk now."

It was mostly around the cool temperature that Iven Forest carried a nutty scent in the air. Gentle leaves rustled around them, mixed with a blend of dried grass. The Grandi trees stood proudly, groaning and shifting but not finding them as a threat. Though the groans she couldn't get used to as she had seen the roots squash darkened hearts.

Rüfus had yet to come back. He went ahead to talk to the Melodian guard about the condition of their relationship with Avery. Pete looked at the condition of his arm, frowning but looking sad, probably because Gourd wasn't coming home.

The wheels smoothed as they rolled over Aspen Bridge, where the Bowring River ran underneath. A healthy number of visitors were on their way out, carrying supplies they seemed to have purchased, a rare sight they had over the summer.

Rüfus returned, panting as his boots thumped on the bridge. "Avery's men are gone. One of the guards up ahead confirmed it."

Lucan threw the blanket off him. He had remained under there since they left Appleton, coming out only when they camped. Since they landed at the port, Wein had been worried about the state of his wound and even encouraged him to rest for the road back.

Melodia's pillars were standing as they left them. Back in the town she called home, she could smell the aroma of sweet potatoes, the chatter of the people walking by, and the stares of the guards watching them. One followed and chatted with Rüfus and Pete. From the conversation, Maiden Trini informed the Thatcher family of Gourd's passing.

Wein took out the silver trinket that stored the ashes of Preisen's White Oak. Everyone agreed they would pay their respects before they went on their separate ways.

"You sure I should come along?" Elene asked. "Gourd and Corie like me but not their parents."

"We have no choice," said Pete. "You do want to be there when we deliver the news, don't you?"

"Of course, I just don't want to make them uncomfortable." The moment those words left her, she felt Lucan's stare. That or she imagined it. He had been doing plenty of that since she told him they should keep their distance.

The countryside roads bled far, connecting other farmland to the main one that led to town.

The Thatchers lived on the west side. Their two-story cottage was yellow with brown shutters and white-painted window panels. The noise of their arrival opened the front door of his parent's home.

Mrs. Thatcher was a petite woman with a frail frame, her blond hair braided to one side. There was no look of surprise in her eyes as she seemed to have expected them. Mr. Thatcher was a slinky man with a full beard like her Father. He took his wife's shoulders as she couldn't hold her tears any longer.

Everyone got off and lined up. They greeted the Thatchers with their Riman gesture, placing one hand over his other shoulder and bowing. Wein then left the silver trinket in Mrs. Thatcher's hands. "Preisen offered a branch of their White Oak in his honor."

Mr. Thatcher patted his wife's shoulders. "Did he say anything in his last moments?"

"He wanted you to know that he tried to get the group who did this to Wein and him," said Lucan.

"Gourd asked me to watch over Corie," Pete's voice broke. "And I intend to watch over her."

"Did you burn him before daylight?" Mrs. Thatcher asked.

"We did. Lucan and I made sure of it."

Mrs. Thatcher nodded, pressing the trinket to her chest. "Then we will reunite with our son in the afterlife."

The tiny sniffles startled Mrs. Thatcher. Peeking through the door was her youngest.

"Corie, I thought I told you to stay inside!"

She pushed through her parents instead and ran out of the house in tears.

Elene opened the side box from the wagon, holding close the bag she tucked in a little chest, and ran after her.

"Stop right there!" Mrs. Thatcher, even in her grief, saw only her transgression. "Where do you think you're going?"

Every muscle in her body wanted to stay, but she couldn't. She made Gourd a promise. She held the bag she kept stored in the wagon and ran after Corie, not caring what was being said in her absence.

Corie was halfway through the fields before she stopped and wept.

Elene picked up her pace watching for every pothole that may send her to the floor. Corie turned, eyes and nose red from her sniffles.

There were no words of comfort she could give, no soothing like braiding her hair or giving her hair ties away to comfort the hurt in her heart. She calmly sat next to her, tucking behind what she carried.

"I know he's gone," she whimpered. "But I still hoped I would see him when you all returned."

Elene left the bag behind her and kept her in her arms, tenderly rocking her back and forth. Any person she adored and wanted to protect smelled like sunflowers to her, a light and subtle fragrance.

"There is nothing wrong with hoping." She wiped Corie's tears away and moved away the curls that stuck to her freckled cheeks. "It's all we can do when things that are out of our control happen." She reached for the bag behind her and presented it to her. She slowly untied it, unwrapped the protective covering, and slowly unraveled two wooden dolls wrapped in a colorful blue and yellow dress with a bonnet over their head. "Gourd asked me to pick them. He was afraid he would get the wrong one, but he wanted one with red hair like yours and another with his hair, so you could think of it as your sister."

Corie took the dolls and pressed them to her chest. "They smell like flowers."

"There's potpourri in them, neatly tucked under the skirt."

Corie then blinked at the one with brown hair. "It does look like Gourd, doesn't she?"

Elene laughed and wiped her tears. "I thought the same thing."

"Elene." Wein had found them. "We're leaving."

"Coming." Elene gave Corie one last hug. Before they went around the house, she saw Corie raise the doll that looked like Gourd against the sky.

Pete and Rüfus stayed with the Thatchers, leaving Lucan, Wein, and her to head to their father's home.

The way back had many patches of empty fields. There used to be old homes that were once their neighbors but were taken from raid attacks. One of them belonged to Mother and her family. She lost everything after the last raid, her family, the home, everything.

Wein long concluded she liked to buy herself nice things because she still wanted to live the life that was taken from her.

"I thought he forgot," her brother said, startling her focus. "About those dolls."

"Gourd wanted to get them in Vinol, but…" She didn't say anymore. Her heart was too heavy, and if she tried to speak, she might break.

"Let me do the talking," Wein's stern voice interrupted the quiet ride. "No matter what happened, Father and Mother entrusted me with the job."

"We all share that fault," said Elene.

"And I intend to repay what was lost," Lucan added.

"That wasn't a request," he said. "Not a word from you two."

The soil had a wet grainy aroma that often lingered now that Fall had arrived. Worn hammered fences passed them as they headed home. Five carriages were parked by the entrance. The curtains were open from the living room, showing the visitors that had come.

The barn was open, and it only remained open when Father was using it. He never liked to partake in Mother's social gatherings.

Wein stopped in front of the barn, leaving enough space to bring the horses and the wagon inside. The bleating sheep from a distance and the shuffling of the peach trees welcomed them home.

Terra stuck her head out of the window. Her hair swayed by the breeze until she saw them. "They're here!" She went out through the front door. Her fall dress was checkered and red with buttons on the ruffled straps. "Took you lot long enough. After we got news about Gourd, we started to think the worse." Her sparkling eyes moved to Lucan. "I knew you would come back."

"That makes one of us," he answered, but his voice didn't ring in the same tune it once had with her sister.

The front door was swung open. Mother was carrying a glass of wine, smiling with her guests at them. She looked no different from how she last saw her. Corset neatly tight around her waist, her blouse delicate and decorated.

Father, who must've heard Terra's call, left the barn.

The wrinkles on his forehead also relaxed after seeing them, but it still left her with a sinking feeling. He was aware of Maiden Trini's news of Gourd's passing, but not that they came back empty-handed.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Lucan leaned in to say.

"Quiet," Wein ordered. "Remember what I said."

As Mother and her guests made their way out, Father's steps took a slower pace. He was observing the wagon now, polished, sturdier than his, with bright yellow wheels, one could see a mile away.

If Wein said he got it, they had to at least give him that chance to try, but he was falling short on words.

Elene was the first to get off. She unlatched the straps from the tongue of the wagon, saying nothing and looking only at the belt.

Lucan eased off and stepped aside, keeping a safe distance but watching them just the same.

"Wein?" Father said. "Did the wagon break? Is that why you replaced it?"

"Looks pretty expensive." Terra smudged her finger against the body. "Mighty shiny too."

It was hard to look at her father's eyes, not when behind him was Mother's frightful look, slowly coming to face her brother.

"I'm going to just say it." Wein's voice remained calm, sympathetic to the troubles their family was about to face. "We lost everything at Mudburrow."

CHAPTER 30

ELENE

"What do you mean you lost everything?" Mother was calm, but underneath, there was a growl.

When Elene tried to speak, Wein raised his hand, stopping her right away. "We were robbed by a group of thieves. They took my coin purses, the trunk I secured the extra money, and what remained of my wares."

The gasps behind Mother were so sharp she gave her guests an ire look. Terra covered her mouth, and Father stayed speechless.

Mother brushed her hair aside as the wind kept tugging it to her face. "Please tell me that you're joking." Wein went to comfort her, but her voice repelled him. "Tell me!"

"Some missing pieces of the puzzle are starting to come together." Father said, "When we received news from Preisen of Gourd's passing, something must've caused it. He died in Mudburrow, didn't he? I told you to have everything sold before you arrive there, or did that not also reach your ears?"

"Gourd was just trying to help me—"

"We gave you all we had. Now you've left us to starve!" Mother threw the glass of wine to the ground, causing it to shatter. Fior and Ivory stepped, startled. "You discarded years of our best wool. All of my needlework—gone into the hands of thieves!"

Father, seeing the silent guests lingering, told them to leave. "This is Harrow business."

Slowly the attendees went on their wagon in silence, eyes bulged by the news. Terra quietly thanked them for their visit, waving as they left the property.

"I told you to be smart about it." Father's voice sounded harsher since the guests had left. "I taught you to be better than this."

Wein rubbed his temple. He hated to look at any of them cry, especially Mother, who cried the most. "I was careful. I sold a lot on Vine Road, but—you know it would not be easy to sell in the summer, not unless we lowball the price."

"Even so. I told you to always play it safe, to keep your risks low."

"I did as you asked, but I made choices based on the ones that were available, and in Mudburrow, I sold more than I ever would in Lyrin Town."

"And where is it now? Gone! Gone!" Mother's hot, flashing eyes snapped at Ivory and Fior. "We'll have to sell the horses, Matias. We sacrificed enough. Winter will be hard on us all."

Elene opened her bag of coins that Lucan reimbursed her for her share in Mudburrow.

Wein immediately took her wrist, stopping her. Looking at him, his eyes were red from having drawn tears. He wasn't a crier, not even when he was drunk, and he was a solid pillar when it came to his emotions, but right now, he was breaking.

"I heard enough," Father said suddenly. "I need everyone to leave. Right now, my wife and I need to have a talk."

"Father."

"No, I had enough with you. You never wanted to be a trader, right, Wein? You said being out there on Vine Road would never give your life any meaning, even if that meant helping this family."

Wein blinked profusely. The hard, hurt look on his softened for a moment. "I did say that."

"Well, you got your wish. From this day forward, you are no longer part of the family business. Leave. I don't want to see your face again."

"Father—"

"Out!"

Wein marched down the road. Terra picked up her skirt and went after him. Elene looked at Fior and Ivory. There was no way Father would sell them, would he?

"Mr. and Mrs. Harrow," Lucan broke his silence, summoning Mother's ire eyes. "If you want to blame anyone, blame me for being too impatient. I told Wein we would make more money if we left Lyrin Town ahead of his schedule. I was eager to find my friends."

"A rushed journey paves the way for a trail of mistakes," Father was no longer giving him that welcoming tone. She initially wanted him to loathe Lucan for calling her a heathen, but those thoughts didn't ring true anymore. "Listen to me very carefully, Lucan. I don't want to see your face on my property again."

Lucan didn't turn to leave as Wein had done but opened his coin purse instead. "At least let me pay back what was lost."

"Yes." Mother's clenched fists went to her hips. "You will pay us back!"

"No," Father said. "I don't want a fool's coin."

Mother gave him a sneering look. "Matias, for once, put your pride aside. We've had a slow year, a shortage of workers, the sheep are getting flystrike one after another, and now this. He owes us and admitted his participation in foolery, or should we sell our horses?"

"Father," Elene said almost in a slight whisper but hoping he could notice she was begging. "This is not the season to be hardheaded."

Lucan still held the bag of coins out. "Wein told me how much your wares were worth. Everything is accounted for, even the fee for taking me to Mudburrow—" Father didn't want to hear anymore. He took off, heading to the back of the house.

"Never mind my husband." Mother snatched the bag from Lucan's hands. "Men and their virtues." She stormed back inside the house, slamming the door shut.

Lucan rubbed the back of his head. Saying nothing to her, he went back.

Heart heavy from the altercation, Elene led Fior and Ivory back to the barn. The flooring was scattered with hay and cracked mud. Father's worktable was a mess, and his shelves were covered in dust. It was unlike him to leave the barn this neglected. And with no hired hands, they must have been living on their last coins.

Rather than go home, Elene swept the place. Father couldn't do all the work. Mother had her job in the house, and Terra hated manual labor.

When a pair of extra steps entered. She pretended they weren't there and decluttered the worktable.

"I hope you behaved, Elene?" Mother's anger lingered in the air.

"Of course, why wouldn't I?"

"Is it true what they're saying?" Terra was leaning by the entrance of the barn, unwilling to take a step inside. "Of a Riman village going up in flames, of Rima children being possessed?"

Greison's face circled back. His icy touch when he took her from the river, the shards of glass that tore out of his skin. Turning to Fior, his large beautiful eyes became her temporary haven. "Yes."

"Oh, blessed Skiar." Mother clasped her hands. The bag of coins Lucan gave her was in her dress pocket, weighing down the fabric. "Come, Terra. We must pay the temple a visit. From here on, I don't want you near that Lucan. His arrival has brought us bad luck."

"Ma," Terra pouted, following her out. "He paid us back, didn't he?"

As their voices left, Elene hung the work tools in their holder on the wall. If they wanted something to do, they could have offered to help. What was Skiar going to do? What has Rima ever done for their family?

The panting of a dog brushed up her legs. If Pepe was here, then so was Father. He was observing the paint job on the wagon, hands unwilling to touch it.

Elene collected her thoughts carefully. "Wein didn't want to close shop in Mudburrow because he didn't want to pay another fee. They were charging us thirty silver."

Father's eyebrows started to narrow. He was usually calm, but he had a slight fear in his eyes. "Are you coming to your brother's rescue?"

"When was the last time you traveled with him? Wein is a hard worker. And even if being a trader isn't in him, he's responsible."

"I didn't ask to carry my father's job, but I did it to raise this family."

"That's exactly why Wein risked it. He stayed until every item was sold. Yes, we were robbed, and Gourd was taken from us, but you

almost lost your son." Father shot a stare at her. His eyes were wide from disbelief. "Wein didn't mention that he was also stabbed by those thieves, that he was between life or death for days." Her brother would hate her for saying that, but how many times had he come in her defense? "Father… I thought we were going to lose him."

Father gave a long-winded sigh. "Tell me more."

Elene started with what occurred after. Finding Lucan's friends at Arrow Den, the long road back to Preisen, and meeting Caydon, who protected them from his Fallen friends. Then there was the gypsy's caravan and the music, Lorenza's laugh, and the enormous horses that nearly killed them flashed back. Dan, Ryker, and their children. The grand feast in Vinol and their trip over the sea. Though she did her best to recount the events, she left out killing that man in Mudburrow. It was her burden to carry, and if she said anything, Father would try to carry it for her, or he would blame Wein for not being there to stop it.

"I expected you would run into some trouble on Vine Road, but not of this caliber." Father closed Ivory's stall and went outside to join her. "And that boy Lucan, why did he return?"

"He's staying in Melodia for a while longer."

A gust of wind blew hard against the peach trees. In the fall, the trunk looked like dark chocolate, with the golden leaves cascaded to the ground by the shivering branches. It was frightful and beautiful to take in.

The scenery had Father under the same spell, smiling at the rustling leaves. Terra envied his curly lashes, and even if Elene had them, she wouldn't admit that she envied hers. Though she didn't have their blue eyes, she felt a little pride in looking more like her father.

"You know, Lucan may be the person you need with shearing the sheep."

"I thought you detested that boy."

"He's not all that bad." Elene avoided the raised eyebrow her father gave. "Lucan had a choice to go with his friends and help find Caydon. But he chose to go with us to ensure our safety and to keep his word."

He took her hand into his callous hold and gave the back a few pats. "I'm angry that everything was lost, but I hate to think I would lose you and Wein. Right now, with everything going on, Cleric Aaron sharing that a Riman village going up in flames by Avery, it's hard to imagine what is really happening to the world."

"Where are you off to?"

Elene stared at the Melodian guard's stone-cold face. The ridiculous leather band covered his temple. He saw the yoke she carried over her shoulder, and yet he had the nerve to ask.

"This is the only time I come to fetch water."

The guard nodded and continued his patrol on the street. He was a rookie, as she had never seen him take this route before.

It was during the afternoon service that she liked to do her shopping or go into town to fetch clean water from the well. In days, she caught up months of her absence, going back to her routine with her normal life. Rüfus and Pete, she only saw during her errands into town as they didn't roam the countryside, Wein hadn't returned since Father told him to leave, and any invitation on her part didn't convince him otherwise. He was now a guard in training, and that kept him busy from visiting her.

Lucan she hadn't seen at all. If he was anywhere, it was in town, but she hadn't made many visits.

Corie and Theo were skipping service. They followed her to draw water from the artesian aquifer, tossing a ball back and forth, telling her how crowded the church was. She listened, watching her buckets overflow with water. The doll that looked like Gourd was carried faithfully in her hands while Theo played with the one that looked like her.

Elene knelt to rest her yoke over her shoulder. The stone containing all the water pressure looked like an anthill. Engraved bits of white stone and shaped to look like tiny stars. The groundwater that sprouted from the opening would splash back on blue and gold colored tile and drop into the water reservoir to be pushed back up through the other opening.

Theo grunted as he heaved the bucket from the water.

"Miss Harrow, how come I didn't see you at Gourd's Wake?" Corie tucked her doll under her shirt so she could grip the handle of the remaining bucket. Her legs wobbled as she brought it over to her.

"I would have gone, but nobody told me when they had it." The truth was that Wein told her. That night they honored his passing by visiting his headstone at night. The silver trinket High Maiden Trini gave to his parents was engraved in the center.

"I hate this place," Theo said. "They never tell you when anything happens."

"They're just forgetful," Elene lied.

"Miss Harrow." Corie's sweet smile fell flat. "Is it true that the dead can walk? That Children of Rima are turning into the Fallen?"

"Who told you that?" Elene bit her inner cheeks. She always told them not to believe folk stories, but now that it had become true, she couldn't answer with that.

"Cleric Aaron gave us kids some stupid rules," Theo added. "We can't play in the forest anymore because we may be snatched away by the Fallen."

"Everyone is nervous." Elene holstered the yoke across her neck and shoulder and lifted the pails of water.

"I thought you said it was just ghost stories?" Theo and Corie steadied them to keep them from swinging.

"I did." With the hemp rope and hooks, balancing the buckets was key. "But that doesn't mean you shouldn't be careful, and I rather you two be close to where your parents can see you, like back at the temple." The bell toll startled her, shifting her posture sideways. Theo and Corie reacted, holding the rope in place so she could steady her feet. "Come on, let's take you back to service, or they'll have a reason to keep you home."

Corie and Theo ran ahead. While Elene watched them, it gave her time to think about what they had said. They were too young to know about these things. Sure, fear was instilled in children to force them to be careful, but it was robbing them of understanding the whole situation, and right now, nobody knew why these things were happening.

The church's front doors opened, and the congregation left. Since the news of Rima's corrupted children, Maidens from Havekin

would come and visit. Melodian guards would follow them everywhere they went.

The older Rimans would look at her and keep a great distance from her. Some looked nervous, even among themselves. Others didn't seem to have a worry on their mind.

As more and more came out of the church, one of the many caught her attention. Terra saw her across the street and sped towards her. Her pink dress had swirls of white stitches.

"Wein told everyone of what happened at Preisen, of a Maiden Trini and Maiden Gittle."

"Is Mother still angry at Wein?"

Terra huffed. "Why are you worried about that? You know how Ma is. Wein is her favorite."

"Then that's all I want to hear." Elene dug into her pocket and counted the remaining coins she had left. If only she could sell her honey pancakes if only they could give her a damn chance to make a living!

The bitter resentment she had towards Melodians came back.

"Elene." His voice halted her steps. She froze while Terra confidently waved at him. While everyone started to wear their coats, he fashioned a plain long-sleeve shirt with simple charcoal blue trousers and brown boots.

Two weeks had passed, and embarrassment ran up her cheeks, of his rejection, of the gentle way he apologized for her stupid question. She nodded at him as a form of acknowledgment and went on her way.

He must be spending his time at the temple. Maiden Camilla was with him, hands cradling her dress to guide the hem from the ground. "Elene, can I have a moment with you, please?" she said.

Elene didn't stop. She went on, feet light to not agitate the water.

"Oh, just listen to her already," Terra chided. "This is serious."

"More serious than making sure I get my water home? I hardly think so." She had prepared her honey pancakes in advance and was hoping to make some tea and enjoy her afternoon.

"My father had a meeting at the Spire." Maiden Camilla used her hand to fan her face. "He told us of the tale you were attacked by a Fallen Child of Rima. Of a man named Greison. The Maidens and I want to know if they can check you, just to make sure you're safe."

Was she serious? Terra nudged her shoulder, her eyes wide, telling her to answer. Maiden Nessa was arms crossed, locked in her defensive stance.

"And how would that work?"

"We can take you to the temple and sing a song of healing just to make there is no darkness."

The longer she waited, the more she felt the weight Fior and Ivory pulled up Lotter's Mountains on her back. "Stop pretending, Camilla. If there was any darkness in me, you or any Maiden would have seen it, but you don't, so just tell me what's really on your mind."

Camilla's cheeks grew pink. "Look, have you ever thought that perhaps if you were a Riman, you wouldn't have been a victim of the Fallen?"

The shoulder yoke trembled, causing the buckets to sway by her chuckling. "So, you think it's my fault that I was attacked?"

"I'm asking you to rethink where you stand with Rima. The Fallen may come back for you again and possibly put us all in danger."

"You mean besides the usual scum who come to raid this place?"

Maiden Camilla rolled her eyes. "That is different."

