

# THE RISING

*By Kristen Ashley*

## Part One

### *The Beginning of Everything*

#### Prologue

##### *The Prophecy*

Once upon a time, in a parallel universe, there existed an abundance of beauty and riches on the continent of Triton.

Yet for millennia, the peoples within it knew nothing but mistrust and oppression and war.

Peace was not the destiny chosen by the rulers.

Differences were reviled.

Subjugation was observed.

Conflict was sought.

One cold night in Sky City, broken from centuries of exploitation, finding themselves without an alternate course, the women gathered their magicks and made the ultimate sacrifice.

They slayed the men who were their masters.

Leaving their sons and gathering their daughters, they fled the city and created The Enchantments of the Warrior Sisterhood of the Nadirii.

In the magical, green, sunny forest of The Enchantments, mighty trees charmed by their witches grew tall and strong, providing treehomes for the sisterhood of the skilled warriors of the Nadirii. The sisterhood welcomed all who beseeched their Enchantments to escape their oppressors and thus grew and thrived through loyalty and trust.

And earned the wrath of men who sought to collect them.

The rest of Triton grew fractured, splintering into different realms.

There were the sun-drenched dunes and mountains of the wealthy, wanton and barbarous southern region of Firenze whose mines of jewels, northern fields of spices and rare silk made them the richest nation of Triton.

And their riches were coveted by others.

Then there were the wet, fertile, wooded forests, dells and plains of the virtuous northwest region of Wodell, whose sheep produced the best wool on the planet, and whose crops and orchards fed the continent.

And whose people tired of war and chafed under a weak king.

Further, there were the black crags of the northern shores and the rolling fields inland of the cultured nation of Airen, producing olives and wine and the best leather and weapons on the continent.

And populated by men who had not learned.

And there was the island continent of Mar-el. Its barren shores of rock and beach forced its people to live by the sea and become fishermen, sailors...and pirates. But within its boundaries, there was a secret.

And its peoples remained removed from the rest by decree of their king.

Last, there was the Dome City. Known for its resplendent golden domes, the city-state was the place of the religion and practitioners of Go'Doan. The priests and their mysterious female acolytes held fast to three sacred missions: education, healing, and most of all, extending their beliefs.

But even after the Night of the Fallen Masters that saw the birth of the Nadirii...

Dissension, assassination, rebellion and conflict reigned across the continent of Triton.

And then there were those...

Those who would see the dominion of all in all lands, the peoples of the nations of Triton cowed to their whims and controlled by new masters.

And it was those who conspired to reawaken the Beast, a fearsome creature who wrought tragedy and devastation across the continent who had been vanquished centuries before.

Foreseeing this, a powerful coven of witches proclaimed the prophecy.

Triton's four strongest warriors must wed its four most powerful witches, binding all nations together.

There is the quiet maiden, Silence, born of Wodell.

And the savage king, Mars, born of Firenze.

And the cold warrior, Cassius, born to Airen.

And the fierce witch, Elena, born to the Nadirii.

And the steadfast soldier, True, born to Wodell.

And the banished beauty, Farah, born to Firenze.  
And the pirate king, Aramus, ascended in Mar-el.  
To make the crusading Ha-Lah his queen.  
If these men and women could see beyond their differences of culture and history, pride,  
politics and pasts—and love could prevail—their strength and magicks would flourish...  
Then, they could face The Rising.  
And perhaps defeat the Beast.  
The time has come.  
He has been awakened...  
And he is rising...

## Chapter One

### *The Feeding*

***The Priest***  
*Ancient Ritual Ground, Lesser Thicket Forest*  
WODELL

He stood removed from his four brothers as they did their work.

It wasn't that he didn't have the stomach for it.

Well, not *this* part of it.

The part that had just been completed however...

The part that meant the virgin staked naked to the dirt, arms wide overhead, legs spread-eagle,  
was virgin no more. The seed of four men flowed from her into the earth.

That part he had no stomach for.

It was the next part he rather enjoyed.

He was happy to note she'd long-since stopped screaming.

"Continue," he commanded when one of the men who'd again donned his dark-gray robe  
turned his head the priest's way for instructions.

This was when it happened. When the ritual set his blood to quickening. His skin heating.

It was when the men approached her with their daggers drawn, and when they'd gained their  
places, they fell to their knees.

She had it in her for but a mere whimper when the first blade slid into her left side at her waist.

And then out, the blood swelling from the wound, rippling toward the earth.

Another, slighter whimper when the other blade slid into her right side.

And out.

The next slid precisely, nicking her heart, causing an actual gasp.

And then out.

And the next, her womb with an upward slice, and at that point, no sound at all.

The dagger was pulled out.