"And you have no idea what is really going on out there because you stay cooped up in that temple of yours." She moved her yoke, nearly hitting Camilla, and headed back home.

"Elene Harrow, this is my last warning!" Maiden Camilla's light steps followed her like a shadow, already making the stupid trip longer. "I tried to be gentle, but you take everything to heart!"

Elene stopped and turned, swooshing good water off her bucket. "And you fancy yourself so pure and good-willing, but you're just a nosy woman sticking your nose in what doesn't belong to you."

"Elene, as Rima is my witness, I only mean good."

"Then there are no witnesses because Rima doesn't exist, and if she did, she's long gone!" Her voice alarmed some members passing by and certainly pulled the attention of the bystanders with the ears to linger and hear them.

"What is she doing now?" An old temple cleric joined the troupe.

"Oh, reinforcements? This is great."

"Oh dear," Terra said, stepping back. "I'm getting help."

Lucan came in between them, blocking her view of the Maidens who lined up against her. "That's enough. We all went through a lot on the road. Elene may not be a Riman, but we wouldn't have made it far without her."

His support eased her breathing, made her see clearly when usually she would ignore these folks and walk away.

Instead of firing back, Maiden Camilla looked disappointed. "Lucan, I respect your opinion, but everyone is up in arms given the news that the legends the city folk fear of the forest may be true. Elene here needs to understand that Melodia runs the risk of meeting the same fate as Estiria. *You* are Riman. Rima will keep you safe. But who will keep her from danger?"

"Let's not forget her staying here is causing a burden on our White Oak," said Maiden Nessa. "Where heathens linger, the ill remain."

"Burden? That's—"

"You know what I think?" Elene used the yoke to move Lucan aside, breaking him as their divider. "You Maidens need a good kick in the ovaries so you'll never become mothers and taint any innocent minds with your ludicrous thoughts!" She marched off, panting as she carried the buckets of water, splashing at her fast pace.

Since she was a little girl, she couldn't distinguish between her anger from her sadness. When one felt stronger, the other followed. Even when she was fuming, her throat was itching, bubbling for a whimper, and her eyes were stinging with tears,

It wasn't until she made it to the bridge that she noticed a pair of boots had been following her. The strain of the yoke over her shoulder had put enough weight. Her left foot wobbled, but she managed to look back. "What are you doing?"

Maiden Camilla and the others wouldn't cross her bridge, but they watched Lucan follow her.

"I want to talk," he said.

"No. Our *talks* ended on Vine Road, and you shouldn't be following me."

He scratched the side of his cheek, nails tracing his freckles. "Why not?"

"Because I'm… people will talk."

"You don't care about what they think, and neither do I."

Once she made it off the bridge, she geared forward. "And I asked you to keep your distance from me."

He picked up his pace, his wavy hair bouncing as he turned back to face her. "Haven't I proven that I respected your decision?" She blinked him out of her view by looking off the road. "Look, I'm here because I want you to fulfill your part of our deal. It's your turn to tell me why you're treated like an outsider."

"You're taking advantage of the situation." Having to carry the yoke longer than needed and suffer Camilla and her throng of Maidens was causing more stress on her shoulders. Now Lucan was laying out the dice, asking for her to pay her part. She blew raspberries, remembering her poor wagering led to a haircut, and this one cost a memory. "I'm not ready."

Lucan huffed but didn't give in. The Lucan she knew would scowl at her for being so snappy. "You're upset, and I think you need to vent out. That's what you told me at the Dice'n Hog, right?"

Elene didn't acknowledge it, and she didn't blame him for wanting to know, more so now after what he saw. Returning to Melodia after a trip, she had to readjust to life here, but this was no longer an ordinary journey to Lyrin Town. The world changed out there, and it altered how she saw the world.

Her gaze slowly went to the man who followed her. His wavy hair with some curls bounced with each step. He was under a great deal of stress when she told him to vent out on her, and now it was her turn to open a moment in time she kept locked.

But did he feel terrified as she did at this moment?

CHAPTER 31

ELENE

In the deep crevices of her heart, Elene didn't need much to have her heart full. She loved her family, Fior and Ivory, her farm life, and the few Melodians who appreciated her. But with her memories, something hung over them, covered their faces, and blurred them with a dark goo, like molasses left overnight, making it impossible to scrub off and hard to forget.

Elene made it out of the bridge and to the private road that led to her home. Lucan still wanted to walk on her side, but he followed close to the edge, stepping on the grass.

"Need help with carrying the water?"

"I can manage."

Fields of harvested wheat flowed back and forth. The walk didn't carry many conversations, but the quietness was what she needed. Much of the sunflowers she planted had long died out, the seeds gone as the birds had gotten to them.

"The air is getting chilly, isn't it?" Lucan was staring at the rustling trees. The breeze tousled his wavy hair from his face and blew it back. She couldn't look at him, not while those silver eyes reflected so much light.

For a second, at his chest where he kept his necklace tucked under his shirt. "Where have you been staying, anyway?"

"Got a house in a little street, a few blocks off the Avenue. Cleric Aaron had it built in case I returned. It's small, but It's more than enough." The Beaven River was passing by, gently passing her home ahead. "How come you don't draw water from the river?"

"I like the taste of well water." *And I'm late to my tea and honey pancakes.*

"Quite a long walk from Melodia, isn't it?"

"And I love it."

Her cottage was ahead, with the fireplace a few feet ahead, between her home and the barn. Elene set the bucket on the porch and rolled her sore shoulders. "Follow me."

She led Lucan from her home and down to the river's dock. The hollow thump of their steps stopped at the end. In the summer, Wein, Gourd, Pete, and Rüfus would sometimes come for a dip, but this summer changed a lot of things.

Elene sat at the edge, her boots inches from touching the running water. Lucan sat beside her. It was just enough space between them, but he sat legs apart, with his hands resting on his lap. He was quiet, eyes drawn to the current.

The sun warmed their backs, but anytime the breeze picked up, it took them away.

"If I can be honest, this will probably burn what mutual respect we built on the road."

Lucan turned to her. She focused on the river, hoping he would look away. He knew it was time to share her story, but it was hurting just the same to think about it.

"Elene… if you're not ready."

"One more moment, please. My wound hurts just like yours, stitches don't help it close, and over the years, no salve or bandage would help it heal."

His stare focused, and he looked away. "I understand."

Elene shut her eyes and listened to the rivers. Thinking of her younger years. Most of it felt like a fog. Pieces were missing from her youth and replaced with awful, wrinkled stares. She went back to the crevices of her heart, back to where the molasses smeared everything she came to love and hold dear. She went back to being a young girl.

"When I was seventeen, I made a Vow of Marriage. Not a year later and I was visited by Maiden Derli. The stones chose for me a man named Zerin. He and I were the same age, so we courted as anyone would, and our personalities were almost identical. He could make me laugh, and I knew how to make him smile." Elene looked

at her hands, uncurled, and trembling. "It didn't feel unnatural to be in this sort of relationship. Mother always wanted Terra and me to marry through a Vow of Marriage. In all respects, I liked Zerin enough not to have any opposition." She rubbed her arms and took deep breaths. "But then, things got further than they needed. We became intimate in the carnal sense. It was bound to happen since our wedding was a week away, but that didn't happen."

"They found out?" said Lucan.

Every muscle in her body roused enough courage to look at him. She blinked, hoping there was no pain when she said it. "Zerin told them." Lucan's stare dropped, his eyebrows compressed against one another. "He never wanted to live in Melodia and, least of all, marry me, but he felt trapped by the arrangement. Like most Melodians who are too cowardly to admit it, his mother forced him, so he thought if he came out clean, then perhaps, under Rima's eyes, he wouldn't be obligated to marry me. But that all backfired on him. His parents were so ashamed they left Melodia and didn't take him. Cleric Aaron thought it was best if we sought our call elsewhere, out of Melodia, as our terrible actions could hinder Rima's White oak."

"He said that? *The* Cleric Aaron?"

"He wasn't wrong. Our transgression was affecting Rima's White Oak, or so Maiden Camilla said."

"But." Lucan shut his eyes. "Sorry, I'll say no more. Go on."

"To remedy this, Zerin and I were sent away. It happened so fast I didn't tell my family when or if I was leaving. Mother was beside herself, Father and Wein were angry, and Terra was too young to understand. Zerin was in a hurry to go, so I packed what I could and left with him. We hadn't reached Vine Road when he told me how much he hated me, how this was my fault. At Lyrin Town, he told me not to follow him anymore and left me at the gates. I was so lost, so stupid I just sat there.

I no longer enter Lyrin Town's walls because it brings back bad memories from living there for half a year. The weather was just like this, living in the poor district with bone-chilling alleyways. All I knew then was how to prep wool and stitch, and it seemed that my needlework gave me minor jobs, but I was a different girl then, I said little and had no backbone."

"Did anyone try to take advantage of you?"

Elene scoffed and rubbed her cold knuckles. "Plenty of times, be it on the street or when I worked as a seamstress at people's homes. Eventually, I was welcomed to live in an alleyway safeguarded by women for women. They told me I had two options, live in rags and beg or make use of my appearance and live comfortably. I chose my pride but barely made a living, and anyone who tried to make a move on me learned how sharp my fabric scissors were."

"And… your family?"

The slow-moving river pulled her focus. Her eyes were glossing over, and when her tears formed, she rubbed them. "Father and Wein frequented Lyrin Town, searching for me. I thought I was doing them a service by hiding from them, punishing myself for ruining our family's name. They came once a week, a costly journey for the family, a pin of needles to their hearts. Midway through winter, I saw them again, Father strolling the blocks, Wein desperately stopping women who looked like me and seeing his hope deflate right before his eyes. I could no longer watch them suffer, but confronting them meant I had to relive the shame I felt. As I feared, the sick feeling came back the moment they discovered me among the crowd. Father got to me first and held me in a tight embrace, unwilling to let go, and that was the first time I saw Wein cry." The sound of horses galloping, Fior's mother leading the way back to Melodia, and the pinching nerve she felt in her heart. "Father and Wein talked to Cleric Aaron and told him Rima wouldn't have allowed this, seeing I was the one Zerin used to break his vow. My mother had trouble forgiving me, but she had Terra to make things right. Cleric Aaron warned that my transgression could harm Rima's White Oak. After a deal was made, Father took me to this old cottage, and we built this dock together."

The hurt lingered like an old bruise, the memories that made her feel worn and wrinkled, like a piece of fabric with too many holes to stitch shut. "Coming back to Melodia was no longer the same. I renewed my Vow of Marriage to show I was faithful and did everything in my power to amend my wrongdoing, but no volunteer work in the temple and no giving of my coins moved those hearts of stone. In their eyes, I wasn't redeemable—I was to be made an example. They grated every piece of me with their eyes, with their comments, excluding me from any festivities. Over the years, that

docile, small-voice Elene died. What you see is what became of her." Without a moment to spare, the anger started to clog her voice and overcome her sorrow. "No, the Elene you see has evolved. I deserted any oath I made to Skiar and reserved what love I had to give to those who saw worth in me. Soon, everything I have suffered for will be fulfilled through that ludicrous Vow of Marriage, where I will take back what Zerin and those Melodians smeared against my family."

The grey clouds that hovered over them started to part. It was easier to see them envelop the mountain peaks than look into Lucan's eyes. She had become afraid of what she might find if those silver eyes went back to loathing her existence.

When he expelled a sigh, his fingers clenched and loosened over his lap. She focused on them, gaze still unwilling to see how he would look at her this time.

"Nothing you said made my skin crawl." His warm took her fingers and held them neatly over his lap. "Not one bit."

She breathed deeper now, his words spinning in her mind like a ball of yarn. His voice was the same, a bit calmer but clear.

"And you're right about that Vow of Marriage being ludicrous. How many Melodians are cheating on their spouses right now? And why have jails if transgressions are deemed unfavorable?"

Elene shrugged. "They see it differently with a Vow of Marriage."

"Please, I spent enough time in Vinol to see how weak the flesh can be. You can't assume there aren't people who made that vow and aren't breaking their celibacy."

"It wouldn't fix anything. You heard what I told Dan and Ryker. My family is here, so I don't have any desire to leave this place. I already lived in the outside world, and I didn't like it. Here in this cottage, surrounded by sunflowers in the summer, that's the life I want."

Lucan exhaled through his nostrils and nodded, eyes narrowing at the running river. Maybe he was trying to cheer her up with explanations, but maybe she couldn't when he hadn't told her what he felt. What his views were of her truth.

Elene moved her boots back and forth, hoping some movement from her would animate him. He barely budged, and he certainly wasn't looking at her anymore. Aside from their disagreements,

Lucan was still a Riman, he sang their songs, and he cared about Children of Rima turning into the Fallen.

Was that it? Had he taken their side because she was an offender of an oath she made to a celestial? Lucan briefly glanced at her, his eyes slightly widening, perhaps aware that she seared her focus on him.

A tiny smile cornered his lips, inviting her lungs to breathe a little more. "No wonder you're so mean." He nudged her shoulder, sending her tilting to the other side. "Wish I had met that kinder, soft-spoken Elene than this one."

His touch left her riding a downward ride merged with confusion and butterflies and whirled in her stomach. She had been shaking, wondering if he would find her sick and deplorable to be around.

Elene nudged him back. "Don't get cocky. You deserved everything I gave you."

"Oh, you mean like nearly killing me on this river?" he leaned back, arms spread back as he looked at the sky. Lucan was still here, out of his own will. His shoulders dropped, appearing more relaxed than before. "Come to think of it, if you had, we wouldn't be talking like this."

"You already know why I did that."

"Doesn't matter. It's time for payback." Lucan grabbed her arm and inched her toward the river.

"What are you doing!" He only pushed her a little, and her arms flopped moments before crashing into the cold river. As she went to the surface, she gasped for air, pressing her hands to her face. "How could you!"

The water crashed by another plummeting in. He didn't let a second pass before he swam toward her and took her arms. "Elene, I was joking. I forgot the water gets cold—I mean *is* cold." His warm fingers delicately raised her chin. "I wanted to distract you from what you shared—"

Elene sank his head into the water. His fingers waved before he came back up and flipped his hair back, gasping for air.

"Very funny."

Elene laughed until her stomach hurt. "Serves you right for throwing me like that." Her teeth were chattery as she swam back to the shore. Just as her boots touched the ground, the weight of her

dress pulled her down. She turned, finding Lucan gone. She peered at the current, startled by the silence.

"Lucan?" She stepped into the deep end once more. "Lucan!"

He shot from the water and grabbed her waist. She splashed water on his face to escape, but the next thing she knew, his arms wrapped her. He stood up, raising her, inching towards the deep end to dunk her back into the river.

"I knew I should have finished you off!"

"Your honor, we have a confession!" Lucan roared a deep and bellow laugh.

Elene stayed quiet so she could hear the rest of it. Instead of acting on it, he kept her suspended in the water and stepped to the shallow end. She clung to his shoulders, and his arms tightly wrapped under her thigh, letting her buttocks rest against his arms. She blinked the water from her lashes while he stared back at her.

"Your pupils," she breathed. "Are they really lilac, or am I seeing things from the cold?"

His lips flattened to a smile. "You *just* noticed them?"

"Ahem."

Elene turned and found her father standing at the dock. She flopped like a fish and nearly elbowed Lucan's face trying to get off. He released her, allowing her to go back to land. She squeezed her soiled dress and steadied her turban from nearly falling off. Her leather boots squished the excess water with each step.

Her father headed to the front yard, his giant posture, his eyes locked on her. It was impossible to make up any excuses, and her cheeks were still burning from how close Lucan held her against his body. How she could feel the rhythm of his breathing, his pearly smile when he looked up at her.

"Your mother sent me over. Terra said you were about to get into a fight with some Maidens." For a second, she caught a smile on his face until he forced a frown. "But I'm glad your mother was wrong to worry."

"Sir." Lucan startled her. His wavy hair was long when it was damp and fell past his eyebrows.

"Lucan."

"I know there is nothing I can do to fix what happened in Mudburrow. And I don't blame you for not trusting me, but I didn't

come here to bring Elene any problems or ruin her reputation." His stare shifted to hers. "I'll take my leave now."

"Not so fast." Father's stare then went to her. "You're both soaking wet." Lucan looked at his clothes as if he had just realized it. "Wein told me how you risked your life for Elene's from Vinol's cavalry—how you saved her from the Fallen."

"You talked to Wein?" she chirped.

Father smiled but focused back on Lucan. "There is no amount of coin in the world that could replace your child, and for that, I thank you."

"It's the least I could do."

"Since you decided to stay in Melodia, you'll need a job. Elene here said to consider you like my extra pair of hands."

"I would very much like that, sir." Lucan knew how to use his words as a weapon, but he was well-mannered to people who had his respect.

"Great. Let's get you two dried up and celebrate with some tea, Elene?"

"Oh yes, I made some honey pancakes." Elene left her socks and boots on the porch. She opened her home and hurried to her room. After taking a towel, she followed the trail of water she left back to the porch. "I have a bathroom inside."

"I'm fine." Lucan was still outside, shirt off, while he worked on taking off his boots. His scarred back muscles were detailed, shifting from the movement of his shoulder blades. The wound that dug through his back was dark, bruised, and purplish around.

Lucan turned, startling her to look away.

"Your towel," she said.

"Oh." He leaned and reached it. "Thanks."

Elene hurried to her room, avoiding her father's gaze, and went to change. After untying her hair tassel, she dropped her heavy turban on the floor. Her hair fell over her shoulders. She looked at herself in the mirror and found a stranger staring back. She grabbed a new turban and covered herself.

Much better.

Her heart thudded as she slipped into her new underwear and bra with pantalettes that she appreciated after a cold dip. She wore a blue skirt over her red one and quickly slipped into her favorite blouse

with sunflower stitching. She picked a grey corset and tied it as neatly as she could.

"I already started your stove," Father said.

"Thank you." She paced back to the front and found Lucan on the porch staring at the river. "Do you think these trousers would fit?"

He turned, and she felt her top teeth bite hard against her bottom lip. His chest seemed strangely muscular since the last time she had seen them. The scars he bore from his battles were littered here and there, like his back, and that purplish wound that wouldn't heal.

Lucan took her trousers and pair of socks. "Thanks."

"You can come inside. I left a blanket to keep you warm."

"Oh, I'm not cold."

"Really? After we fell in the icy river?" And didn't he say the air was getting chilly?

"Oh, right." He rubbed his arm despite not trembling. "It was cold."

As pink batter sizzled on her iron skillet, Elene's heart swelled with joy. Now and then, she would peer at the living space and see Father and Lucan sitting on her sofa.

Lucan had been staring at her plants hanging on the ceiling, the cream sheepskin as her rug. Her furniture was hand-me-downs from Father's house, but it was enough to make her home, home. Father said the place once belonged to an old man who had no family but entrusted his property to him.

Elene sprinkled her dried hibiscus in her teacups and poured the hot water. She stirred a teaspoon of sugar and served them. Father and Lucan talked about what his duties would be in his first week. Father wanted him to start with the light work, ensuring water was kept clean.

After serving the pancakes, she curled on her own single chair, her mug of tea close to her chest. There wasn't a dull moment. Father shared his wisdom on raising sheep, and Lucan wasn't afraid to ask questions.

"Don't hesitate to scold me if I make a mistake." Lucan sipped the tea and gave a satisfying sigh. "The only animals I ever really cared for were Fior and Ivory."

"You never had a pet growing up?" Elene's question sent those steady silver eyes at her.

"My mother was focused on… my studies."

"The only protection our sheep will need is from foxes, wolves, and a few hungry mountain lions." Father sipped his tea and smiled approvingly. "Work never ends at the Harrow farm, especially during lambing season."

"I'm sorry, but what is that?"

His question pulled a chuckle from Elene. "Father, you'll flood him with too much information. Don't forget he was a mercenary before this." She scooted a chair and joined them, sipping her tea and partaking in the honey pancakes.

Her heart was still fluttering. It was hard to tell where the source came from, whether it was at Lucan being in her home, the relaxed conversation he shared with her father, or that he didn't leave after she shared her transgression.

The light from his necklace caught her attention. He did say he was unaware of Melodia's chill and, with mountains surrounding them, he could use something warmer than that long sleeve shirt he wore. Maybe she could do something about that—she could crochet or knit something for him.

Father continued his conversation with the hired hand she approved of. Lucan listened, reaching for another of her honey pancakes and taking a bite.

Elene closed her eyes. She held the new special moment. She breathed deeply, taking in the place, the seconds, the temperature in the room, and the voices around her. If she could capture a memory to hold and look back on, it was the promises today had.

CHAPTER 32

LUCAN

Lucan started hauling ass up the Avenue. He told Matias he would be there after service but got held up when Cleric Aaron and a few selected Maidens and old clerics went to attend the Spire. He hoped he could keep up on Preisen if David and his friends had found Caydon, but Cleric Aaron wouldn't share anything until there was something worth sharing.

The time spent waiting was in vain. He promised Matias he would be there on his lunch break and help him finish the rest of the day.

The jingle of a familiar bell rang. He knew the sound from his visits, from having passed her shop.

"Stop right there, Lucan?" As he thought, it was Olivia.

"Didn't see you at service today," he said, catching his breath.

The old woman chuckled. "Got busy with some orders, and where are you off in such a rush?"

"The Harrows and I'm running late."

"Mind helping me carry two heavy bags to my kitchen? Promise you it won't take much time."

"Sure." He couldn't say no to Olivia. Now that he had coins, he visited her bakery when he had sweet cravings, but she would never let him pay on account that he helped her with simple tasks, like dusting her top shelves or fetching her well water. Eventually, she would invite him over for dinner, and he, having few to talk to, obliged.

As soon as he walked into her bakery, he breathed in the smell of rye. His stomach churned. By the door were two sacks of flour weighing about forty pounds each.

Olivia slowly headed back to the kitchen, where she left the door open. The way the sound of dishes being placed after one another thumped and clattered. Weird, she said she needed help, but someone was in her shop.

Lucan crouched and lifted the first bag. He wobbled back, taken by how light it was. He felt a slight twinge in his wound but was able to pick up the second bag.

Short on time, he hurried through the shop.

"My, my," said Olivia, blushing at the cheeks. "I knew you were strong, but you were just hiding that from me, weren't you?"

"Maybe," he teased back. He walked in and found a woman there, washing the large pans Olivia used to bake. She hummed to herself, singing a low melody but not noticing he was behind.

Lucan quietly set the bags down and stepped back. Her humming delicately fluttered across the room and danced in his mind. She radiated joy and contentment. That's what her humming told him.

Olivia was staring at Elene and back at him. As she opened her mouth, Lucan hurried out of the kitchen. Without a protest, Olivia watched him head for the exit, evidently perplexed by his actions. Elene wanted that distance, though he didn't know if it counted after they talked by the Beaven River. He never asked, and she was a hard face to find in town.

"Right, work." Olivia took a bag she left on the counter. "For the trouble. I threw something in there for Matias."

Back up the Avenue, Lucan cursed at the long walk it was going to take to get to Matias's home. Olivia once mentioned she had a helper who took over after her workers left. That person must've been Elene, and given her reputation, the arrangement was between them.

A horse neighed, bringing him to a halt.

"Hey, stranded one, need a ride?" Terra was driving the wagon, smiling at him. On the front seat was Maiden Camilla, with Maiden Nessa in the back.

"Going to your home?"

Terra rolled her eyes. "Where else?"

That was good enough for him. Lucan hopped in.

With the wagon going into motion, the wind pulled and tugged into the countryside, pulling Maiden Nessa's amber-colored hair left and right. She grabbed her cloak and raised it over to keep her locks in place, eyes shyly peeking at him.

"So, Lucan," said Maiden Camilla. "Father said you've been ever so curious about the business that occurs in the Spire."

"That's because I was."

"You're thinking about your friends, correct?"

"Got that right." Oscern would at least send word for him, let him know they were alright.

"If there is any news, we'll let you know, but be careful about wandering around the higher levels of the temple. The clerics don't like it."

"Because?"

Maiden Nessa chuckled. Her freckles wrinkled when she smiled.

"So, what are you two doing in town?" he asked.

"Simple, really," said Terra. "Elene's engagement ceremony is coming up, and we want to look presentable."

"We're going to look at some fabric Mrs. Harrow ordered from Appleton," said Maiden Camilla. "A shame she lost her precious handkerchiefs."

"Hey, that's not our fault," Terra said with an irritated tone. "I nearly lost my brother, and Skiar knows what scare Elene went through to see him nearly killed."

"Sorry, sorry," said Maiden Camilla. "What I meant was we will have to improvise for the new event."

At the Harrow farm, Lucan hopped off the wagon and hurried to the pasture. Matias was miles in the back of the property, where the fenced area blocked the way into the wilderness.

Behind, Terra's voice echoed, 'You're welcome.' He waved but didn't turn back.

The flock of sheep pulled cloves from the ground and legumes and other plants that grew in the pasture. They were allowed to roam in the small acreage behind the Harrow's home, beyond their chicken coop and garden. Unless something caught their attention, be it by some strange noise, the flock were head down, bleating.

Among them was Pepe, fur as frost white as them, blending with them in case a predator thought they were alone.

Matias wore a brown wool cap over his dark hair. His eyes were just like Elene's, lashes thick and curly, eyes dark and full of mystery. Seeing him, he went over to the rock he liked to sit and eat. "Thought you weren't coming." He moved aside so he could join him. "Terra made us a sandwich. It's probably soggy now."

"Sorry, I stayed longer than I should have at the temple."

"Did something happen?"

"They ended service early so Cleric Aaron could attend a meeting at the Spire. I hoped I could find out what it was about, but was asked to leave."

"I see." Matias bit into his loaf of bread stuffed with meat and hard cheese. "If it's important, we'll know."

Lucan unwrapped the pastries and told Matais it was from the bakery. Matias responded by giving him a mug of apple cider. He took it humbly and watched the sheep graze.

"You settling in well?" Matias asked.

"Enough to know my neighbor's chickens like to leave droppings on my steps." The warm apple cider warmed his throat. The sweet, tangy taste and the skin of the softened apple he chewed. "Though I have to say I was pretty comfortable living in the temple."

"Temple, huh?" Matias finished his sandwiched bread and grabbed Olivia's pastry. He smiled at it like he knew it would taste good. "Never thought a Vinolean mercenary would be open to this kind of life."

The cold wind picked up and rustled the leaves above their heads. As some fell, he focused on the orange leaf that fell on his shoulder. "I'm not exactly Vinolean."

"I'm aware." Matias watched the sheep move to the other side of the pasture. "So, did you live in the lower city or in the floating mountains?"

Lucan choked on his sandwich. He spat bits of the bread, his eyes watered when Matias patted his back.

"You alright?"

"Sorry, you took me by surprise."

"When Cleric Aaron announced Gourd had passed away, he said your friends were Rima's Orphaned, so I assumed if they were as close as you claim, then you were likely one."

Lucan didn't deny his assumption, but he took a meaty bite of his sandwich so he wouldn't explain. The view opened the valley, the tall, robust mountain peaks, always reaching for the sky. In big cities like Vinol, he had to be in the hills to see the mountains and their lower rangers. Here, the folded mountains with convergent boundaries embraced Iven Forest just like it had to Melodia. It was possible the structure was influenced by their White Oak, just like Preisen was bigger on the inside.

"So… I'm going to assume you've been to Aelith?" He never answered his questions about the floating mountains, but perhaps his inquiry was an answer of its own.

"I visited once when I was younger, probably beyond your time. My father did the long-distance travel then."

There was never a man old enough to be a grandfather walking around the Harrow home. In the living room was no portrait or hardly a mention.

"He passed away long ago," Matias answered for him, seemingly aware he was trying to connect the dots.

"He always wanted a chance to meet Aelith's High Maiden, but I doubt he even visited the lower city's temple or ventured much. He was goal-oriented first before anything else and would journey back home. My mother was often sick back then, so any time away from her made him eager to come home."

"Oh." Even if his father tried, his mother was too busy to be seen by everyone who made the pilgrimage. She directed her service solely to their floating temple.

"But I did have the chance to meet her briefly."

"Did you? But you said you only visited Aelith once."

"Her name was Decima, correct?" Matias said it like it was a whistle, a sneeze that didn't take any effort to sound out.

"Yeah, that was it." He hoped Matias didn't pick up his disappointment, but it came out just the same.

When it came to her name, He taught himself how to freeze every muscle in his face, how to breathe through his discomfort with ease in spite of the thumping in his chest. Her name, he couldn't utter,

even in solitude, even in his dreams. It bore various meanings, the title Rimans sought in times of trouble. To him, her name ranked below mother, and to those who witnessed her fury saw for themselves that very same name revolved around her powers.

The one she passed to him.

Matias didn't have any inclination to suspect anything beyond him being a Riman, so he continued. "Even if I went to Aelith once, it's not a memory the years can erode, yet hard to describe in words what it was like to step in the city. The light there covers you differently, like that feeling when you dip your feet into a warm bath."

"I've heard that before." Mother said it had to do with the first White Oak Rima planted. It was excessively pure, so her roots could not dig into Pleada, a world that belonged to the demon of the deep. Once Rima had planted the acorn on the ground, the rocks broke and floated over the region. "Then she fell."

"It was hard on us all." Matia's eyes narrowed. "My mother died that year, Melodia encountered failed robberies, raids, and gifted Children of Rima left the faith. Since then, I stopped traveling Vine Road so I wouldn't steer too much from my children."

"Matias, I'm really at fault for what I put Wein and Elene through, for rushing them to Mudburrow and losing Gourd."

Matias's stare shifted to meet his. "You're quite something, Lucan, and your demeanor doesn't match you. Something tells me you're more than meets the eye. I believe that now after you and my eldest daughter have gotten along."

"About that. The mug you got Elene broke because I did nothing to stop it."

"Ah, yes, that incident." Matias chuckled. "Rüfus said Elene repaid you by attacking you."

Lucan half smiled and rubbed the back of his neck. "It was the first time a woman ever dove at me like that. Told me a lot about how much she loves you."

Matias smiled. "It's her nature. Elene doesn't doubt her emotions. They work like one mind, and if they're strong enough, she'll leave you surprised. It's something she picked up from her mother. Once her mind is set, nothing can stop her."

The cowbell rang from afar. It was impossible to see who was standing out far back, ringing it.

The brown horse and rider coming to the pasture was Wein. The panic in his eyes was enough for Matias to leave his lunch and approach him.

"Whoa." Wein slowed down and unmounted his horse. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, panting. "Maiden Derli is coming for dinner."

"Of course she is," Father said. "She'll be announcing Elene's betrothed tonight."

"Not just that." Wein swallowed hard. "She'll be coming for Terra's as well."

"Looks like the secret is out." Matias wiped his hands with his napkin. "A month after you left, Maiden Derli paid us a visit for Terra. She's been wanting to keep it a secret until tonight." He gave Lucan's shoulder a squeeze. "Come on, we best start shearing the flock before Maiden Derli pays us a visit."

"I'll help," Wein said, rolling his sleeves.

"Don't you have the town to protect?"

Wein frowned and lowered his gaze. "I never said I didn't want to help you anymore, and if you've taken me from the business, I'll help whether you like it or not."

Matias smiled. "Well, let's get to it."

Housing sheep was one thing, and watching them graze was another, but getting them to settle down for shearing resulted in a cat-and-mouse game. Lucan chased after them and hobbled through mud and dung piles just to get one bleating sheep back to the barn.

Every time he came back panting, Wein would laugh.

"Got another job for you, seeing my youngest hasn't arrived." Matias sheared the sheep like a work of art. It was no simple task, and only experienced hands with blade shears could remove their sheep's wool. "Wear those gloves on the table and start taking any impurities from the wool we stacked for you."

"Impurities?"

"It's called skirting," Wein said, "It's one of the dirtiest processes of taking junk from the wool." He unrolled his sleeves and headed for the exit. "I'll go fetch Elene for dinner."

"Don't take too long." Seeing Matias sheer sheep after sheep looked like a back-wrenching process. He always started by removing the belly wool. Blade shears normally glided closest to the sheep's skin, but they left some space for the cold climate. After finishing his task, he covered his money-makers with an extra blanket wrapped around their neck.

Lucan flung the last fleece on the shelves and washed his hands from the basin Matias refilled for him. His ass hurt from sitting those long hours, and after rummaging through every little thing that clung to the wool, removing twigs, burrs, and even vegetable matter, he needed a good cleaning.

Layers upon layers of sheared wool overlapped one another, waiting to be bathed in hot water and cleaned.

Lucan went to the fenced area leading to the pasture to make sure the place was secure. To minimize the growth of parasites, Matias liked to keep his barn open enough for the sheep to wander into their closed pen. Though it was big enough for them to roam, if a sheep got out at night, it would be on its own with any lurking mountain lions and wolves.

The sweet citrus aroma of peach pie swept from the kitchen window. Mrs. Harrow caught him checking the gate. Her face slightly scrunched before she left his view. It seemed no matter what he did, she was going to remain guarded, but he understood more by working here that she was a control freak. She was hard on Terra if she wore her hair wrong, and she was worse on Elene for how often she liked to take Fior for a ride. Wein seemed to be her preferred child, either because he didn't protest or because she favored him.

Before leaving, Lucan headed to the barn Fior and Ivory were kept. Matias liked to spend his last work hour there, going through his notes. He knocked at the entrance, and only Pepe looked his way. "I'll be heading home now."

Matias grunted a nod.

As he turned, he halted at the blue-eyed Terra, standing inches from him, giving off the aroma of a sweet perfume. "I didn't know you were still here." Her hair was neatly pulled in an updo, and her earrings dangled from how light on her feet she was to sneak up on him.

"I'm just heading home."

"Home?" She crossed her arms. "Why don't you join us for dinner? Mother is making lots of food, definitely making use of your coin."

"Terra." Matias left his notes on his table and headed toward him. "Lucan must be tired. He was skirting the wool on his own, you know."

"This is the thanks I get for making both of your lunches? I nearly sunk my boot in mud, you know. Then I had to discover Lucan wandering Melodia, and I was kind enough to give him a lift."

Matias put his pen down and smiled. He gave Terra a kiss on her forehead. "Alright, since it's a special occasion, I can't say no. Lucan, what do you think?"

"If it's alright with you guys," he said, thinking of that peach pie. "I'll need to go home and grab a new set of clothes.

Terra laced her arm with his and tugged him from the barn. "No need. A fresh shirt and vest will do you just fine, and Pa has many."

"Terra, don't let Maiden Derli see you like that, and your mother, she'll have a heart attack."

"Relax, Pa, I can do this until the announcement." Terra pulled him from the barn and led him to the house.

The home was filled with various aromas, hints of meat, sweet cranberries, and bread. Terra led him to the kitchen where Norma was. She released him just as her mother turned. "Ma, Pa asked Lucan to stay for dinner. Gonna fetch a shirt for him since he's been skirting wool all day."

Mrs. Harrow gave a deep sigh. She looked at him disapprovingly but nodded. "There should be enough shirts and vests in his drawers."

Just like that, Lucan was following the humming, whistling Terra upstairs. She took a sharp right and strolled down the long hallway.

"You're *Pa* asked, huh?"

She chuckled at her crime rather than denying it. "If I had told Ma I asked you, she would've had you running out of the house." She opened the door that likely belonged to their parents. "Come on, don't be shy."

Matias and Norma's master bedroom was grand. High walls with their own chimney accompanied by plush seats and shelves of books.

In the far back was a desk, and on the wall, a map of the continent where a red pen had drawn certain regions with tiny circles.

"Quite roomy, ain't it?" Terra was rummaging through the dresser.

There was a family portrait of the Harrows on the wall. They had done the commission in their living room because he recognized the fireplace in the painting. Sitting on the chair was a younger Mrs. Harrow, holding a newborn that had to be Terra swaddled in a flowery muslin cloth. Matias stood on her right, and beside him was Wein, wearing a white shirt with suspenders, black shorts, and high-knee socks. Standing on the other side of the chair was a young Elene in a simple brown dress with ruffles on her shoulders. Girls her age often had long hair, but hers was misshapen and cut to her ears.

Something about the painting made her look different from the rest that the painter did not fix. Her hands were delicately over one another, her chin tucked in, but her gaze slightly veered to the right. Little to no reflection was in her eyes, but there was great detail in the shape of her hair and face than the rest. Maybe that's why it looked like she could move at any moment, but he didn't know why she looked so sad, but somehow the painter wanted to preserve it than fix it.

"Lucan?" Terra was right behind him again, shirt and vest in her arms. She looked at the painting and back at him. "Like it?"

"Yeah, but what happened to Elene's hair?"

"Oh." Her tone was flat, missing that rise and fall of her voice. "Ma said Elene would take her scissors and cut her hair whenever it grew long. She has a scar on the back of her ear for having cut it so fast."

"Fast?"

Terra shrugged. "Don't ask me, I was a baby then, but Elene would do weird things, or so Ma said."

So it was some child tantrum she was in. Looking back at the painting, anyone would have that face if they were scolded for not sitting still for a painter, and with a mother like theirs, who wouldn't?

Terra pressed the shirt and vest to his chest and paced to the plush seats. She stopped in front of the bed, her index finger tracing the frame. "I'm excited that Maiden Derli is coming to visit, that I'll finally know who my husband will be, but…" She squeezed her lips. "But now that it's here. I don't think I'm ready."

"Tell Maiden Derli you're no longer interested."

Terra smiled, eyes half drawn to his chest. "I'm not going to mess it up, not after Elene has…" A frown followed. "I wish I made a few more choices that were my own, beyond flirting with the boys, beyond thinking I had all the time in the world to wait, but now that opportunity is gone."

"This Vow of Marriage and you Melodians." The fearful look on Elene's face, sitting with him at the dock, flashed in his mind. "It has hurt people, you know."

"You don't have to understand." Terra faced him, taking a step closer as if she was taking his comment as a challenge. "Nobody is forced to make a Vow of Marriage if they don't want to. It's breaking a vow that we have a problem with."

"Well, I better get changed." Just as he turned, Terra took his arm once more and turned him to her. She was getting on her toes, pink lips guiding hers to his. Lucan leaned back and moved her from reaching him. "What are you doing?"

"Why are you asking?" Her eyes were shut, still on her tippy toes. "I thought you liked me."

"You're going to be engaged."

"The ceremony, yes, but not at this moment."

"That's why you asked me to stay, isn't it?"

"Yes." She opened her eyes and dropped down to her heels. "Come on, I'm running out of time." She tugged at his collar so he could lean down, but Lucan leaned back.

"Terra, stop. I'm not going to kiss you."

His words forced her to release him. Terra huffed out of frustration, not sadness. "You gave me some mixed messages the last time we met."

"Yeah?" He crossed his arms to create a safe distance. "If you can flirt while keeping your heart guarded, what makes you think I can't do the same?"

She smiled, pleased by his response. "Fine, then, can you at least pity me and hold me?" Elene's words sprang back to him of their stay in that hotel in Mudburrow. He blinked back at Terra. "Come on, I'm begging here."

Before he could answer, she slipped through his arms and sank into his chest. Sighing, Lucan wrapped his arms around her. She started to tremble as if scared by his embrace.

The smell of sweet fruit was coming from her hair. Whatever she put on it, it smelled nice.

A creak on the floor startled them, and his heart nearly dropped into his stomach.

Elene was standing by the doorway, her chest rising and falling at a quick pace.

Terra moved from him and fixed her dress. "About time," she said carelessly as if nothing had happened. "What took you so long?"

Elene gulped the air. Somehow, the action made her eyes flicker. "Wein was summoned to the temple. That's what held us up." Her voice was stale, like those eyes of hers in that painting.

"Well, I'm off," Terra sang. She was back to her jittery self, not once asking Elene to keep what she saw to herself. "I have many dresses to choose from and so little time!"

Elene turned to leave, forcing him to call her. He thought she would stomp away, he hoped she would, but she stopped. "What…" He cleared his throat. "What did Cleric Aaron want with me?"

"You'll soon find out."

"Elene," he said calmly. "What you saw just now. Can you let me explain myself?"

Her dark gaze moved to him. She must've swallowed the hurt he saw at the doorway because her expression softened. "What exactly do you need to explain? You always liked my sister."

"No, that's just who I was before—"

Elene darted out of the room. Lucan followed her down the hallway, heart thudding but keeping up. Seeing him behind, she side-eyed him. "You don't need to give me an excuse, Lucan."

"At least let me explain." He took her arm, and at that moment, she yanked it away. He froze, surprised by her reflexes.

Elene took a deep breath, and her lips quivered to a shaky smile. "It's alright. I'll see you at the dining table." She hurried downstairs,

giving him no room to respond. Following a sudden pause was a thud.

"Elene," he heard Mrs. Harrow say. "How many times are you going to trip over the same stairs?"

Lucan went to the washroom and left the shirt and vest on the wall table next to the oil lamp that dimly lit the room. As he unbuttoned his shirt, he went to the washstand and looked at the oval mirror. Up close, he looked at his reflection more, at the sun-kissed freckles on his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. Looking into his eyes more, a different person stared back.

The oil lamp flickered out, and the room darkened.

"Damn it." Lucan took off the lampshade and adjusted the wick feed. He lighted a match, fed the wick, and put the lampshade down again.

Are they really lilac, or am I seeing things from the cold?

His stomach sank for the second time. When Elene had said it, he didn't question her. He was born with lilac-colored irises, but he was supposed to have black irises or at least had for the last decade. In flashes, he saw her again. His mother ran her dagger of light down the side of his neck, the change of his body, the flesh he accepted to become his.

The knocking brought his heart to race.

"Lucan?" It was Terra. "We're waiting for you. Maiden Derli is here."

"Ah—coming." He rushed back to the washstand and poured water from the pitcher into the basin. He splashed the water on his face a few times and smoothed his wavy hair back. He rubbed his eye sockets with his knuckles and gave the mirror a hard look.

Skiar. It was lilac.

Cursing, he changed out of his shirt and threw it on the floor. He had been staring at his abdominal muscles, chiseled into firm shapes. Those bags of flour didn't bear any weight. For fifteen minutes, he had placed his hand over his scar, wondering how to reverse the effect, what excuse he could give to leave the Harrows.

His deep, long breaths didn't fix it but gave him time to process what was happening.

Nothing has been the same since Major Rudra impaled him, but there was no remedy, and it wasn't that he wanted to disregard

Oscern or Zorn's worries. That night on the cargo ship, he had developed a fever that worsened the hammering in his chest. Wein saw the flash of light he emitted, and now Elene knew his eye color could change.

Mother. Lucan took the necklace into his hand. *How can I live when your protection is fading?*

CHAPTER 33

LUCAN

Lucan hurried down the steps, following the chatter in the dining room. His breathing was calm now that the color was gone, but his vision was blurred from having rubbed his eyes too hard. Maybe that's why the Harrows were giving him a strange look. Elene and Terra were sitting across the table next to their mother's right. Matias took the head table, with Maiden Derli taking the seat to his left. Wein gestured for him to take the chair to his left.

Assuming it was his, he claimed his seat.

Mrs. Harrow got up and silently served his plate of beans with what looked like slices of pork, onions, and collard greens.

"What took you so long?" Terra was looking at him, eyes narrowing. "And why are your eyes red?"

"Got some soap in my eyes."

Mrs. Harrow cleared her throat and returned to her seat. Everyone started to eat with baskets of bread being passed around. The Harrow women sat upright and proper, with their arms hovering over their table. Matias and Wein were identical not just in appearance but in the sunken look when they ate.

Maiden Derli, who talked about her garden work, focused on him. "Oh, and Lucan, I heard you've been helping Olivia down at her bakery."

A clatter moved everyone's attention to Elene. A few beans were scattered on the tablecloth while she leaned under the table and picked up the spoon she dropped. By that expression alone, Olivia hadn't mentioned him to her.

"Elene," Mrs. Harrow said, rubbing the side of her temple. "First the stairs, now this?"