That was when the priest moved in his white robes toward her, his fingers wrapping lovingly around his own dagger at his gilded belt.

There was naught left of her to even turn her head and look at him, even if she still breathed. She did nothing but stare at the starry sky through the leafy trees. The pumps of blood surging from her chest slowing as that organ lost its strength were her body's indication of its desperate desire to stay bound in this realm, even if, perhaps, she did not share this wish.

She would find peace.

He did not know that for certain, but at this point, did it really matter?

He crouched close to her glossy brown hair that was now filled with dirt and mud and twigs and leaves, tangled, even ratted in places, due to her struggles that night.

She had been a spirited one.

The Beast liked those best.

"I'm sorry, my dear. We must feed the Beast," he murmured before he skated his blade across her windpipe, opening flesh and creating a surge of blood.

A gurgle from her lips.

Then two.

After that, the priest watched the light blink out of her lovely blue eyes.

He rose, stepped back, and commanded, "Untether her and turn her in order she drain direct."

The four men moved as ordered.

The priest stood separate, watching, waiting.

And when it came, it was more than satisfactory.

*Much more.*

The rumble, the growl, the roll of the earth under their feet so powerful, it almost took him off his own.

It had not been thus a fortnight before.

Most definitely not the fortnight before that.

Decades ago, when he assumed his role as the overseer of the ritual, there was barely a rumble, and no growl.

But now, it grew strong.

And hungry.

“My lord,” one of the men called, eyes wide and on the priest.

“Not long now,” the priest announced.

“Then every week,” another of the men declared. “Centuries of the ritual. The sacrifices. So close. I can feel his strength. His hunger. Every week we shall join at this sacred place and—”

“No,” the priest denied. “Every month.”

“*Month?*” another man asked with incredulity. “It’s been every fortnight for two and a half *centuries.*”

“You’ll anger the Beast,” the impatient collaborator snapped.

“He must understand who his master is,” the priest reminded them.

“Who his masters *are,*” the man corrected him, and the priest narrowed his eyes.

When the Beast was his, that one would go first.

“Of course,” the priest murmured.

“Every month seems—”

“*We* feed it. *We* nurture it. *We* give it what it needs. *We* make it grow strong. It will be *we* who liberate it. He must learn patience. He must learn gratitude. He must learn,” he leaned toward the men, “*servitude.*”

The priest leaned back and moved his gaze through the four men, assessing each one.

He did linger on his favorite though, as was his wont, for there was much to linger on.

They had been chosen carefully. They had been trained accordingly. They, and those who had come before them, had lived, plotted, schemed, raped and murdered for one goal.

The goal they’d achieve while these men’s feet walked the earth.

While *his* feet walked the earth.

And what he saw then was that these men knew it.

The priest would have patience. They would give it to him.

For if they did, they would all be kings.

(Save one, but he'd always been bothersome.)

“We have known, as our brothers before us, and those before them, and backwards for over two hundred years what we wish,” the priest stated. “The lore is not lore. The Beast abides in the under-realm. Banished there after his last rising. He will rise again. He will be ours.” He paused for effect, something he felt he was quite good at, before declaring grandly, “And then *Triton* will be *ours*.”

There came a low “Huzzah” from his conspirators, but then again, a loud roar would not be the thing. They were deep in the forest. There was no one close.

But it wouldn't do for their sacred site that had stayed secret for over two hundred years to be discovered at this late date.

Obviously most especially after a ritual.

“She is surely drained,” the priest noted. “Take her. Tonight, our work is done. We meet again in a month. And it's,” his gaze fell on the impatient accomplice, “*your* turn to find the candidate.”

His least-liked brethren gave the priest a look that said he wished to open his mouth and share something.

Wisely, he did not.

With ease borne of practice, the sacrifice was wrapped in a sheet, loaded on a horse, and with cursory farewells, three of the four men were away.

Leaving the priest with his favorite.

“Are you certain we should wait an entire month?” his chosen one asked as the priest drew close to him. “That growl seemed—”

“Open your robes,” the priest ordered quietly.

Looking up, he saw his brother's eyes fire.

Gratifyingly, he then opened his robes and bared himself.

It was gratifying as it was so soon after he spent himself inside the vessel.

And it was gratifying because it was so beautiful to look at.

The priest dropped to his knees and took the shaft deep into his mouth.

And more gratification at the rumbling groan.

He tasted her for a but few strokes.

After that, he tasted only *man*.

Later, his snowy robes cast aside, naked on all fours in the moonlight, taking hard, thick cock through his arse, hands and knees in the blood-soaked earth, the priest's head jerked back, and he called his pleasure into the moonlit night as he spent his seed into the dirt.