"Ma, she can't help herself." Wein seemed to have caught on that his sister was off because he was glancing at her as often as Terra was glancing at him.

"I help when Olivia needs me," Lucan answered, so he could draw the focus from Elene to him. "She's been kind to me."

Maiden Derli nodded. "That she is, though if she had married and had her own children, she wouldn't be in this situation."

Lucan drummed his fingers on the table. "Not everyone wants to live their whole lives fighting and squabbling."

Mrs. Harrow swiftly grabbed her glass of wine and chugged it.

Maiden Derli laughed light-heartedly. "That just makes me more curious about you. Do you intend to settle down here?" She seemed like a well-meaning old woman, despite being an arranger of Vows of Marriage.

"Settle? Not likely, and in case you ask, I'm not the marrying kind."

"Is that so?" Mrs. Harrow chimed. "You must have spent too much time with my son." Wein didn't look up. He moved his spoon around. "He's in his middle thirties and hasn't introduced us to anyone, woman or man of that matter."

"He met a lovely Gypsian leader on Vine Road," Elene said, head still down but wearing a smile.

Wein's face grew red. "Elene."

"We will not be sharing *any* conversation about what you two did on Vine Road," Mrs. Harrow said. "And certainly, no talk of Gypsian women. Those aren't the types a Harrow should be looking for."

Wein's stare fell that moment. He said nothing, but his mother's words wore him down. Matias was eating with a frown. He said less but seemed to be reading the room. He seemed like the kind of man who would be pleased for as long as his children were. Norma, on the other hand, cared more about their reputation.

Elene whispered a sorry, but Wein didn't look at her.

After dinner, they finished with the peach pie. Turns out Matias had made it that morning, and Mrs. Harrow was the one who reheated it. He happily served everyone a slice, which Lucan enjoyed.

The juices were thick, the peaches golden as if they were pickled before being used in the pie.

"We can talk in the living room," Mrs. Harrow said, seeing Maiden Derli take her time with the pie. "Or we can stay here."

"That would be for the best. This pie is marvelous, Matias."

Matias thanked her with a smile, but it fell flat after. "Before we begin, I would like to confirm with our daughters if they want to continue this arrangement. Once you're engaged, you're in it for the long run."

Mrs. Harrow grabbed Matia's hands and squeezed. "Is that necessary? They made a vow."

"We'll start with Elene," he continued.

It seemed the only person Elene could make full eye contact with at the dining table was her father. Lucan already knew her answer. In her eyes, marrying through a Vow of Marriage would cleanse her wrongs from her family name. Matias asking didn't sit well. Did he not know she was sacrificing herself? Or did he ask because he knew her plan all along and wanted to give her a way out?

"Yes," she answered, eyes dropping to her plate. "I'm certain."

Wein shut his eyes and slowly breathed out.

"The same for me," Terra said shortly after.

Relief fell on Mrs. Harrow's face. "Thank, Rima."

Maiden Derli chuckled. "Very well, as you know from the bustling noise in town, preparations are already being made. This weekend you two will be tying your promise to your betrothed, whose name I can now reveal."

"Can I go first?" Terra was at the edge of her seat, leaning side to side.

"Terra," her mother sneered.

"Oh please, I'm anxious."

Maiden Derli set her fork down and faced Terra only. "You will be marrying Shane Marigold."

Mrs. Harrow poured more wine into her glass and downed it.

Terra cocked her head sideways. Her lips were pursed, barely a smile. "The banker's son? Him?"

"Yes."

"What about Oscar? Or Justin?"

"That's enough chatter, Terra," Mrs. Harrow said, shifting her gaze to Elene. "What about my eldest daughter?"

"And yes, our long-awaited bride-to-be."

"It's alright," Elene said. "I can wait."

"No, we simply must know," Mrs. Harrow said, frowning. "Please, go on, Maiden Derli."

Elene stood from her seat, but at that instant, her mother stood up. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Norma, it's alright," Maiden Derli said. "There is nothing wrong with waiting. Just so you know, Elene. Your betrothed is aware that he's marrying you. You would be the only one left with the surprise tomorrow."

"That's fine with me." Elene shot a glance at him. "Nothing surprises me anymore." Just now, she was showing him that her smile upstairs was a farce, unaware that the embrace was her sister's doing.

Mrs. Harrow and Terra walked Maiden Derli out. The family moved to the living room for coffee. Elene had gone to wash the dishes. He watched the hallway in case she returned or left. He needed to talk to her, more so now after she gave him that look.

"Lucan?" Wein had been lingering by the doorway. "Cleric Aaron would like to have a word with you."

"Can it wait?" He needed to talk to Elene first.

"It's about your friends, Zorn and Oscern."

An unsteady sensation roused in his chest. "What about them?"

"Take it easy. I'm just the messenger. Come, I'll take you."

Dammit. Everything was happening at once, and he was given little time to do anything about it.

He thanked the Harrows for the meal and hurried out. Terra followed them to the porch and waved goodbye.

Elene never left the kitchen.

The road was dark, and the night was cool. The temple doors were open. The entrance was all stone, and the house of worship was just through the double doors, grand enough for pillars to support. An amber light glowed from the candles and wooden structure of the nave.

"So, who's Terra marrying?" A voice echoed down at them. At the second-floor steps was Maiden Camilla smiling at them.

"You'll find out this weekend," Wein said, continuing to the nave.

"Won't need to. Terra will tell me."

Cleric Aaron stood at the altar before the statue of Rima, whose arms were spread open, staring down at the room. She wore a type of helmet that concealed everything but her chin and lips. It had three spear-like points coming out of her from the head with curved loops that pushed inward, facing her cheeks.

"What happened to Zorn and Oscern?" Lucan's voice echoed just the same.

Cleric Aaron turned, seeing him. "Ah, you're here. I waited quite long for you to come."

"My family invited him to dinner with Maiden Derli."

"Ah yes, that is a momentous occasion." He placed his hands on his belt and sighed. "I was at the Sanctum shortly after I sent you off. It appears that Maiden Trini did not leave. A Maiden by the name of Gittle asked her to inform you that Zorn and Oscern returned safely but left shortly after."

Gittle. She still thought about them. "And David? Did he find Caydon?"

Cleric Aaron frowned. "I'm afraid that is private information."

"You can't keep this from me, not if it involves my friends."

"And the less we say, the more prepared we can deliver news when there is something to say." He bid them goodnight and went toward the east wing of the building.

"Skiar," said Lucan. "He stormed off on purpose and gave me the same excuse."

"I can tell you." Maiden Camilla's voice echoed again. It seemed she stayed upstairs and entered the worship house through the second floor and listened to them.

"You know?" Lucan asked, hopeful.

"Won't you get in trouble?" Wein tested, arms crossed.

"Well, unlike you, I'm not afraid to take risks." She gave him a personal look that made him look away. Her focus then shifted to Lucan. "The man you speak of, David, has yet to find Caydon or the Fallen. Your friends, Oscern and Zorn, did return to Preisen as my father has said, but after David and the Maiden didn't return, they left once more."

"Where to?"

"That is something you will have to discuss with Maiden Trini. Even my father doesn't have that answer."

Lucan looked at Wein, who carried a troubled look. Something must have happened that separated David from Zorn and Oscern. They probably thought they would find his copy in Preisen, but when he was gone there too, they must have left to find him once more.

"I'm sure if we wait for a few more days, we will have a recent update," said Maiden Camilla. "These are hard events we're in. If it wasn't, I wouldn't be taking the risk of telling you." She gave Wein one last look and left.

Lucan faced the statue of Rima. Caydon. How could they still lose him? And David and the Maiden accompanying him. What became of them?

"You want to find them, don't you?"

Lucan looked at Wein. "It's the fact that they can't find Caydon that bothers me. Thanks to his abilities, he flawlessly cloaked us from the Fallen. Who's saying he hadn't done the same thing to David?"

"That is true." Wein relaxed his hands on his hips. "It makes looking for him that much more difficult. Rima's power, though grand, they're just as dangerous. Remember the cavalry who attacked us on our way to Vinol? I thought that was the end of us."

Lucan spun from the statue. "I was no better. Powers or not, I killed for a king and his dispute with another kingdom."

"Lucan, you don't strike me as the man who would intentionally attack innocent people."

"But I've killed," he said. "For coin."

"To live," Wein corrected. "And those coins were used to keep us alive, and after what happened to us, keep food on my family's table. Are you to also say my family should've suffered because it wasn't good enough?" Wein looked up at the ceiling. Maiden Camilla was gone, but he spoke in a low whisper just the same. "Elene… she told me about what happened in Mudburrow, of what she did to the man who might've killed Gourd. I'm going to tell you what I told her. Every day is a new opportunity to be a better person. If you lose sight of that, then you lose a piece of yourself and the things that you hold dear."

"Elene," he uttered. "I need to see her and apologize for what happened."

Wein frowned. "Skiar, what happened between you two this time?"

"A misunderstanding, but she stormed off before I could explain."

"Then I suggest you drop it." Wein rubbed the back of his neck. "You know her engagement is this weekend."

"I'm not trying to get in between that."

"Then you better go now if you want to meet her on the road. She doesn't stay long at father's house at this hour."

Lucan marched out of the house of worship. His steps echoed in the temple's entrance until he made it down the steps.

At the Avenue, he ran up the hill toward the country road. *You know she's getting engaged this weekend.* She could get married tomorrow for all he cared, but he wasn't leaving Melodia with Elene making absurd assumptions about him.

When he got to the crossroads, he stopped to catch his breath. The cool breeze swept against him, but the distance to the Harrow farm was too far. He jogged a bit but stopped right after the pain in his chest grew.

From afar was a shadowy figure, its trotting hooves pacing in a two-beat rhythm. The moons unveiled a black horse. Riding him in a jog trot was a woman covered with a maroon-colored cloak. The frame of her face followed him before she slowed to a stop. The wind's breeze tugged at her hood, shuffling her hair tassel.

"Go home Lucan. My family is sleeping."

"I was coming back so I could talk to you."

"There is nothing to talk about." Elene encouraged Fior ahead. "Excuse me."

"If you want to be like this, then you won't have any trouble there. I'm leaving Melodia."

"Leaving?" She encouraged Fior around. "What did Cleric Aaron want? Terra overheard Wein talk to you, said you tried to get into the Sanctum earlier."

"She really likes to tell everyone everything, doesn't she?"

Elene shrugged. "You get used to it."

"Zorn and Oscern are alright, as far as I'm concerned, but I wouldn't have found out if Maiden Gittle didn't ask High Maiden Trini to forward me the message."

Elene brushed Fior's back. "Gittle… she's a sweet, caring little girl, isn't she?"

"Listen Elene… I was told some news that may be important to you, considering it has to do with Caydon."

Elene took the reins into her left hand and took her right foot out of the stirrup slide. As she slid her right foot over, she sank down, her left foot still caught in the stirrup. Fior jumped but didn't move when she plummeted to the floor.

Lucan took her arms and helped her up.

Wincing, she wiggled her boot off the stirrup. "I-I got it" She used her one foot to balance herself until she could free her other foot. She fixed her upturn cloak and adjusted her turban.

Lucan had bitten his inner cheeks for having witnessed that. Fior could have taken off and dragged her like a doll.

"So," she said, patting down her skirt. "You were saying?"

"It's Caydon… he and the Fallen have yet to be found."

"I feared so. His power was remarkable." Elene took the reins and encouraged Fior towards the road home. "Wein told me he was… that he may be corrupted."

"That's what David said, and there's only one way for me to find out."

Her stare sharpened when she looked at him. "Alright, Lucan, since you're leaving, let's talk."

"Really? Just because I'm leaving?"

"Last chance." She said it like he was doing her a disservice by wasting her time. But maybe there was more. Matias said she was mostly driven by her emotions, forgoing that she was clumsy and tenacious.

"Terra." He only said the name, and her eyes widened. "She embraced me back there. She was nervous about her engagement and just opened up to me."

"Alright," she said. "Thank you for letting me know. Goodnight."

"Wait. Don't do that. Stop pretending it's not bothering you."

Elene scoffed and spun to him, her tassel shifting left and right. "It's not."

"Right, because that look you gave me in the dining room was anything short of disappointment."

"As I said before, you always liked Terra. I have no reason to be upset."

"Have you ever heard of the phrase, 'match your attitude with what you're saying?' I know your jealousy got to you."

"Jealousy?" she said, surprised in the eyes. "I'm *not* jealous."

"Says the woman who asked me if I would marry her if Maiden Derli willed it."

It was dark, but he could bet a gold coin Elene was flustered. He knew she was embarrassed about that night, but he had no choice. She was acting like she had no soul, lacking a drop of emotion.

"I asked you one question, and you think I'm going to get jealous just like that?" Fior started stomping, compelling Elene to lead him forward. "Sure, I wanted us to get along, but now I'm starting to have regrets."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"I'm saying that if you come back to Melodia, I don't want to see your face ever again."

"There she is, the Little Heathen I know!"

"And since you want to keep acting like a killer, you can leave now, or I'll throw you back into the river!"

Now her spikes were out, and it got him deep. He started by unbuttoning his vest. "You want me to go? Fine!" He then followed with the cotton shirt. "Here, it belongs to your father—don't want you to call me a thief too." He flung them on the ground. "And since you want me to leave that soon, then I'll leave tonight." He marched back to Melodia, mind rattled and heart scorching.

Skiar, help the poor bastard who's marrying that one.

A neigh stopped him. Elene was having trouble grabbing Fior's reign. He stepped back, resisting her attempts to catch him.

"Elene."

"I got him."

Fior stepped sideways toward the end of the road, forcing Elene to grab the reins. Before she could lead him, his left foot dipped into

the slanted slope. The draft horse marched downward, dragging her as he trotted towards the open field.

"Let go of the reins!" Lucan shouted. His feet slid down the slope just as Fior had done. "Elene!"

She let go that very second.

Lucan fled into the field, nearly slipping himself from the dip, heart thudding that perhaps she got trampled. She crawled to her knees in a panic, got up, and ran after Fior. That second, she plopped back down.

"What happened?" he exclaimed, leaping over the pothole that took her down.

"I… I don't know." She wiped the tears from her eyes.

Lucan pushed through the tall grass, following the uneven vegetation Fior left. After some distance, the black stallion stopped, tail wagging left and right.

"Hey," he said, calmly approaching him. "What's gotten into you?" Fior snorted, shifting back, and for a moment, he thought he would take off. "It's okay. It's just me." He patted his side and gently took the reins. Fior snorted and resisted, pulling from him. "Come on, you worried Elene to death."

He neighed and shuffled back, but Lucan held on tight, showing him he was no pushover. He hummed, slow and steady, luring Fior's ears to shift forward and listen to his tune. The tight hold on the reigns loosened. Lucan rewarded him by petting his head.

"This isn't the first time." Elene came to them, rubbing her arm where she must have landed from her fall. "Father thinks Fior has grown some fear of the night. I think after what happened on Vine Road, he's unable to forget what we witnessed, the Fallen, the Vinolean soldiers..."

"Is that why he's been wearing blinders recently?"

"That's it."

Lucan took a deep breath. He petted Fior's shoulder, slowly grazing his fingers up. He seemed to calm down, though it was probably because he hummed. His focus shifted to Elene, who was head down, staring at her hands. "Elene, I don't want to fight with you, and I don't want us to go back to how we were."

She lowered her arm and tucked them behind her. Some of the moisture from the cheeks gleamed from the moon's light. "I don't

either." She glanced at his chest, eyes slowly drawing down to his abs. She grabbed Matias's shirt and opened it for him to slip in. "I don't want you to get sick. Father won't mind if you keep it longer."

He slowly released Fior and slipped his arm in it, then the other. Just as he grabbed the bottom end of the button, Elene took it instead. She remained head down, slowly buttoning the shirt for him.

Before she reached the last button, he took both of her hands and lowered them down. "How do you do that?"

Her soft fingers curled over his skin. "Do what?"

"Worry me to the point I might need an exchange of new trousers?"

Elene spilled a laugh. She planted her forehead against him, shoulders shaking from the hilarity. "That was quite scary, I'll admit." There was a nameless need to pull her closer, to feel the shape of her waist, but he overcame it by releasing her hands.

Once she relaxed, she remained there, head pressed against his chest but a safe distance from the wound. Out of nowhere, she whispered those words. "I saw you embrace her."

"It was nothing special." He wrapped his arms around her. "See? I can embrace you just the same and feel nothing."

"Just like Zerin then." Her words pinched at him.

"Don't compare me to that coward." He spun her and hugged her from behind. She chirped, shoulders squeezing in but not pulling away or giving him a slap for daring himself. "Did he… did he hold you like this?"

She mumbled some words, but he didn't pick them up. It was even harder to read her face with her back against him. When she turned, her breath brushed his face. Realizing how close he got, she looked down. "Why are you asking?"

"He didn't…" Lucan gulped, knowingly going out of boundaries to ask. "He didn't caress you?"

"Zerin was using me, remember?"

"Did he kiss you?"

"Please, I've never seen my father kiss my mother." She tensed up a bit but didn't look away, but her stare found him briefly. "When it happened, our clothes were still on, and he didn't touch me since."

That bastard. Not only did he betray her trust, but he didn't love her after all.

Feeling her breathing in his arms, he moved one hand over her shoulder. The back of his thumb grazed the nape of her neck, scarcely running down her collarbone.

Elene shivered and swallowed the air.

"Skiar," Lucan released her and stepped back. "You're more innocent than I thought."

She chuckled. A fixture of her curly lashes overlapped her dark eyes, followed by a cascade of colors, drawing in the moons' light into her glossy eyes.

Lucan brushed his hair back, giving it a little nudge. What the hell was he even doing? He could work better with a woman who knew her body. This one hadn't even been kissed.

Elene moved from him and fixed her cloak's collar. "Since you're here, you might as well walk me home." She went for the reigns, but Lucan took it instead, just in case Fior wanted to take off again.

She didn't refuse and marched back to the road, hand tracing her neck.

Lucan and Fior followed from behind, her soft skin still hanging on the surface of his lips. In no time, he caught on that her left foot was limping with each step. "Think you should let Fior give you a ride."

"Best to walk it off. I promise I'm not in pain."

At the edge of the crossroads were Melodian guards patrolling the area. The clank of one of the guard's swords made Fior stop again, shuffling as if some mouse was crawling under the large beast.

"Whoa, boy." When Fior pulled one way, Lucan followed him. He whistled a few times, diverting his attention to him.

Elene stood at a safe distance, watching him find some peace with the horse. She was the expert but wasn't feeding him any of her wisdom. The pressure was on him.

Fior's ears were back, and his breathing was hard. When he nipped at his shoulder, Lucan stepped back.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. "Since you're going to be like that, go on, run, have your space, but I'm heading this way." He walked towards the bridge, leaving Fior to stare at him. He turned, and he was in a solid stance.

Fior huffed and followed him. They met at the bridge, and he took the reigns. "You were testing me, weren't you?"

Fior blew air in his face.

Once they made it over, they waited for Elene to cross. Her limp was light, but she was walking all right. Perhaps after so many accidents, she had grown some resistance to pain.

A long straight road lay ahead, lacking farmland and neighbors. Most of it was open space, with thinly wooded areas a lumberjack wouldn't touch.

"Are you nervous about this weekend?" he asked.

Elene repelled the chill by keeping her arms crossed and tucked her cloak. "If I want to continue living here, I must fix my Vow of Marriage."

"Cleric Aaron, he has good intentions, right?"

"After his wife died, Maiden Camilla was too young to lead, and Maiden Derli didn't think she or the clerics could make the hard decisions for the community. He stepped to the challenge seeing he knew how his wife ran the temple." Seeing her shrug didn't give him any hope that it was true. "Personally, I don't like him. He takes advantage of my father because of the deal they made, but once I marry, he won't have anything to carry over him."

Now that they were halfway through the wooded road, the cottage was coming up. Lucan slowed his pace, and Elene mimicked him. The trees rustled, tossing the leaves through their feet.

"Lucan." Elene was staring ahead. "Take Fior with you." He and Fior looked at her. She crossed her arms and picked up her pace this time. "He lost his courage out there, and I want him to reclaim it."

"I wouldn't have time to think about it, *you* said you wanted me gone by tonight."

Elene took the reins from him. "I didn't mean it. This heathen blurts the first word that comes to her mind."

"*Little* heathen," he corrected.

She gave him a sour look and measured him from head to toe. "You know, you're not so tall yourself."

Lucan laughed it off. *That's what you think*. His mother was nearly seven feet tall, and he didn't know the correct height of his celestial body.

Elene led Fior to the little barn when he called her back once more. She turned, turning the horse so they could both face him. It

was hard enough that she was staring, but did he have to witness it as well?

"You'll be busy with your ceremony, and I might leave early," he said. "So I need to get this off my chest in case in case I don't see you again."

Her eyebrows knotted together, showing worry.

Skiar, this was harder than embracing her. Emotions, feelings, thoughts, these things bore no material or weight, they had no senses, no taste or sound, and yet they existed, and it required some consumption in the soul for them to become words.

"Every assumption you had about my behavior was right. I got used to the side of you that didn't snap at me or bruise me. Not that I appreciated your tendencies, but I didn't want to accept who you are now, a clumsy, short-tempered woman with a big heart but few to share it with. Everything you do worries me to the point where I think something bad will happen if I'm not there to monitor you." Her pressed lips softened to a smile, and her eyebrows relaxed. "So, with that being said, I regret letting that mug break for doing or saying things out of anger." His bottom lip tucked under his upper teeth, and he slurred the words. "F-forgive me."

He looked at Fior, who blankly stared back. He was no horse whisperer, but he wished he was now so he knew if his apology was good enough.

"You're forgiven." He didn't look at her when she said it. He stared at her long skirt, wondering when she would turn and leave. "But, can you forgive me as well?" Lucan looked up. Elene knew how to smile with her eyes. They gleamed differently when the gentle creases of her lower eyelids followed. "I acted out of impulse, and though I hated you once, I don't hate you anymore."

"Yeah, you're forgiven."

She looked down this time, appearing to be staring at his boots. "I should turn in. Give me tomorrow to talk to my father about lending you Fior, alright?"

"Okay."

She smiled, content. "See you around, Killer." She left for the barn, but he lingered a bit longer. He told her she might not see him again, yet her words comforted him that maybe he might.

"See you around, Little Heathen."

CHAPTER 34

ELENE

Elene rubbed her icy hands and blew the heat from her breath into them. The chilly ride back to Father's house was covered with dull morning fog but nothing like the one outside the Gypsian Forest. She unlatched the lock and pushed the door open. The thud ended in the clatter of hooves shuffling next to her.

"Good morning, Ivory." She led Fior into his stall. Ivory snorted and trotted around at the sight of him. "You missed him, didn't you?"

Looking at Fior, Elene gave his shoulder a rub. There was no shame in wearing blinders as it helped horses focus ahead and not on the littlest things that could spook them, but a part of her was a little sad. Fior could see fireworks shoot in the sky and remain still. Now even the most mundane noises, a can tossed by a sheep or a rustle from the wind made him whine.

"So," she said, hoping to shake away her thoughts. "We gotta talk about yesterday. You followed Lucan like a chick following its mama hen?" She smiled, thinking of how Lucan looked at her, hoping he would give her some tips. "You don't follow us like that, at least not me or Father. I have to admit I was a little jealous."

Without thinking, Terra and Lucan, locked in an embrace, flashed back in her mind. Even if he hugged her back and told her it meant nothing to him, a part of her couldn't hold him completely responsible. Terra always knew how to make men do things she wanted. She just wasn't expecting it would sting when she tried it on Lucan.

"Elene?" Her little sister's voice startled her. She was covered up with a long knitted shawl, carrying a wicker basket. "What are you doing up so early?"

"Just came to return Fior. You?"

Mother stepped in next, adjusting her hair. "We're going to see the Thompsons for some earrings for the ceremony. Come on, you need a pair as well."

"Need me to set up the wagon?"

"No need. Your father will pick us up in the afternoon."

The morning fog continued to envelop the mountains and the roads that rose and fell from the hills. Roosters were croaking in the distance. The leaves that last night's wind tossed, crunched underneath their boots.

Terra was in her usual cheery mood, singing *My Haven*.

Mother would hum along, but she seemed preoccupied with the button on her sleeves. She liked full shank shaped over anything that had hole flats. Her style was conventional but sharp, while she could use some improvement, more so since that woman at Arrow Den wasn't too impressed.

Elene grazed her fingers against her turban. Just touching it made her mother give it a narrowing gaze. "When will you take off the Skiar-awful thing?"

"Don't like it?" Elene teased, bringing Terra to chuckle.

"You better have been using Maiden Derli's cream. I don't want you to sport that ridiculous hair at the formal announcement."

"I have, Mother." How else was she messing with it? Her hair had been fighting for room.

By the time they arrived at the market streets, the shops were beginning to open. Carriages were passing by, some carrying several field workers for the farmland.

Elene glanced at every bachelor, from guard to baker, that passed them with a little hello. Maiden Derli said her husband-to-be was already made aware. So far, none had given a look that made her suspect it was them.

Just outside the temple was the platform, built by hardy-looking men with rolled-up sleeves and hammers.

"I wish it looked more festive," Terra commented, evidently displeased that it was just a wooden platform big enough for less than ten people to stand.

"It looks like the gallows," Elene added.

"Please, Elene," Mother said. "I was on the very same stage when your father and I were promised to one another."

"But I thought you and Pa didn't make a Vow of Marriage?" Terra said.

"You don't have to make one to declare to Melodia you are no longer available." Mother wore that proud smile like when she was complimented for her sewing skills. "Your father was the most handsome man in Melodia."

"Pa is still handsome," Terra said. "Otherwise, Mrs. Mintz or Mrs. Butler wouldn't always be complimenting him behind your back."

Mother's eyes widened. "What did you say?"

"It's true." Terra twirled the ends of her hair with her finger. "I overheard them at the party."

"Well, regardless of what they say, I married him. You always need to see who the most suitable partner is, and at that time, the Harrows were known for their hard work and respectable reputation."

Terra grumbled. "Except I gave up my choice. Now I'm going to marry a boring banker,"

"Shane is a little quiet," Elene admitted. "But he seems nice, just probably shy."

"Well, you'll have to forgive me for having a weakness toward talkative men."

Mother was frowning at Terra. From around the corner, a couple was passing by. She swiftly smiled and nodded at them, but as soon as they passed, the frown returned. "*He* will just have to prove to us that he isn't as dimwitted as his parents. There are rumors circulating around the Marigolds, and it's too late to confirm anything."

Terra bumped her hip into Elene's. Just the change of her balance left her stumbling awkwardly to the side.

"What was that for?" Elene pushed herself off the brick wall she used to steady her balance.

Terra seeing this laughed. "You're so jumpy I could tip you like a fainting goat!"

"Mother."

"Terra, stop wolfing around. We're in the public street."

"I'm just ever so tickled to know who of all the available bachelors my dear sister is going to marry."

"If I'm lucky, a bear from the mountains," Elene chortled.

"With your luck, you're getting a field mouse."

"Then I'll keep him in my pocket."

Mother took hers and Terra's arms and pinned them with hers. "Enough, you two, this is a serious commitment. Everything must go without disruptions and with no errors, and I won't have either of you ruin tonight's ceremony."

CHAPTER 35

LUCAN

It was at night when Rima's White Oak tree went from a regular oak tree to changing to a gradient lavender with lines of white light that would swirl over the bark. Security was tight, so Lucan could never get this close, but with the engagement ceremony starting, he took a chance.

He pressed one hand against the bark and watched the swirls of light wrap his fingers. He hoped that by making contact, the soreness in his chest would heal, but it hurt just the same. Even so, he felt some comfort.

"Your mother tree protected me, I hoped I could stay a bit longer so I could ensure your safety, but I need to leave." He respected Oscern's concern about the Fallen if he joined them, but at the same time, he couldn't sit there and wait, not after they hadn't found Caydon.

There was a sudden stomp at the bridge. The guard who discovered him gripped the hilt of his sword. "You shouldn't be touching it." That face, it was Pete.

"Sorry." Lucan pulled his hand back. The swirls of light still entangled his fingers until he pulled enough for them to sink back into the bark and move upward. "Couldn't help myself."

"Well, you're lucky it was just me. I know you mean no harm in it." Pete gestured him back. "Come on, aren't you going to watch the engagement ceremony?"

"Maybe." He still needed to get his provisions from the house, so he went back into town. "See that your arm is all healed up."

"Still a bit stiff and sore, but I'll manage."

The Avenue was closed off, and dozens of tables and chairs were set up. It was like one whole damn wedding. A ridiculous large harp was in the back. The floor was ornamented with flower petals, and the stage in front of the temple was adorned with silky white drapes that the wind brushed side to side.

Through the passing and going of many, Lucan found Rüfus at the far end, sneaking a sip from his flask.

"Give it back!" A red hair girl swept past him, following the group of older girls who held two dolls in the air.

From the smile on their sneering faces, they were messing with her. While the older ones were not paying attention, Lucan swooped in and seized the dolls. They inhaled, caught his rude stare, and fled back through the crowd, but Corie remained.

"Here." She stared at the dolls and back at him. It seemed she was just as troubled by him as she was with the bullies. "What is it?"

Corrie grabbed the dolls and held them closely. "I heard you were leaving."

"I am."

She tilted her head sideways. "Are you still a mercenary?"

"That depends."

She grabbed a coin and held it for him to take. "I want you to take down the man who took my brother."

Lucan stared at her copper coin. Elene had already done it, and teaching a child revenge wasn't a good idea. "Gourd wouldn't want you to do this."

Her big eyes looked at him, lips pressed tightly. "But… how will the killer know how much he hurt me?"

Oh, he knew. Elene likely got the guy.

"How about this?" He returned the coin to her little hand. "I'll give him a beating, make him suffer on account that you don't try to push me back into the river again."

Corie smiled and took his hand for a shake. "Deal."

Lucan watched her run off. As he observed the crowd, he felt a pair of eyes on him. He searched through the faces, but nobody was looking up. When his stare went to the temple, he found a figure by the temple's oval window.

Vance was watching the crowd, or him. At least, that's how it felt.

As Lucan merged through the crowd, a hand took him and grazed his knuckles along the way before letting go. Turning, he saw it was Maiden Nessa as she passed him. Since he returned, her behavior seemed bolder.

Maiden Derli was walking in the opposite direction he intended to go, talking to Mrs. Harrow, who, by the attire, looked like the bride herself, white lace layered dress with red imprinted flowers.

Rather than go home, he followed them, thinking of last night, of Elene having to mention Zerin when he embraced her.

"Maiden Derli," Lucan said before she got away. "May I have a word?"

Mrs. Harrow gave him a soured look but gave up with a sigh. "I better find Matias anyway."

"You look rather unkempt on such a joyful event no less." She was oblivious or perhaps aware of how powerful her acts were.

"Look, I'm going to be blunt." He searched the crowd for Elene or Terra but like earlier, they were nowhere to be found. "Are these arranged marriages necessary?"

Maiden Derli took a seat at a table and asked him to join her. He obliged only because this was probably going to be a long conversation. "How much do you know of Melodia?"

"Enough to find it strange that you choose who desperate people should bed for the rest of their lives." His words slightly weakened Maiden Derli's smiling lips. She looked at the people, talking and chatting with one another. Bands of little children ran through the table, chasing one another.

"Melodia was once a prosperous place. As great as Preisen currently stands, you might say. You can tell how beautiful it once stood by what has survived, the architecture of our water fountain, Rima's temple, and the bridge leading to Rima's humble White Oak." She rested her hands on the table and looked at them. "Since I was a little girl, I have seen this place pick itself up and fall apart. We have gone through one season of famine, two raids, and two wars. The first was from Vinol during their conquest of the southern continent. Their army burned through the forest and crushed this beautiful architecture. Statues of Rima once decorated this wonderful place. We had many Maidens then to guide us, our gifted Children of Rima, to protect her tree. But time has tested our home. Mercenaries would

come and take our Maidens and slay our young and gifted men. Every year I prayed for a resolution, and every decade I watched Melodia grow smaller and smaller. Then it came to me in a dream. Of one solution to keep our people together."

"So you practice lithomancy to predict it? Rock prediction has nothing to do with Rima."

"I am a generation Maiden," she announced. "It has been passed down to me from my mother, who learned it from my grandmother." On the table, she placed a velvety cloth tied neatly by a white string. As she opened it, he thought she would pull out the dice Wein and the others like to play, but he found colorful asymmetrical stones polished to the point of looking like gemstones. "These rocks came from Aelith's floating rocks. They had warned me when to prepare for a hard season. What you see is how much we suffered, but not how many attacks and more famines we evaded. I'm going to continue to do my part to protect my people, and if it helps when they stay within our community, so be it."

Lucan leaned back in his chair. He peered at a couple passing by, hands clasped as they looked at the lanterns hanging overhead. "Sorry, but I'm not entirely moved or convinced, not after what it did to Elene. How your people wouldn't take her in when it wasn't her fault."

"Elene Harrow?" Maiden Derli frowned but nodded like she understood. Slowly, she collected her rocks back into her bag. "That was made based on a unanimous vote that I did not participate."

"Then you can see why I disagree with your practice."

"It's the same for Maidens, is it not?" she asked. "Maidens can marry whomever they want, but if they want to guarantee a gifted one, they must marry a Child of Rima to increase the likelihood of passing their powers. Do you think *they* don't have a choice?"

Lucan looked down at his hands. His father was old and wrinkled when he was a boy, just like Maiden Derli and his mother, youthful, no older than Terra. He knew the age difference had to do with his mother being a celestial as she was the oldest one, but did she have a choice when it came to him?

The notes of the harp chimed a soft melody, shifting the crowd to silence. Maiden Derli left the chair and fixed her gown. "I'm afraid that's all I can share. Have a safe journey, Lucan. Be with the light."

"Thanks." Lucan left the table and squeezed through the back to avoid the crowd, pacing to the edge of the sidewalk, just across from the decorated stage and temple.

They could stay if they wanted, but he didn't want to be a part of it.

The Melodians started to clap, even from those who watched from the second-story window.

A sharp-looking man climbed the stage. He wore a high collar-buttoned shirt with a white cravat tucked under a glossy black vest. His grey trousers contrasted with the glossy black shoes. It was the trimmed beard that made him unrecognizable until Mrs. Harrow climbed up next and took his arm.

"Thank you all for coming for this very special evening." Matias's voice was loud and clear. He stared at the crowd with not much enthusiasm, but he seemed determined to wait until the noise fell. "I'm not a talkative man, so I'll make this speech brief. I don't ask for much in life, but I've been given two daughters, and I watched them grow into the beautiful women they are, each with their own strength that I admire. They have filled the holes in my life more than they know. Join me today in honor of their engagement."

Maiden Nessa's fingers delicately strummed the harp.

Two women were led up to the stage. A heavy red veil had been placed over their heads. By the height and attire alone, it was easy to tell who was who.

Elene was shorter, and her turban left an uneven shape on her head. Terra wore a soft cream-colored ruffled dress. The chest and sleeve area had lace designs tied neatly together by red ribbons. There were a few grunts and muffled complaints from the surrounding men, unhappy to see her on the stage.

Elene wore a white blouse with puffed sleeves. Her corset was a dark grey with the maroon-colored skirt she often wore. Her angled cuffs were decorated with beaded buttons that trailed to her back elbow.

Maiden Derli climbed the stage and nodded at the figureheads who waited at the steps. Cleric Aaron led two men covered with a red veil. Maiden Derli took the tallest man and made him stand next to Elene. The one who nearly stumbled off the stage was helplessly

gestured to stand next to Terra. No doubt it was Shane Marigold, a banker he had never met.

The foreign ritual was ridiculous, an old archaic tradition that should have been outlived.

Mrs. Harrow leaned to whisper to Maiden Derli. She, in turn, shook her head. Maiden Derli guided the one with the light veil and made him hold Terra's hand. Her posture was calm, chest upright, even though they couldn't see her face.

Matias and his wife stepped aside, giving them space but watching closely.

"Terra, holding your hand is your beloved partner. Bounded by life, happiness, and all the struggles of the world. From this day, you are both betrothed, promised to one another. When winter washes away, and spring arrives, you'll both be bounded as man and wife."

Maiden Derli grabbed both veils and flung them off their faces. Terra squinted at the light, blinking at the blond-haired man with dark brown eyes.

Shane Marigold carried a long gentle smile, but Terra's was lopsided. The crowd clapped and cheered.

Cleric Aaron gestured for them to move back, keeping them still in view.

Maiden Nessa continued to play her harp, head tilted by her focus on the strings.

"Now for the one who wanted to wait!" Maiden Derli led a man two heads taller than her to the center.

Matias took Elene. She trusted her father, gripping his arm as he led her to the front.

"There you are," Wein's voice unfocused his view of the stage. "My father wanted a word with you before you left."

"What for?"

Wein didn't answer. He crossed his arms, watching his sister fidgeting with her dress.

Like she had done to Terra, Maiden Derli placed Elene's hand into the hand of the stranger. "Elene, holding your hand is your beloved partner. Bounded by life, happiness, and all the struggles of the world. From this day, you are both betrothed, promised to one another. When winter washes away, and spring arrives, you'll both be bounded as man and wife."

The veil was pulled off.

Elene blinked as her sister did from the change of light. Her gaze shifted to her right, seeing the man who stood beside her. Smiling brightly at her was Hunter, the man she danced with at the Lovelett's wedding.

"Elene." Maiden Derli's smile wavered, drawing her attention back to her. "I thought I told you to take off your turban. You no longer need it."

"But—"

Maiden Derli went to grab it, but Elene pressed her hands over it to forbid her. The harp played out of order, and Maiden Nessa turned her attention to them. The audience shuffled, whispering what that was about.

"This is not good," Wein uttered. "Dammit, Elene, what are you doing?"

It took the stomps of her mother to come behind her. Just as her claw-like hands went for her turban, Hunter leaned in. "It's alright," he said. "She's lovely as she is."

"Until you marry her, you won't have a say about that." Mrs. Harrow gave Elene's shoulder a tight grip, keeping her still as she untied the knot.

Elene's chest was rising and falling fast. She seemed to be panicking, either by the light or the whole town that witnessed in silence. She suddenly pulled forward from their reach, ducking from their hands.

"No," she whimpered. "No!"

Lucan pushed into the crowd, holding his apologies until he elbowed his way to the front. in

"Stop acting like a child!" Mrs. Harrow was red-faced, steadying her once more, unwrapping the layers of her wrap. Amidst the struggle, the hair tassel Wein gave her crashed on the ground. Her mother stepped on it, unaware it was under her boot. In pulling the fabric, Elene saw what had happened to her tassel.

In leaning for it, she stumbled forward and crashed to her knees.

With one tug, the turban glided to the stars, supported by the evening breeze. Following the current were locks of shimmering black hair flowing out of its cage. Her hair bounced off her shoulders and swung inwards and overlapped her face.

As the wind swept her hair to the side. She discovered him from the crowd. Their stare entangled with one another, and without warning, a mean pinch throbbed inside Lucan's chest.

The Elene he knew was fading. The one who lunged at him for breaking her mug, who asked him to hold her at the Glass Crane, who he assured with his embrace that Terra meant nothing. The new woman who replaced her was staring back with tears filling her eyes, her new look meticulously cocooned so he couldn't recognize her.

Matias leaned toward his daughter and whispered something in her ear, which led her to break eye contact with him.

Hunter approached her and took her hand, the hand he once claimed in the Gypsian Forest.

Elene smudged the tears from her eyes while the crowd awkwardly clapped.

Maiden Derli invited Terra and Shane forward so the four could face everyone. She said some words, but Lucan didn't hear them. He moved from the sea of people and fled inside the temple, not daring to stay any longer.

He rubbed the ache of the wound, sensing every pang of pain.

Down the long narrow halls, he listened to the echo of his own steps. He stopped before Rima's statue, thoughts running solely of the woman who imprinted herself in his mind. Elene was surprised to see Hunter, but the look she gave him was that of shock, as if he had caught her naked.

He stayed as still as he could, seeking only the silence in the grand walls. *Why is my heart beating this loud? Why do I feel sick to my stomach?*

Lucan sat in the front seat and hunched over to endure the morbid pain. Desperate for some relief, he looked at Rima's statue, facing downward with a slight smile.

"Rima," he said. "What's happening to me?"

A hand took his shoulder. "Lucan?"

Matias. Great. He was already in a bad mood. He wasn't so sure if he could engage in chatter. Besides, shouldn't he be out there with his family?

"Congratulations on your daughter's engagement." Hopefully, that would remind him it was best to turn and go back.

Matias took a seat beside him. Instead of a thank you, he smiled, but his eyes were mixed with concern. "Are you really leaving Melodia panting for air like that?"

"Uhm… yeah."

He nodded to himself and stared ahead. "Elene asked me to make sure you take Fior."

"Don't have to."

Matias pulled at his cravat. "Fior is no help, cooped up and causing a mess when I give him the simplest task. Just promise me you'll bring him back. That you two will overcome whatever darkness looms over both of your heads."

"Darkness? You think what I'm feeling is darkness?" Had he been corrupted? Was he becoming a Fallen without knowing?

Matias adjusted himself in his seat, his weight creaking the wood. "You know, you remind me of a person I used to know, always eager to do the right thing even under questionable terms. In the end, that person could only wander, searching for peace, and said that self-inflicting thoughts shouldn't linger in the mind. That sort of thinking corrupts the heart, and courage is hard when one has their own demons to fight."

"I've suffered these thoughts for years. I don't think it will seize me."

"Some have more resilience than others. Look at my children, for example. Wein is very guarded, Elene puts her family's happiness before anyone, and Terra is not afraid of consequences. Eventually, these things hurt not just the person we love but themselves."

"Elene…" Her name echoed into the ceiling. "I hope after this, she's treated with more respect."

Matia's smile faltered. "You would've been the perfect man for her."

Lucan felt his breath escape his lips. "Don't think I am."

"Because you're the… what was it that you said? Not the marrying kind?"

"Elene long decided under a Vow of Marriage, and last I recall, she had a sweet spot for Hunter."

"She did, but the hearts change."

"That's what scares me about her," he said, thinking of how she and Caydon looked at one another. He inhaled and washed those

thoughts away. His focus shouldn't be wasted on a woman but looking forward to the journey waiting for him. "If you think Fior would benefit from going with me, I'll take him."

Lucan laid a white sheet over his bed. Instead of a drawer, he bought a chest where he piled his clothes. They smelled like wood, and from how little he had, there was no point in taking more. With only a candle to light his room, he wrapped the straps of his belt around his waist with his leather scabbard.

It was fairly basic, not as high in status as the Melodian guards' scabbard that had gold-colored casing around their black scabbard, but he favored Vinolean swords, and it had the reach he preferred.

A knock startled him. It was too late for anyone to be out and about. He carefully approached the window and peered out. There was just the cobble street and homes across. He cracked the door open and peered into the night. Without warning, it was pushed open, surprising him that the old lady had any strength.

"Olivia, what are you doing here?"

"You never came to pick up your treats." She gave him the sack for him to take. "There's some bread there, cheese, and the muffins you like to have."

"I'm sorry, I sorta got busy with the arrangements. Had to go to the Harrows to pick up Fior then I took a bath and nap afterward."

"Oh right, the engagement ceremony was tonight. How was it?"

"You didn't go?"

Olivia laughed. "What for? I wake up early to bake in the morning."

Lucan smiled because she had lost sleep for him. "I'll walk you to your home. I'm already leaving, anyway."

She nodded and made it down the steps. Fior waited outside. He snorted as they stepped out. Lucan untied the lead and led him out of the little street. His hooves clotted, slowly following Olivia's pace.

The streets had little lamp posts to light the way, lit by fire and oil, but overall, the place was a graveyard, silent, with creaking branches. He was going to miss the morning mist, the smell of leaves breezing through his window.

Fior pulled against his lead now and then, and he had to reassure him. "Even if you don't want to go back out there, you have to try. You lost a piece of yourself. Let's reclaim it."

"A piece?" Olivia was studying Fior. "Is that why you're going?"

"Sort of." He promised Maiden Camilla not to tell the locals anything regarding Preisen and David missing.

"Quite a dangerous world out there, you be careful, lots of rumors lurking about, especially from travelers coming to my shop."

"Like what?"

Olivia gave it a thought. "You probably wouldn't believe me."

"Try me."

"Well… there's talk more and more talk about people roaming at night, folks coated in a black veil."

That didn't sound like a Fallen, at least not the one Greison or Caydon's friends looked like. "And you believe them?"

"I believe anything at this point. This world was born in darkness, and shadows love to lurk in the corners of every crevasse, don't you think?"

"Yeah… you're right."

The temple whistled an eerie noise. Though the lights from within emitted a soft ginger glow, it looked murky and grim with the fog crawling underneath.

Olivia unlocked the entrance to her bakery shop. Her home was just upstairs. Before she went inside, she laid out her hand. "Give me your key, and I'll make sure your little house remains in order. To think you've been living with bare walls, barely any silverware, and no rugs. Shameful."

Lucan, chuckling, left the heavy iron key in her hands. "You really think I'm coming back, huh?"

"Well, you got a horse to return, so you sorta have to."

He didn't agree but gave her a nod instead. Olivia bid him goodnight and went inside, locking the door.

Lucan and Fior went down the Avenue en route to Iven Forest. The black steed huffed at any sound that spooked him, his skin twitching.

"I know I'm returning you when this is over," he told Fior. "Just not that it was going to be me to do it."

Lucan followed lighted lamps overhead, guiding him out of Melodia. Now and then, he would run into a Melodian Guard, who seemed to watch posts every half a mile or so.

The running water was growing louder, followed by the Aspen Bridge. There he saw three figureheads waiting. One relaxed his crossed arms. "About time."

Lucan smiled, pleased to see them. "You three were waiting for me?"

"Of course," said Rüfus. "I would have brought my wine—oh, what the hell? I always carry something to drink." He squeezed out a bottle from his underpants and gave it a quick swish, and handed it to Pete.

"The least we could do is see you off after you came this far for us." Pete looked around to ensure no guards were looking, taking two loud gulps and passing the bottle to him.

Lucan took it, giving it a swig. It came down like sweet honey with a spicey aftertaste, exhaling as he passed it.

Wein barely sipped it and went to the bridge's capstone. He didn't notice it because of where she stood, but a woman was sitting there, covered in a cloak. The ends had the stitching of a tree swallow and a sunflower.

"Think you'll handle the road on your own?" Pete asked, moving his attention. "Can't imagine the journey to Lotter's Mountain."

"I'm heading to Appleton so I can sail to Vinol and then go straight down to Preisen."

Elene hopped off. Her left leg shook, but she handled her balance swiftly. She moved to the other side, where Fior was, and stroked his shoulder. Her hood made her impossible to see, and her silence gave him mixed signals. *If she was going to ignore me, why come at all?*

Rüfus had the bottle back, shaking his head while he gave it another drink. Wein and Pete were looking at one another.

"I better go," he said before the mood was killed. "Moonlight is burning."

"Take it easy," Wein said. "You too Fior."

Lucan encouraged Fior to continue, moving Elene back to allow him to take the horse.

The rest stayed behind and watched them cross. They were talking to themselves softly, but it was hard to hear what was being said. He knew Elene wasn't one of them, as it was just Rüfus and Pete's voice he picked up.

The dangling ornaments above tossed and clanked overhead. The lamps shifted, agitated by the breeze.

A small farewell from her would have been nice. But hell, maybe Hunter was the jealous type. Maybe they couldn't be friends like she wished.

"Lucan?" Her voice stopped him in his tracks.

The men waited where they were, but she snuck up behind him. She went to the front, where he and Fior could both see. Her hood was still on, masking half of her face, but she seemed to hold something, something she tucked under her coat. She unraveled it and presented a folded piece of fabric. "I—I made this. You don't have to take it, but it is chilly now and—"

Lucan took it before letting her explain. Unraveling it, he raised a poncho, dark blue with white and grey lines. Stitched on the collar and ends like her cloak was a small oak leaf and an acorn. "You made this?" It looked like Rima's White Oak. He knew she wouldn't want anything to do with Rima but this?

"You're a Riman, so I thought you would… I mean, I don't know what your likes are."

"I'll wear it wherever I go." He couldn't see her face, but he wished he could see what expression she held, if she had any tears, if she was going to miss him. "Can I see you?"

She stepped back, mouth agape. Fior snorted, moving from him, fidgety and ready to go.

Elene took her hood and moved it back. Her black hair shuffled with the breeze. Her turban was gone, but her hair tassel jingled as it still moved along the side of her face. She worked a small smile for him as if to prove that she was no stranger and moved aside as if not to delay him any longer.

Lucan inhaled and continued, determined to cross the bridge. The lanterns shuffled and clanked with each step, and Fior's hooves clattered and clotted.

Staring ahead, there was nothing but the way out, and behind were Elene's steps that faded as she returned to her group.

At that moment, he turned and found she had stopped, staring at him. She spun at that moment, and he spun back.

Fior nudged his shoulder to get his attention. He responded by patting his back. "I'll be fine," he said. "People can get attached when you're with them on the road for long, and obsession is a symptom that will fade in time."

CHAPTER 36

ELENE

On her way to visit her brother, Elene had to steady her hood over her head to keep it from flipping back. The wind knew how to lift a fistful of hair and tug them where the current was the strongest, as if it wanted to lead her to a secret in the forest.

Since she stopped wearing her turban, her ears would get cold, and her head would hurt from the cold. Either way, the faces of the towns folks would notice her and look away just the same. Her apron was clouded with dust as she cleaned the mess in the kitchen. Her flour bag had been torn by mice. Angered, she intended to head to the store.

Wein lived a few blocks off the Dustbowl Tavern. The moment he turned eighteen, he moved out of the house, admitting only to her that he was tired of hearing their parents fight. She gave his door a knock and stepped back. Puffs of clouds moved overhead. A thump left her staring at the window. A grey tabby cat meowed and scratched. The door creaked open, and it ran out.

Wein's hair was lopsided from sleeping on his side. He left the door open and dragged his steps to the living room, yawning.

"Come on," she said. "You promised you'd help Father with my roofing."

"Give me another hour of sleep. I worked the late shift last night."

"Fine, no honey pancakes for you."

"Getting my trousers on."

Elene went to the other room and looked at his kitchen table. The stove was caked in old batter, ashes, and grease. The cabinets were half open, and there were glasses of molding milk.

"What a mess." She set her basket down and started picking up his plates and bowls. The dining table was worse. The cutting board had molding bread and cheese. "Honestly, Wein?"

"What?"

She sighed and picked up after his place. "You seriously need to have your rocks read."

"Look at you," he said from his room. "You got engaged, and now you're telling me I need a Vow of Marriage."

"Well, look at this place."

"I like my life like this. I clean it when I want, how I want—whenever I want."

Elene groaned and discarded the grime from his plate into a bucket. "Molding food is not good for your health, you know."

Wein scratched the back of his hair, yawning. "Uh-huh."

"What would you do if Lorenza came right this very moment?"

He nudged her head and went for his boots. She had teased him before, and he learned to just choose silence over admitting anything.

As a member of the Red Guild, she thought Lorenza would visit, especially after they knew they were from Melodia, but with the war and all, perhaps it was hard to make the journey.

The noise in the marketplace picked up, and the vendors sang loudly for anyone to come to them. It was hard not to look at them with envy. If she could set up her own shop and sell her pancakes or the cheesecake Olivia was teaching her, she would have enough coin to repair her poor roof without taking her father and brother's time.

Among the crowd of folks, three men in long robes started walking up the Avenue, singing *A Thousand Leaves of Light.*

Rima, walk among us. Take us
where you most reside.

Oh, Skiar, free us from the
shadow's cage.

They were monks, mountain men who often made their pilgrimage to every Riman town at the end of the year.

"What news from the world?" Wein boldly asked one of them, interrupting their singing.

One man stopped and placed his right hand over his left shoulder. "Rima greets you."

Wein returned the gesture.

"War and turmoil in the east," he said, "Whispers of darkness roaming our forests." Before turning back to join the others, he gave them a curt nod. "Be with the light."

As she feared, the war was still active on the east side, causing destruction and death like they had witnessed.

On the way to the farm, Wein's mood turned into worry. Any subject she sparked he dampened with an 'Uh-huh.' "Do you at least think about Lorenza?"

Wein opened his mouth, his worry turning into an irritable look. "You're not going to drop it, aren't you?"

"Answer me, and I'll drop it."

"Lorenza isn't looking for anyone, just like I'm not looking for a partner, least of all someone who lives across the Hacelen."

Elene rolled her eyes. "Excuses."

Wein huffed and gave her head a few pats. "I just admire her is all, and before you get worked up about it, Lorenza isn't just a member of the Red Guild, she's the daughter of one of the Gypsian tribe leaders. She has people to lead, and I have our people I want to protect."

Elene nudged his arm. "So I'll take that awful justification as a yes."

"Mother would kill me if I tried to pursue a Gypsian for a wife."

"And you could never do any wrong in her eyes. It wasn't long before she forgave you after you told her we had lost everything. If it was Terra and me, she wouldn't talk to us for months."

Playing by the water fountain were Corie and Theo, balancing on the rail.

"Miss Harrow!" Theo, who saw her started waving at her. "Congratulations!"

"Congrats!" Corie said after, louder than him.

"Thank you!"

"And you?" Wein said. "You're not going to tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"What you gave Lucan."

"Just something for the road. He's not good at ironing or taking care of his clothes. Do you remember the state of his socks? I'm not sure how he made it far without complaining."

Wein nudged her. "That was nice of you, considering you wanted nothing to do with him."

Elene harrumphed but didn't carry the conversation. He chuckled, and it bothered her that it sounded like he had won.

At Father's house, Maiden Camilla, Nessa, and Terra were chatting under the peach tree. The blue wagon on the property belonged to Cleric Aaron, but he wasn't near. Seeing the barn shut, Father was having a private conversation with the cleric.

"Wein, Ma wants you to do some heavy lifting upstairs," Terra said.

She picked up her skirt and hurried to the back of the barn. There was an old hole that she patched with a nail. With every bleat from the sheep, Elene would step closer until she could move the plank and listen. The voices were muffled at first, but there were steps. Cleric Aaron was walking around, observing their tools.

"I was hoping you could ask Elene to teach Camilla how to make her honey pancakes for the winter ceremony."

"Elene?" By the tone of his voice, Father had taken the request hard.

"I know it's just… your daughters are betrothed now, and my daughter has yet to find a suitor. I would ask Olivia, but she's a strange character, so I thought Elene could give her a few lessons."

"You and I both know they don't exactly get along. Besides, they are a part of her own trade."

"Please," Cleric Aaron insisted. "Camilla is graceful, but her devotion to Rima has kept her from learning things her mother would have taught her."

Graceful? Elene wanted to snicker, and when it came to her devotion to Rima, Gittle was better suited.

Father agreeing with a solemn nod, got her to bite her tongue.

Elene returned to the peach tree, where her sister and Maiden Camilla and Nessa looked at her.

"What's with that face?" Terra asked.

"Oh, I stumped my toe."

"Great news." Cleric Aaron was fast on his feet to get out. "Elene will be teaching you her honey pancakes."

Father marched back into the barn, and a clattering of tools fell on the ground. It was terrible that she had to hear it. More so an insult that Cleric Aaron didn't bother to ask her after Father made the request.

"We can start now," Elene said, hoping it would calm him.

"Lovely," Maiden Camilla said in a long, expended groan.

Mother kept her kitchen where everything she needed was already stored. She started with the flour, the sugar, and the spare jar of dried hibiscus.

Maiden Camilla spent half the time glaring than listening. She had her own bowl, so she could follow her steps. "Isn't there a way you can write me the recipe, and I could be on my way?"

"You'll get it once it's down, but you're better off learning by watching."

Maiden Camilla frowned and looked at her sister and Maiden Nessa. "You think I'm incompetent?"

"These are my honey pancakes," Elene reminded her. "And I don't want any mistakes."

Maiden Camilla sighed and listened.

Terra grabbed some apples and began to slice them.

"Elene, I have a question." Maiden Camilla cleared her throat and scooted her bowl of sliced apples. "It's about Lucan, seeing you were in his company for longer."

Great. Just great. "Why are you asking me?"

"Oh, just answer my question," she groaned. "Has he commented or inquired anything about Maiden Nessa?"

Elene stopped mixing and turned to them. "Since when did she like Lucan?" It came out like fire, like someone had walked on her property, and she was ready to defend it, but the surprised look in

their eyes left her winded. "I mean… he's nothing but a rude and prude man—a killer at that."

"Honestly, you don't know men if they were standing right in front of you," Maiden Camilla said, buying the bait. "There's something about him, something I noticed from the moment he came to Melodia. It feels like a sort of magnetism, only I don't know what to call it."

"Alright, well… why the sudden interest?"

Maiden Nessa took a slice from Terra's bowl and gave it a crispy bite. "Well… not that it's any of your business, but does he have a type?"

Elene looked at Terra. "Yeah, he likes girls like her."

Maiden Nessa laughed. "Well, then I stand a better chance."

Terra spat pieces of apples out of her mouth. "What is *that* supposed to mean?"

"Oh please, Terra. You knew I liked him first. And the moment I told you, you started flirting with him."

Elene couldn't believe what she was hearing. Terra leaned back and shamelessly laughed, nearly hitting herself against the cabinets. "Yeah, to annoy you. But I didn't like him like that, so please have him. I have my banker to wed this Spring."

Inside, the news relieved her. Terra didn't see him like she thought, but now Nessa was moved by Lucan, and it seemed more serious.

Maiden Camilla only listened, smiling at their banter. Since she spent most of her time home, perhaps Maiden Nessa had reason to ask. Lucan's arrival and his stay at the Rima temple probably brought them closer than she thought.

"I just need him to win my pa over," said Nessa. "He seems to have hit it off with yours. Just what was the recipe for that?"

"Maybe we can have him come over and help with the temple work?" Maiden Camilla inquired. "Or hire him for a mercenary duty, you know, lure him with coin."

"Lucan isn't a toy you can play with when you please," Elene said under her breath. Her sister and Camilla didn't seem to have heard her, but Nessa did and shrugged.

The pancakes sizzled on the skillet, and, with careful ease, she flipped them to their fluffy, round texture. Maiden Camilla burned

the first two batches but started to pay attention to the bubbles in the batter.

Once they were finished, the women served their plates and drizzled the top with her strawberry honey.

"Let's eat in my room," Terra sang, gesturing the Maidens out of the kitchen. Elene stayed in the kitchen as she never joined them. She hoped they would invite her so they could catch up on girly things, but why even hold her breath?

Maiden Camilla, who was the last one to leave, went to grab her glass of milk.

"Has there been any news from Preisen?" Elene asked before she left.

Maiden Camilla raised an eyebrow. "Since when did *you* care about that?"

Elene glanced at the stack she set aside for Wein. The others were waiting by the exit, listening. "There's a maiden who lives there… just wanted to know if she was alright."

Maiden Camilla groaned and set her plate and glass aside. "You know, Elene, as much as this town is aware of your failed vow, don't feel you have to pretend you get along with us Rimans. Leave your worries at the door. We're taking care of it."

Elene wiped the flour off her apron. "Are you seriously going to tell me that? All you do is sing and heal sick folk."

"Being a maiden is a burden I wish upon nobody. We are born immersed in light and see darkness looming in areas you have never seen before." There was a shaky fright in her voice that even kept Terra from taking a bite of her pancake. Maiden Camilla was gripping her dagger, an act she wouldn't normally do, not since she could ever remember. "My father tells me to ignore it, and the clerics have grown quiet… but I feel as though we are coming to a second end."

Elene and Terra held one another with their stare. It was an awful thing to hear. Those weren't things someone as optimistic and proper as Maiden Camilla would say so loosely.

"Alright, since you won't tell Elene, then tell me," said Terra. "What is happening?"

Maiden Camilla looked at Nessa, who started rubbing her earlobe, eyes barely on their plate. Finally, she gave in. "Preisen sent

a rescue group, made of three Maidens and two Children of Rima, for David and Maiden Retta. They're now missing."

CHAPTER 37

LUCAN

Maycove

"Any news for the way to Preisen?" Lucan asked.

"Not that I nur'." The merchant used the tongs to fill his bag with peppered beef jerky. "Somethin' I should be worried abut'?"

"No," Lucan said, passing his five bronze coins.

Vine Road had mostly traders with better equipped travelers, but as of late, he met many faces who had seen better days.

Avery and Vinol's holy war was really affecting the innocent. Their shoes wore the blankets they carried over their faces, that look of desolation. He supposed that the seller didn't care who he saw for as long as he was making money.

The owls hooted over the swaying branches. The fire cracked and popped while he ate his beef jerky. The day before, he spent half a day at the Dice'n Hog just in case he ran into any familiar faces, Zorn and Oscern, David, and, if he was lucky, Caydon.

Alone, he had more time with his thoughts, thoughts about what was happening to him, why his body was weakening, why Major Rudra's blade caused it, or if it had been on a downward slope, as Zorn guessed.

Off Vine Road, the private road to Preisen was a few miles away. Fior led the way with ease while Lucan scoped the area. He felt something off in the air, some noise he swore he heard but didn't know where it came from.

Suddenly that noise came up the hill. A group of people was fleeing a tossed carriage, and two men were leading three women forward. They were clutching their babes and their smaller children who tried to keep up tumbled down.

At their heels was a band of four men in ragged clothes. Their curved swords were in the air, shouting.

"Think we can take them?" Lucan asked Fior.

Fior snorted and tapped the ground with his left hoof.

Lucan was light on his seat, sweeping through the divide until he leaped off Fior and struck the first one, diving his sword into the man's chest. The three bandits turned on him, charging with their raised swords. Lucan spun from the first strike and tripped the bastard against his companion. He stepped on his back and charged at the third.

In one swoop, he tore his sword to the man's back. Suddenly, a kick sent him down. The man came at him fast, cranking his crossbow so he could release the bolt to his head.

A high pitch neigh and the black stallion of over six hundred pounds trampled the man off. Before Lucan could get him, the men of the family jumped their attacker and impaled them with their daggers. Blood splattered from his mouth, he crawled on his fours in agony until he stopped moving.

The women with the babes embraced their older children, shuddering as they wept.

Lucan watched them, blinking at the man who gave him a stabbing.

"Thank you," he said, wiping the sweat off his forehead. "Thank you."

"Welcome." Lucan dusted his poncho. He'd be damned if it got torn because of scum like them. Fior was huffing, trotting around. "You weren't scared there, were you?"

Fior dipped his head back and forth, shifting his jet-black hair.

The women calmed the children as the men picked the pockets of the dead. "Damn it." The one with curly black hair spat. "Not an ounce of coin or food on them."

"Probably thought we had some," the other said.

"They would have killed us nonetheless, taken our women and children, and sold them."

"But they didn't. They didn't." He walked with a gimp in his step. It looked like he dodged an arrow himself.

"Where are you guys heading?" Lucan asked, uninvited to their conversation.

The men looked at one another. "The hell we know, anyplace but Vinol."

"Thank you for coming for our aid." One of the mothers said. She had a rag on the side of her face, discolored with blood. Her left cheek was bruised, the sleeve from her shirt had been torn, and the buttons were missing, pulled by her attackers.

"We'll have to sell what we can of these bastard's shoes and leather for some coin." The other woman said, bouncing the two babes in her arms.

Lucan brushed Fior's mane. He couldn't leave them like this, not after hearing all that. "I'm going to a Riman village. You're all welcome to join me."

The man scrunched his face. "Count me out. Look what this holy war has put my family through? We lost our land—lost our family, my mother, and my brother!"

Lucan didn't blame them. But hearing it, even after a dozen times, he felt some fault. He profited off the war. He untied his bag of beef jerky and handed it to the woman with the cut. She looked up, barely able to squint by surprise. She took it, looked into it, and thanked him. There weren't many coins left on his person, but he gave the men two gold coins.

"We're grateful," he said, staring at it with his palm still open.

"In case you change your mind, the Riman village is down this path. Tell them Lucan from Melodia sent you."

The men didn't contest, but they took his help and thanked him.

The moons were full and high when Lucan reached Preisen. The guards opened their gates and let him in. Rather than visit the temple, he spent the night with Fior outside the stables.

A warm wet thing licked his face. He scrunched and moved it off. "Ugh, Fior!"

"Good morning." Standing near him, looking down at him like some great tree, was High Maiden Trini. Two maidens stood behind, giggling as he riled himself up.

Lucan wiped the slob with his sleeve. He got up and patted Fior for waking him up.

"You must have been having a deep sleep." High Maiden Trini still dressed like a soldier. It seemed no season would change her attire, even with what the cold could do to armor.

"Yeah," he said. "Haven't had those in a while."

"What can we do for you?"

Lucan rubbed the back of his neck. "I want to know where my friends went. If there has been any update since you contacted Melodia."

The High Maiden shut her eyes and inhaled. "After Zorn and Oscern came back empty-handed, we discovered David and Maiden Retta are still missing."

"Meaning they somehow got separated."

"Correct. Shortly after they left to find them, we sent rescue teams not a month ago to Nemdrin, Mudburrow, and Timberton. All returned, but the ones who went to Timberton."

"Sounds like it's worth checking out."

A sudden ear-splitting cry moved his focus to the group behind the High Maiden. The family he talked to on the road were sitting down, tended by the Maidens.

High Maiden Trini, who saw them, glanced back at him. "They said you saved their lives and gave them money and supplies. Quite a strange thing for a Riman who worked as a mercenary."

"It's no secret that I took lives, that I'm going to continue if it's necessary." Elene's glossy eyes flashed back to the way her small hand felt against his when he held it. "I have to do right with what I can and save those who can't defend themselves."

"As do we," she answered. "We would send a Maiden to accompany you, but with our people missing, we cannot take that risk again."

"Just let me feed my horse and give me water, and I'll be on my way."

High Maiden Trini nodded. "We'll send you off with food, medicine, and extra blankets for the road. Be with the light."

Before she joined her people, Lucan called her back. "Where is Gittle?"

"She and her mother are on a quest to visit the western Rima villages for any answers. We decided that it is important to see the condition of every oak tree. Gittle sounded insistent on making the journey for Melodia. Any reason why?"

"I think she wants to see Elene."

The High Maiden nodded but said nothing on that matter.

Timberton

On the map, Vine Road was the longest route to Timberton, and the forest surrounding it beheld dangers of the unknown. An arrow swept before his eyes before he pushed Fior to pick up his speed and avoided the highwaymen who lurked from the shadows. He spent the night with a couple who were heading to Nemdrin.

The wife made onion soup while he and her husband kept watch. Lucan warned them of the crooks up north whom the husband was made aware.

"Pay em' one silv'a and they leave ya alone."

His mention of Timberton ended with silent stares from the wife.

"Ya don't know, eh?" the man said, his southern accent strong. "The town is empty. Timberton used to keep these roads safe, but we haven't seen 'em for well ov'a a month."

Lucan left before dawn. The forest ran for miles until he reached a signpost that led off the road and to his destination. At first glance, the area lived up to its name with its log cabin homes, the lumber stacked under a trap, and the sawmill houses.

The problem was that the man was right.

The place was a ghost town.

Fior snorted as he walked through the road, his hooves clapping on the stone. The afternoon sun illuminated an old graveyard. The moisture from the ground emitted a low mist that swept through the tombstones.

The wagons were toppled over, deep into the mud. "Easy now," Lucan said as he led Fior around.

Some of the shutters were open, creaking and pounding against the window. He doubted people were asleep, doubted anyone was

left. Up the steps, a doll sat by the fence. The locks of yarn hair flowed from the breeze. Something happened, but what?

A shadow started to encase the town, with no clouds or wind to cause it. Fior pulled back and shrieked, toppling Lucan back. As he met the ground, he rolled back. Fior kicked his back legs. He jerked his head as if someone was pulling the reins leading him to the forest.

"Fior!" Lucan rubbed his side as he got back up. "It's okay. Just step back."

Fior neighed, his hooves dragging the reigns still swayed, but some invisible force was dragging him. When the veil of darkness enveloped the silent town. The houses creaked, and the wind picked up, whistling through the alleyways. The doll that sat on the bench fell face flat.

Lucan rubbed his eyes and looked at the darkened sky. An enormous eyeball with popped veins was above the town, staring at him. The pupil dilated as it inched closer to him.

What is your name?

Before Lucan could peel his sword, he felt a tug pulling him to the forest, just as it tried with Fior. As the wind picked up, Lucan resisted and gripped a loose pole. He searched for Fior but found him missing. The eyeball in the sky was gone, and the opened shutters kept slamming and opening.

The same painful shockwave returned, strained by his upper muscles. As Lucan released, the shadows in the Glaze Forest swallowed him whole.

When he came to, a lurid and airless forest enveloped him. The ground he fell into was translucent green, coated with bog water and slime. He wiped it off, unsure of what it was except that it reeked like rotten eggs.

"Fior?" Even as he got up, he felt heavy, like the weighted blanket Matias gave him. "Fior!" One step and his foot nearly sunk into the ground. He leaned on the tree to balance himself, touching a thick gooey slime. Long, slinky vines hung from every branch, with thorns protruding from the scaled fiber.

Skiar, what is this place?

Each step left him sinking all the way to his ankles, with his feet nearly slipping off his boots. Whispers loomed in the gloomy corners

of the place, chatter that was incomprehensible but made him feel like there was a knot in his stomach.

"Oscern!" he shouted. "Zorn!" Uphill there was some ground but lesser light. The slime had coated the rest of the forest, keeping the branches dripping with its substance.

"What is your name?" A nameless whisper uttered behind his ear.

Lucan ran his hand across his earlobe. He unsheathed his blade and investigated the jungle. Whoever took his friends, David and the locals, had to be here.

A shuffling ground rumbled, and the slime started to part, leaving him stepping on mulch. What remained of the way back to Timberton was of a dark serpent body crawling over the light and clenching it, squeezing it with its long arms until it vaporized.

The forest fell into an even darker space, giving life to noises, and the chatter grew louder.

"The line between light and darkness is finer than a thread of silk." He picked up his feet, wiping what bits of slime hung off his chin. "You are either light or darkness." He raised his blade into the coated space ahead. "I am light."

A pulse of light responded, and the following second, the surrounding darkness consumed it.

I am light, the voice responded in his mind. *Help me. Help me!*

Lucan picked up the pace. The fading light was flickering, its hope calling him. After a sprint, it felt like he was in a loop, getting closer but starting where he began.

A cackling sound halted his steps. A large creature with six legs fell from the branches. Its compound eyes focusing on him. It looked like a giant beetle, with a hardy thorax and a long lower body, translucent like the slime but carrying what looked like eggs.

The beetle sped for him with ease in the mulch, and its jaw snapped at him. Lucan leaped to the side and ran past it, turning in time to raise his sword. As it dove its mouth at him, he leaped over its head to impale it from the back. The casing of the wing opened and fluttered out flames. It tucked him underneath to trap him under. Lucan cut one of the wings off, bringing the beetle to wail and push him off. It charged at him again as tendrils of fire spewed from its back. Lucan stepped back, shaky but watching it close in.

The second it leaned in, he ducked, steading the pommel on the tree and impaling its mouth.

Green ooze splattered on the ground, and the beetle fell to the side, kicking and squirming. The abdomen with the eggs were heads, men, women, and children of every age, eyes blinding white, peering out with their mouths still moving.

The beetle stopped its sporadic movements, and the fire on its back died out.

"By Skiar's light."

Lucan headed for the light, caught under a cage of thorns covered in the forest's slime.

A Maiden lay there, hugging herself, dagger tightly in her grip, emitting weak pulses of light. The first thorn he cut bared its teeth and shrieked. It tried to impale him, but Lucan slashed it until every single one stopped.

Once he was shoulder deep into the gunk, he hankered his feet on the ground and pulled the woman out. The substance didn't want to give her up, but neither did he. Once her shoulders were out, he laced his arms around her and tugged, heaving until they were both on the ground.

The Maiden lay there, motionless. He smudged what he could from her face, hoping it wasn't too late. She was warm, but how the hell was she breathing? That slime clogged her nose.

He cringed and trembled but sucked the mucus from her nose, drawing in the salty slime and spat it out. He didn't stop until the Maiden gasped. Her eyes fluttered open, and her eyebrows squeezed in. She went to her knees and coughed loads more until she gagged.

Her eyes were dazed, nearly shutting closed.

"Hey." Lucan shook her, and she panted herself awake. "You must be the Maiden who went with David. Have you seen him? Have you seen my friends?"

Unable to raise her head, her index finger weakly pointed behind him.

A body was hanging upside down by the same thorns that caged the Maiden. He remained unconscious, but the grip on his axe was locked.

"Oscern!"

CHAPTER 38

LUCAN

Once he was free from the shrieking vines, Oscern slid down into the slime. Lucan barely caught him as his weight plummeted against him and the ground.

Groaning, he opened his eyes, the gold irises focusing on him. "Lucan?"

Lucan patted his shoulder. "Zorn, where is he?"

"I… I don't know." He wiped the coats of slime off him and shakingly rose to his feet. "I remember entering these woods and hearing a manic laugh. I don't even know when I was taken, but it felt like I was wrapped and pinned like some voodoo doll."

Lucan turned to the Maiden, who had been doing the same as Oscern, scraping the disgusting goo off. "The Maiden is alive. You two stay together. I'll lead the way."

"Lucan… I don't think—"

"I said I'll lead the way."

An endless darkness, a gloom that clawed at his focus, the whispers, the sounds of more beetles in the distance afflicted the forest.

"What happened?" Lucan whispered.

Oscern, who needed help walking, turned to the Maiden, who offered her support. She nodded to him. "When we got to Timberton, the place was vacant, its people gone."

"The place had been touched by darkness, the same that stirs in people who have been possessed. It was surviving without a host, lingering in the walls, in things that once belonged to the taken. Its presence came from Glaze Forest."

"Then we got separated," said Oscern. "Felt like a maze until Zorn and I were able to escape. Maiden Retta and David's horses were missing, so I assumed they had returned to Preisen, but when we found out they didn't make it out, we returned."

"They sent a search team for you. Have you run into them?"

"None," answered Maiden Retta. "I heard a voice a while ago like Rima was calling to me, but then, I found you."

Lucan focused back on the road. "I heard nothing when I found you, just saw your dagger's light."

On the way, Oscern knew how to evade the beetles, but they still had to cut through the thorns and leeches that hurled at them.

Maiden Retta kept her dagger in the air, her eyes bulging at every turn she made. "It's here, it's everywhere, darkness crawling up my skin, choking out our very own light." She froze and looked to the left. "I sense it, a Riman child."

"Lead the way," said Lucan.

"We'll watch your back," Oscern added.

Lucan inspected him. His helmet was gone, and his pauldron chipped. "Maybe we should stop to check on you."

"No," he grumbled, eyes narrowing ahead. "Not until we get Zorn back."

The ground would labor and vibrate under their feet. "Think it's safe to say we aren't in Glaze Forest anymore but another realm."

"Definitely a hellish place, but where?"

"My first thoughts were the Underworld, the Demon of the Deep's den," said Maiden Retta. "But such a place can't be accessible like this, could it?"

"Who knows," said Lucan. "Experts of those things are impossible to find."

"Best not to say their names," Oscern whispered, leaning more toward Lucan. "We don't know if such Maidens exist."

"They do," Lucan mumbled, who right away felt his friend's stare. He didn't explain, it was too risky since he uttered it for him to hear, but he remembered seeing a Maiden who only visited the temple under the cloak of the night.

"We're getting closer." Maiden Retta started to pant slowly, raising her dagger of light. "Do you see the light?"

"It's dark," Oscern said. "Can't see a thing."

The Maiden went to a full stop. Her neck bent sideways, and her arms shot up, leading her to scream.

On the ground was an unconscious David. Standing before them was a shadow hunching over a man who lay on the ground. The only thing Lucan could make out was the squirming and the feet kicking as the shadow coiled a handful of thorny vines around his neck. While his victim fought for air, the man slowly turned to face him.

Gripping the thorn, he moved and yanked his victim so he could face them. Zorn's eyes were bloodshot red, and blood seeped from his lips where the thorns had cut him.

"I told you we would meet again, friend." His black hair tousled as his eyes focused, giving him a menacing grin than a welcoming smile.

"Caydon." It took a lot of willpower to say his name and not attack him. "Let him go."

"Lucan…" Zorn wheezed. His hand went out, reaching toward him. "End this bastard."

Caydon squeezed the vines, bringing Zorn's porcelain face to turn blue. Lucan gripped the hilt of his sword. Oscern's tight grip stopped him. "Let me try."

"No, we'll do this together."

"He's corrupted," he said. "If we couldn't take him down, it's because his Fallen powers are greater."

Caydon lifted Zorn by the throat, his feet kicked until he flung him. His body rolled, but Lucan and Oscern managed to pull him to safety. The next second, Caydon was in the air, his sword coming down at him.

Oscern picked up Zorn and moved out of the way while Lucan rolled back.

Caydon prowled to Lucan only, blade on a downward pose. Lucan parted his legs and met him, crossing blades in one harsh clash.

"Where were you?" Caydon asked. "Thought you had abandoned your friends."

"I'm going to kill you!"

Caydon ducked when Oscern's great axe whooshed behind, nearly taking Lucan down. Black shards of glass protruded out of Caydon's cheeks, hissing as he charged at Oscern.

Zorn was shaky, rubbing his neck as he searched for his sabres. He was of no help right now, and some spell still locked Maiden Retta. Her fingers were curled, trying to reach for the dagger of light she dropped.

While Oscern and Caydon exchanged blows, Lucan went to her and tried to lower her arms, but they remained locked. She was whimpering, but her eyes showed anger, glaring at Caydon for what he did to her.

"Close your eyes," he told her.

"Why?"

"Just do it." Lucan dove his fingers between the stitches of his wound. His clenching teeth gritted, and his gums bled until a pulse of light bounced and hit the back of her spine.

Maiden Retta's frozen limbs dropped, and she fell to her knees.

"Wait for us to bring him down," he said. "But don't engage. We need you to do an exorcism."

She nodded, wheezing, dagger tightly in her grip.

To disorient him, Lucan leaped into the fight. Oscern knew how fast his strikes were and often worked his ax around them, but Caydon acted fast and vanished.

"Hornshit," said Lucan, the blood from his chest had soaked his shirt.

"This is how he got us," warned Oscern, pressing his back against his. "He knows I can't feel pain, so it's not like we can surprise him."

"Where are my fucking blades!" Zorn shouted, rising to his feet. "Give them back, you Fallen bastard!"

A shot of light fired from Maiden Retta's dagger swept through him and Zorn and bounced at what looked like an invisible force field.

"I saw him," she said, "But he's gone now."

"No, I'm right here." Caydon came down from the branches, coming down at the Maiden.

Zorn leaped and tackled him before he got her, both crashing into the ground. He shuffled back, evading his swings and giving him and Oscern time to join again. As they exchanged clashes, Caydon met his sword and Oscern's axe, using his invisibility as a shield, blocking blows and striking their blindside, giving them little room to parry.

The next time he reappeared, Caydon was winded but keeping a safe distance from them.

"Enough!" Lucan's arms shook as he searched for another opening. "You've become a Fallen, the same threat you wanted to stop your friends from becoming."

Caydon shook his head, eyes narrowing at him. "How little you know, friend." He vanished and rained his blade against Oscern's arms. The force cut through armor, at once freeing his grip on his ax. Oscern shuffled back, startled to see his tendons ripped.

Just as Lucan went to his side, Caydon reappeared and dove his sword to his shoulder. The shot of pain against his muscles locked him in place. Oscern gritted his teeth, witnessing it happen before his eyes.

"Lucan!" shouted Zorn.

"Not a move, any of you." Caydon moved back, tugging Lucan like a fish on a hook. He leaned to his right ear, his voice dark and shaky. "I'm not holding back anymore, but you're not giving me your best—why? Is it because we bonded? Are we closer than I imagined?"

"We can help you… let us… help you." It hurt to speak, hurt to breathe.

The thudding of another came their way. Oscern was charging at him, his arms flinging as he had lost control. He screamed, stomping with fury. Zorn leaped from his back and wrapped Caydon, pulling him off Lucan and the sword he impaled him with.

As they fell to the ground, Oscern used his weight to topple him.

"No!" Caydon growled and howled. "Keep your hands off me!"

"Maiden Retta!" Oscern shouted.

The Maiden shivered but swiftly raised her dagger at him. Spews of light swam out of her hands and shimmered dull sounds. The obsidian blade came to life, lighting the black forest. "Blessed Rima, strip him with your light, and return his gift to Skiar!"

The light shot from the point and penetrated Caydon. Upon contact, his back arched as he wailed. Maiden Retta shot another. It sizzled through the air and penetrated him. Her eyes were burning, focused on the darkness only she could see.

"No!" Caydon trembled uncontrollably, his teeth chattering against each other. "Don't kill my brother, don't kill my Pa! Don't hurt my Ma!"

Lucan clenched his jaw, hand pressed against his new wound. He heard those cries before shouting from every corner of Aelith before they, too, grew silent.

Another ray of light hit Caydon, the light scorching his skin and bringing his body to convulse.

Lucan kept him pinned, watching his skin lose its color.

"Did we get him?" Zorn panted. "Did we?"

Caydon clutched Lucan's shoulder, squeezing to the point of kneading his fingers to his bones. He looked into his eyes and saw moving images unraveling before him, a woman with short black hair serving him a bowl of stew. Another image showed an older brother, older than Caydon, helping him to carve a horse out of wood. Then there was a man sitting outside their home. He had Caydon's eyes, smoking from his pipe.

The visions faded that second, and Lucan was back, staring at the Caydon he knew. A cold sweat covered him, but he seemed different now, staring at him with a different look.

"Decima," He muttered. "She was always so kind to me."

The slime that plagued the forest burned, leaving a foul stench of death. The vines coiled back, and the beetles that watched turned.

The Glaze Forest he knew from afar returned, and the stars and the moon glimmered over them. The grip on Lucan's shoulder was gone, and Oscern, who had wrapped his arm around Caydon, was hugging the air.

"What the blazes," said Zorn. "Did we defeat him?"

"Oh, dear Skiar." Maiden Retta went to the pile of men and Maidens. Their slumped bodies had decayed, and their daggers of light crumbled.

A low croak moved their attention ahead, where a warped view of the hellish forest they were trapped in survived. A Fallen was standing lopsided, snarling at them.

"At ease, Mason." A hand reached from the tree beside him and touched the Fallen. Stepping out was Caydon, the holes of light that struck him cut through his robes, but he wasn't dead.

Hope swelled inside Lucan that perhaps they had saved him, but when he turned to them, Caydon's eyes emitted a faint glow of red.

For a moment, Lucan couldn't think, couldn't process what he was seeing. They had taken him down, but now he was back, half smiling again.

Oscern confronted him, gritting his teeth because he couldn't raise his ax. "Lucan," he grumbled. "What did you tell him?"

"He didn't need to tell me anything," Caydon answered. "I had to undergo a tragic memory until Lucan helped me uncover what I lost." He coughed, hand pressed against his chest. "I'm sorry… my chest… the thing that lives inside, they've been searching Rima's Orphaned since Aelith fell."

Zorn, who had found Ace's weapons, aimed one point at him. "What the hell are you."

"I'm a Child of Rima, or does it seem unbelievable that I am?" He frowned, seeing Zorn take another step. "Careful… you step where I'm standing, and you will be right back in the trap you fell into."

"Who—" Lucan grimaced through his pain. "Who do you work for!"

Caydon's focus shifted to him. "It won't let me say… won't let me whisper its name."

"Hornshit," Zorn said. "You keep speaking riddles, but that won't help us understand… none of it!"

Caydon frowned, gripping the Fallen's slanted shoulder. "What do you mean you *don't* understand? Did my Fallen friends not teach you enough?" Rather than release the Fallen, he went behind and put him in a chokehold. "Look at Mason!" he demanded. "Was his sacrifice not enough! What do you think Mason? These fools wanted your purified water when you could only give them that slime." Caydon took the dagger from his scabbard and penetrated the blade into Mason's chest.

Maiden Retta screamed as Caydon ran the blade down and opened the cavity, releasing a foul odor.

Caydon tore through the layers of muscle and fat. "I had to gut Rowan to make David see, but he didn't want to listen, and now Mason. How much more do I have to sacrifice so you'll understand?" He shoved his fingers into the chambers of the heart

until he plucked out something buried by white strings. It looked like tapeworms, unwilling to let go of what Caydon tried to take out.

In one snap, he dropped Mason's motionless body. He flung it on their side, bringing them to step back.

Against the moon's light was an oval figure engraved in lines of light that looked like embers.

"Is that…" Oscern leaned in for a closer look. "An acorn?"

The cap opened, and spirals of roots flung out and wrapped his arm. Maiden Retta shot her light at it, and it coiled back, squirming. The acorn crawled to Mason's body before it stopped moving.

Oscern stepped back, unable to pat the arm it tried to take.

"That's it then," said Lucan. "That's what corrupts the Fallen."

Caydon was staring at them, eyes narrowing at Maiden Retta for what she had done. He blinked and turned to Lucan. His face changed that moment, and he smiled. He swore any moment, he would take out his pipe for a smoke. "How's Elene?"

Lucan bit his tongue.

Caydon leaned against the tree and crossed his arms. "Did she… ever tell you what we talked about?"

"Leave her out of this."

Caydon chuckled but started to cough right after. There was a look of hurt like he could still feel like a part of him wasn't entirely Fallen but human. "Guess I'll have to tell you. I asked Elene to wait for me and promised to give her the life she deserves. She told me she couldn't, that she had made a Vow of Marriage and was soon to be promised to someone." He shrugged and scratched that same area she hated him to do. "Honestly? I wasn't threatened in the slightest, and when she told me she hated Rima, I didn't care. I told her the only person I could see myself losing to is you. She was so surprised she turned to face you. That was when you noticed we were talking about you." He started scratching the open cut on his cheek and smiled. "But things don't always go as we plan, do they? When I first met her, I did everything in my power to stop myself from turning into a Fallen, just so I could see her again, but I lost, and if she's marrying someone, then we both lost."

Lucan looked at the others. They wouldn't look at Caydon but had nothing but a scornful look. "Was it all a lie?" he said. "Who you said you were, who I befriended in Lyrin Town?"

"Aelith," he whispered. "Do you remember how it used to look during sunset? The floating rocks slowly rotated around the ground city. I could spend hours lying on the grass watching them hover over us, wondering if I would ever see the first temple in person. Remember how every spring, the mountains would pour the perfume from all the wildflowers down to the city, waking up to that every morning to songs signing Rima's praise. I never wanted to leave."

"So, this was your choice," said Lucan. "Knowing where you stand, you've always been like this."

Caydon looked at him. His smiles from reminiscing Aelith faded. "Darkness and light will always find each other, tethered to destroy one another, and we are creatures of darkness, created to roam in malice. You cannot go against the course that has been put into motion, for the wheel has long been turning, before the Fallen, before Aelith fell. Now it is only a matter of time before the Demon of the Deep takes his place."

Lucan pressed his hand to his wound, not the new one but the old one that lingered since Major impaled him. "Am I corrupted?"

Zorn and Oscern looked at him. In their eyes, he could see they were putting the pieces together, of him, a celestial possibly becoming a Fallen.

Caydon stared at his chest, aware of the undertones of his question. "You are untouchable, but it's not impossible. The line between light and darkness is finer than a thread of silk. You are either light—"

"Or darkness," Lucan finished.

Caydon smiled. "I'm tired… perhaps I'll see you again. Perhaps you'll be persuaded to consider my words, friend."

The realm he stood in faded, taking with him Mason's body. Beneath his feet, the acorn that nearly took Oscern crumbled to ashes.

"What in Skiar was that?" Zorn asked, unable to look away from it.

"Whatever it is, it's spreading." That voice. David had woken up. A bruise was on his temple, and his side was soaking with blood. "Its existence destroyed Timberton and nearly took us."

"Good to see you breathing," Oscern said.

"Let's pick the lost Preisenans and keep our feet moving." He started limping north. "We can talk more once we leave this forest. I need to breathe the open air again."

The walk was meager, but everyone had their own wounds to consider and corpses to carry.

David was his real self, otherwise, a copy of him would have replaced him. He explained in detail about the missing community and the forest taking an evil form. Lucan listened, but he didn't mention his experiences, the voices, the large eye that asked for his name.

"How did you do that?" Maiden Retta was peering at him. "How were you able to free me?"

"It's something he picked up from us," Zorn chimed with a lie. "This is Lucan, an Aelithian. He was raised to become a temple guard, so naturally, he has some skill."

"Oh." Her eyes fluttered as she stared at the ground, but the look on her was less than convinced.

"Let's hope there are some survivors," said Lucan. "The dead need a proper fire burial."

For the rest of the night, they burned the slaughtered Maidens and gifted Children of Rima.

Maiden Retta led the prayer for their souls for Skiar to take them and Timberton's victims. The homes were still stricken by darkness, but she managed to clear one house with her dagger and came back with bandages and needle and thread for new stitches that Lucan wished he didn't have to tolerate.

A sinking feeling suddenly overwhelmed him. He got up and searched every street and corner.

"Fior?" he shouted. "Fior!"

"Who's that?" David asked.

"My horse… no, I mean—Matias' horse."

"What the hell is a Matias?" Zorn followed.

"Wein and Elene's father, now stop with the questions." The sound of a movement startled them. Coming to them was a shadow. "Hey," he said, taking the reins. "Sorry, we got separated." Fior blinked his long lashes, eyes focused and unwavering. "Yeah, you did pretty well by yourself. See? You're a braver horse than you know."

For the night, everyone rested at the border of Timberton, suffering the cold but keeping close to the campfire. The blankets and any dry food they found they didn't dare touch. The people had lost much and still remained tainted by that same coat of darkness that took him to Glaze Forest.

"Do you guys think all of it was a hallucination?" Zorn asked, who frequently touched his bandaged neck.

"I don't know," answered Lucan, wincing as Maiden Retta stitched his new wound. The old one she stitched again, but rather than ask where it came from, she said nothing. She bandaged Oscern but didn't provide him any medicine to ease the pain as there was no need. In a few days, his tendons that Caydon severed would rejuvenate.

Out of the group, David seemed the quietest. He sat and watched what remained of the undead.

Lucan observed watching the conflict in his eyes. "When I first met Caydon, he said you were searching for something, but he didn't tell me more."

David's blue eyes met his. He had bags under his eyes, and the bruise on the side of his temple was still swollen. "Most of my journey has been focused on visiting every establishment, searching for answers in libraries from public places to old relic collectors' hoards. Everything had become a never-ending maze until Maiden Trini told me of what had been happening, Fallen Children of Rima, just like Mason, like Rowan and Caydon. It took Caydon to open Rowan's torso and show me what those cryptic messages were trying to say."

"And what's that?" said Zorn.

"The world as we know it is coming to an end."

Everyone looked at one another. It was hard to breathe with a message like that and easier to see than comprehend.

"There must be a better explanation than that," Oscern said. "If the world is ending, then why is it happening now? Why not sooner?"

"Caydon couldn't tell me," said David. "But he's obviously on the side that supports it, and whatever it is, it's coming from that place he took us, corrupting us. For now, that's what I will keep pursuing, for my taken friends and for Estiria."

As the sun rose, the unfolding mountains unveiled the cloak of the night. The scenery of the world as they knew it had a different feel about it. Underneath it all, a sinister shadow was coming out of hiding, waiting for the time to strike.

A sense of relief flooded his body. The same pain he suffered helped calm him, a reminder he wasn't living a dream.

From afar, Timberton emitted tendrils of light that looked like fireworks. High Maiden Trini and her team of Maidens bathed the place in light, cutting the darkness with their daggers and cleansing the lost with their songs.

It took all day, but Lucan and his friends decided not to leave until they saw the place purified.

High Maiden Trini listened to every detail of David's experience of finding a ghost town in Timberton and being pulled into what felt like another realm.

"It was a bad idea to bring along company with me. We went through this blindly and lost many lives," David, who was hard to read, frowned at the few red-eyed Maidens who sniffled. "As soon as I feel better, I'll be back on the road, this time alone."

"Not a chance," Lucan said. "What if you run into Caydon again? He's out there, following, working for what has to be the Demon of the Deep."

David grumbled and rubbed his beard. "Not to offend your Riman status, but there's nothing you can offer me when I can make a dozen copies of myself to assist me."

"Then, at least tell us where we should go. What can we do that your copies can't accomplish?" Lucan hoped his friends would throw their ideas, but Zorn and Oscern were silently looking at one another, avoiding their attention from him.

"If what Caydon said is true, then no Child of Rima is safe," High Maiden Trini said. "Whether you decide to seek the darkness, we're facing something unfounded. For now, you're all welcome to stay in Preisen until we find more answers."

At night, everyone stayed to make sure nothing lingered under a rock. Bread, candies, and carrot soup were served to fill everyone's stomach, and wine to calm their nerves.

Lucan, Zorn, and Oscern started their own campfire, a safe distance from the others. It was important that they saw their support, but if they were going to share any private conversation, then only Fior could listen to them.

Lucan and Zorn were taking turns feeding Oscern and giving him some wine. He nearly gave up eating when Zorn asked him if he wanted a bib.

Whenever Lucan brought up David and his solo mission, they avoided the topic, asking where he's been and how he survived Vinolean's cavalry. It slipped through his teeth that he was at The Dustbowl, which brightened Oscern's eyes.

"Were you able to see Delilah?" he asked, his mood getting better.

Lucan stared at the flames. It was still that much harder since the light shared the same color as Oscern's eyes. "I saw Tabetha, but Delilah wasn't there."

Oscern nodded, taking his lie as the truth.

"Are you sure?" Zorn had an eyebrow raised, peering at him for the truth. "That's mighty strange since they're both always together."

"If I saw Delilah, I would know," he defended. "Maybe she was busy, if you know what I mean."

"It's the weather," said Oscern. "She probably got some time off to make sure her youngest didn't catch pneumonia again."

"Again?" said Lucan.

"Dein, her three-year-old son, has asthma, and with the cold, his immune system plummets. She nearly lost him last year, but Delilah is something else when it comes to her children. She paid the best doctors in Vinol to treat him. I tried to ease the financial burden, but she wouldn't let me. Said they were her responsibility."

"I… I didn't know."

Oscern looked at him, eyebrows compressing. "Like I said, you don't know her life."

"And she knows yours?" he snapped. "She didn't even want your help."

Oscern shrugged and focused back on the fire. "She just wanted me to be there, my presence, as she explained it. Before we left searching for you, I told her that if she ever needed me to wait for me in Vinol, I promised her I would always come back to help her no matter the cost."

"How disgustingly romantic," said Zorn, half smiling.

"Anyway, I tell her that every time I go to battle, and she always answers that she'll be there, waiting for me."

Lucan swallowed hard. It was best if the big guy didn't return to Vinol again. His mind was burning with remorse, his inner voice calling him an asshole. He recalled Delilah mentioning something about the cold weather before he cut her off. Was she willing to marry anyone just so her son wouldn't be deathly ill?

Skiar, she was gone now.

Oscern's voice brought him back. He mentioned his and Zorn's committed interest in joining David but asked him to stay in Preisen, where it was safe.

"Now you're outing me?" Lucan gave the candied peanut a hard chomp. "And what do you mean you and Zorn? Were you two talking behind my back?"

"All the time," Zorn said, giving him the finger.

Lucan chuckled and popped another peanut. "Well, like it or not, I'm going."

Oscern shut his eyes like he needed to meditate before looking at him again. "Zorn and I already broke Aelith's promise by revealing where we came from. If people like Caydon exist, then they're not just some hired hand we're used to taking down. These people are searching for you."

"I'm going. End of discussion."

Zorn slapped his hands against his thighs. "Are you that thick-headed!"

Preisen's soldiers and Maidens fell silent, watching them.

Oscern looked like he wanted to pull on Zorn's sleeve, but his arms were useless. "What Zorn is poorly trying to say is that now that we know the enemy is this strong, we can't plunge you into the unknown unprepared, not after what happened."

"As long as I don't reveal my true name, no Fallen is going to touch me. Caydon may have known my mother's name, but he didn't

know she was a celestial." He stared at the bandages on his friends, the bruises they suffered. "Anyway, I'm not letting you two face it alone, not again."

"I know why you're saying that." Oscern's voice softened. "I know that you constantly feel the need to protect us."

Lucan avoided him and peered at the flames. "No, you don't."

"You were just a kid. You couldn't make any decision after we lost our livelihood. The way I see it? I jumped off that wagon to follow you. Nobody pushed me, and you didn't tell me to go with you. So stop blaming yourself for that, alright?"

"He's right." Zorn rubbed his nose. "We didn't follow you all these years because you're *her* descendant or some stupid celestial being."

"Everyone still died. Your sister, Oscern's family, my mother. The Maidens upon Maidens who used their bodies to shield me. I didn't ask for it. I didn't ask for any of it!" His voice quieted the group. His throat was pinching, and his tears he held in.

"Let me clear one thing, Lucan. If I had tried hard enough, I could've stopped Nati from leaving. And maybe I could've done more to help Oscern find his sisters or help his father from the rubble, but we were kids. It's okay to want to take the blame, to feel you should've died with them, but that's the aftermath of us orphaned children. That's why we're all messed up, like that Caydon guy."

"Still, I could have done better—we nearly starved to death in Aelith. I could not have been so lovesick by Marca that we nearly ended up dead."

"You helped me find Nati's earrings after Aelith fell." Zorn grew tears, and as they fell, he didn't wipe them. "You and Oscern were there when Ace was taken from me, and on those nights, it felt like I had nobody left, you two were always there."

Lucan rubbed his moist eyes, averting his gaze from them. He stared at the swaying fire, sparks shooting out from the cracks. What was he supposed to do now? He couldn't just let them go like this and not do his part. He was a celestial. He was supposed to lead Aelith as his mother intended. That made him feel that much worse, more rotten than his own body had become.

Oscern scratched his growing beard. "Alright, Lucan, if you want to join us, fine."

"Oscern!" Zorn muttered.

Oscern raised his hand to quiet him. "I know if you stay in Preisen, you won't last a week because you'll be searching for us, so what if you return to Melodia? Didn't you say it's surrounded by endless mountains and deep forest?"

Lucan already hated the idea. "And if whatever the hell is out there finds me there? There are people in Melodia who may be hurt because of me. I can't allow that."

"Then you'll have to accept if this keeps going, those people you journeyed with on Vine Road will eventually become victims."

Lucan looked at Fior, who grazed nearby. "What do you mean?"

"What Caydon has done to Timberton led to massacres. Wouldn't you want to be there to ensure those folks you traveled with are safe?"

The Harrows, Pete and Rüfus, Olivia, Cleric Aaron, the Maidens, and little Corie came to mind. The one with black hair and big brown eyes tried to enter his awareness, but he shut her golden tassel away.

"We'll be gone for a few months and look for you when we have found any clues," Oscern said. "How does that sound?"

Lucan scoffed, hating the idea of leaving them but also hating the idea of leaving Melodia to the wolves.

Zorn grabbed a handful of the candied peanuts from his bowl and flung them at him. "Will you stop being an arrogant twat and listen to us for once!"

"Hey, I was enjoying those!" Seeing it within his reach, Lucan kicked his boot. "Twat queen!"

"You're lucky you have two holes in your torso, or I would've had your arm behind your back!"

"You mean like Caydon had you?"

"Why you…" Zorn tackled him to the ground. He was trying to pinch him, but Lucan shuffled to the side, elbowing him if he tried. They rolled into the cool grass, wrestling one another, trying to pin the other down.

"Enough you two!" Oscern bellowed. "They're watching us."

Lucan rubbed his face and got up first. Just as Zorn wobbled back to his feet, Lucan pushed him back to the ground. Chuckling,

he went back to the fire. He didn't want to relive the past and be the one who needed protection, but if anyone had any right or say, it was the ones he laughed and suffered with.

Oscern smiled now, perhaps relieved he could see he was for it. "Thank you, Lucan."

As the sun was rising, the wide and open Vine Road lay ahead. Oscern and Zorn walked him to Vine Road to see him go. He never thought he would be separated from them again, but their mercenary days were now over.

"Lucan, before you go." Oscern always had something to say. He looked at Zorn, who leaned his shoulder on his arm, yawning. "If things get worse, you may have to do something your mother forbade you."

Lucan brushed Fior's shoulder. The thought had crossed his mind a dozen times in that forest when he thought Caydon would win when he couldn't say who he worked for.

"Since Major Rudra impaled me, I spent many nights wondering why this wound wouldn't close, why no medicine or stitches work, but now I see." Lucan gently placed his hand on the old wound. "The only way this pain will go away is when I become him. I'll suffer a bit longer until it's absolutely necessary." He mounted Fior, wincing by the stretch. "Don't get yourselves killed," he threatened. "You two are… you two are all I have."

Zorn rolled his eyes, his eyes twinkling, and Oscern smiled.

CHAPTER 39

ELENE

When it came to visitors, there were a few things that riled up Melodians. One was when unusual visitors arrived, as Lucan had done when he showed up at the Beaven River or when the circus made its annual return in the Spring. But today was different. Today she heard from Wein that Preisen's armored guards were walking up the Avenue heading to the temple.

Elene was on her way to run an errand for Olivia when she saw Maiden Derli watching the folks climbing the Avenue to get to the temple. "I was wondering why the bells rang at this hour," Maiden Derli smiled at her, analyzing her hair. "By the way, Elene, why haven't I seen you with Hunter?"

"He went back to Appleton shortly after the ceremony. He should be back before winter."

"Ah, I see."

"Excuse me, but I'm eager to see who came to visit." Elene ran back up the road, her calves burned from the climb. When she got there, the guards who stood by the stairs were gone. If they went anywhere, they were probably inside. Swallowing the pasty saliva that thickened from the run, she sprinted towards the side of the temple and slipped through the gates.

At the back of the garden, there was mostly foliage blocking the windows, but one facing the house of worship was slightly open. She picked up a medium size clay pot and boosted herself.

At the altar, a Maiden in golden armor and a white skirt was talking with the congregation. Her tight curls were braided into four sections and decorated with silver hair clips.

Mother and Terra were seated in the middle of the attendees. They had a look of anxiety, similar to Maiden Camilla and Cleric Aaron, who stood a few feet from her.

Preisen's Maiden declared, "For years, we have remained peaceful under a time of war, but now we pick up our own arms. Children of Rima are being corrupted, only we have yet to uncover how. It is important that you all keep your faith and guard one another. Protect your light and strengthen yourselves from the influences of darkness."

"What does this all mean?" one yelled.

"Has the end come?" Another called back.

"What we know is that performing an exorcism will castrate the darkness from the host." She nodded at someone who sat in the front, but Elene couldn't see. She then looked at Maiden Camilla. "Take me to Rima's oak tree, so we may sing."

The congregation parted and moved out of their way.

Just as Elene felt her balance wobble, a hand grabbed her arm and nearly tossed her off the potted plant. Her legs jolted with electricity when she landed.

The guard was rough, tugging at her blouse as he tried to keep her straight. "You don't just come in breaking into the temple's garden."

"The gate was open." Elene pulled herself free, but he gripped her tighter. "Let me go!"

"On Skiar, I will not. You're going to answer to Cleric Aaron for intruding on private property." She resisted, but his pull only became more aggressive.

Tugging her to the front, Elene's cheeks flushed when the folks outside noticed her presence. Before they made it down the steps, Cleric Aaron was there.

"This woman was peeking through the window," the guard announced.

Elene saw her father and mother with Terra biting her lip.

"Elene Harrow," Cleric Aaron said. "Have you no decency for this urgent matter? Matias, do something!"

A push pulled him out of the way.

A girl in robes sped out. The beads of her braids bounced as she picked up the pace and embraced Elene. Heat swam to her face by the look everyone gave her.

"You're alright." Gittle's blue eyes fed her courage. Elene kneeled and hugged her back.

The woman who was protected by Preisen's guards stepped forward. She smiled at her daughter, and for once, Elene saw an adult Maiden take no ire look against her.

"Come," Gittle said, taking her hand. "That's my mother, Selene. We're going to pay Rima's White Oak a visit and pray."

"Oh, but." Surely Gittle knew, heard her plenty of times she didn't believe, but she insisted. In the presence of her mother, nobody protested her invitation.

Masses of Melodians followed, many whispering what they overhead, the Fallen, corrupted Children of Rima roaming Pleada. The pond that surrounded the White Oak was almost full. Still, the place had a serene feel, gentle movements of the tree. Rima's White Oak had yet to shed most of her leaves.

A few did fall, emitting an amber light over the masses that gathered. It's been so long since she came here that she had forgotten how slowly the leaves glided, like feathers that had all the patience in the world before touching the ground, and when the leaf did, it faded.

Elene and Gittle crossed the bridge she thought she would never return to. The worried look and mumbles surrounded them, but she blurred them out.

"Have you seen Lucan?" Elene dared herself to ask.

Gittle shook her head. "He's not here?"

"He must be off somewhere," she answered. "Somewhere, with his friends."

Maiden Camilla and Cleric Aaron circled the tree, went on their knees, and bowed their heads in prayer. Everyone followed the routine.

Seeing her mother wait for her, Gittle released her and joined her.

Elene stayed behind, arms crossed at the ritual, a song of prayer, a song for guidance. Father's hands were clasped in prayer, just like her mother and sister.

Maiden Camilla, along with Nessa, Derli, and the other Maidens, began to sing *My Haven*. Joining them was Gittle's mother and Gittle herself until, slowly, everyone joined.

Come to me my haven and
bathe in the light

Where in darkness we have
crept, you freed us from despair

"You shouldn't be here." That cross voice couldn't be no other than Caspian, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "This sacred place is for Rimans only."

"I was invited, but I wasn't planning on staying." Elene wasted no time and sped down the bridge rubbing her arms at how uncomfortable he made her feel.

Standing at the end of the bridge was another Child of Rima, Vance, giving her that same look. When she passed him, she never locked eyes with him.

In a way, he was an outcast himself. At least that's how she felt when few people approached him, and Maidens wouldn't look his way. Even so, they were not on the same team.

Melodia looked like a ghost town. Few stayed, mostly business owners, waiting outside of their door for the others to return. Among them was the bank the Marigolds ran. Mrs. and Mrs. Marigold were talking to one another but waiting just the same.

As Elene crossed her own bridge, she thought of what she had overheard at the temple. Gittle's mom was asking everyone to be prepared, reminding everyone to keep their light. Her thoughts went back to him, of how urgent he was to reunite with his friends, just as he was in the summer.

A hand took her shoulder, and she yelped. She didn't recall hearing anybody cross her bridge, and now a man stood behind her.

"Did I frighten you?" he asked.

"Y-yes." Her heart was racing, but he chuckled and grabbed the pipe that stuck out from his vest. Elene looked at her surroundings, wondering how long he had been here. "What brings you here?"

He looked up from his pipe, his dark hair dangling over his eyebrows, lips pursed in a smile. "To see you, gorgeous."

Open thine eyes.
Find the light.
Retrieve his celestial name.

Coming soon

CHILDREN OF RIMA

MAIDENS OF DARKNESS

GLOSSARY

Avery: A kingdom in the Southern. It emerged after little kingdoms broke and merged until one solid society stood among them all.

Aelith: The supposed resting place of Rima and home of the first White Oak tree. Various chunks of mountains resist gravity and hover above the lower city.

Child of Rima: Mostly referring to men with unique capabilities as Maidens are called by their respected title.

Demon of the Deep: The said creator of Pleada in all essence, form, and right.

Rima: A celestial being sent by Skiar to answer the pleas for the humans of the world.

Riman: A follower of Rima, a believer of Skiar in existence or in faith.

Hornshit: A profane word said by people of the Northern, specifically Vinol and Mudburrow, as the Mountain goats in that region attack travelers indiscriminately.

Grandi trees: are said to have existed because Rima had walked near them. Like most forests, Grandi trees carry the same stigmas and rumors by folks who fear a walk into the unknown.

Vinol: An industrious, luxurious kingdom that started to open its laws in order to fund the war with Avery.

Marker: The marks of Children of Rima that, after being burned, left a single rock is left in their stead.

Murella: The loyal servant that beckons the will of the Demon of the Deep. After a long battle with Rima, Murella was defeated.

Maiden's Dagger: A dull obsidian blade, sometimes a stone dagger, that has been etched in light. It strikes fast and from a fair distance to nullify tainted areas. It is also an instrument to perform an exorcism on victims tainted by darkness.

The Split: The Hacelen is said to have been cut through by Rima and Murella's fighting, creating Blood River.

Vine Road: A long and wide road popularized by traveling Gypsians. It's deemed safer to travel than other lonesome roads. Merchants and travelers of every background take the route, though safety is not guaranteed, as popular spots are susceptible to bandits or highwaymen.

Red Guild: The Red Guild is a private society first created by Gypsian traders deemed as tribal leaders in their community. In the last one hundred years, the guild started to open its membership to non-Gypsian members. To be a member, a Gypsian of the guild must invite you.

About the Author

Miriam Yvette is the author of Dragon of Mirrors. She writes about all things fantasy, from scenes that visit her in her dreams to nightmares she wishes she never had. She's a self-taught artist and has a passion for storytelling.

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