His chosen one milked him dry before his thrusts grew in violence and he shot deep inside.

Finished, he ground there, murmuring, "Gods, but your arse is tight and hot."

"You really must remember to bring oil, Rupert," the priest muttered.

He felt his lover curl over him, still hard inside.

"You like the pain," he whispered in the priest's ear.

Indeed.

"Pull out. Needs be we're away."

Knowing precisely how he liked it, the end of the penetration was rough, making the priest moan.

"Oh yes, he likes the pain," was whispered above him.

The priest ignored that as he took a moment to rub his seed into the dirt.

There was no growl at that.

Just a hum.

And having done this, just like this (though with different partners), for over a decade, the priest knew he was the only one who felt the hum.

So he knew who the Beast's true master would be.

## **Chapter Two**

### *The Standing Stones*

***The Great Coven***  
*Silbury Henge, Argyll Forest*  
*AIREN*

In the clearing of the forest, the first flash of light came before the first of the five standing stones.

It was marine blue.

As the woman stepped forward out of the flash, immediately, the stone next to her lit with red light.

And that woman stepped forward.

The next, the light was green.

And after that woman stepped forward, a flash of bright white.

That woman joined the others at the slab at the center of the circle.

A slab that in ancient times had known the blood of humans, then the blood of animals.

But for millennia, it had known no offering but the wind that shorn its edges curved and smooth, the rain that beat its height into the dirt, the sun that bleached its color.

Just as the standing stones around it. Once standing tall and proud over two stories toward the sky, now, they stood just over one, the edges dulled, one having taken a strike of lightning, weakening it, so a fragment broke off and plummeted, bedding itself in the earth by its sister's side.

The four women turned.

The fifth light flashed coral and through it came Ophelia, Queen of the Nadirii Sisterhood.

“Sister.”

“Sister.”

“Sister.”

“Sister.”

“My sisters,” Ophelia murmured in greeting, taking her place amongst her sistren at the slab.

“Fare thee well?” Rebecca of the Dellish asked, her gaze sharp on the queen.

“Not tonight. The disturbance has occurred again, right on cue,” Ophelia replied.

That was not the answer to Rebecca's question and Ophelia knew it.

Rebecca did not prompt.

“We have work to do,” Lena of the Mar-el noted, moving closer to the altar.

The rest followed suit.

Lena began.

Touching the stone with her fingertips, she stated clearly, “The moon.”

Nandra of the Firenz touched the stone. “The blood.”

Fern of the Airenzian touched it. “The star.”

Rebecca followed suit. “The dirt.”

Ophelia went last. “The sisterhood.”

A frisson of energy slithered up their arms, singing under their feet, vibrating in the stones, and the simple ritual complete, the circle united, the coven present, they took their hands away.

“They rouse the Beast,” Rebecca told them what they all already knew and had, for some years now.

“They are cloaked. At the power of the last rousing, I spent the fortnight trying to find them and naught else. No sleep, no food, deep in meditation, casting spells that have not been attempted in centuries. And I could not,” Lena declared.

“They have a powerful sorcerer among them,” Ophelia murmured.

“Go’Doan?” Nandra asked bitingly.

Ophelia looked to her sister, sharing her dislike of the Go’Doan, at least some of them, (well, truly, most of them) but not showing it. “I suspect, but I cannot be sure. I cannot feel them either.”

This was a surprise.

Especially after all these years of trying.

They were the most powerful witches of their lands, Ophelia by far the most powerful among them.

That was not strictly true.

They were the most powerful witches anyone of their lands knew.

At the now.

It would seem the others would need to be revealed.

“The prophecy must commence,” Fern shared.

All the witches closely watched Ophelia after this was uttered.

But it was true.

When the Beast was banished, the coven had risen.

And every generation for millennia, the daughters were selected.

And the sons.

Just for this happenstance.

In order that they could banish it back.

“We can delay no longer, Ophelia,” Rebecca said kindly. “We’ve all attempted to find them. We’ve all cast repeatedly to stop them. We’ve spent the last two years in these endeavors. It’s

come too far. The Beast has awoken. He rises closer to the surface. I no longer need to feel the earth move to know this is true. I feel...*it* when they feed him.”

“You worry about your daughter,” Lena noted, still regarding Ophelia closely.

“I worry about all of our daughters,” Ophelia replied.

“It is too true. None of this will be readily accepted,” Fern said under her breath.

“You mean none of *them* will be readily accepted,” Nandra declared irritably. “As ever, it is the woman’s wont to seek and build her place with the man. Especially in *your* land.”

Fern looked away, color coming to her cheeks, but Ophelia spoke.

“We must not be cross amongst ourselves. It will serve no purpose. Fern, of any of us, even the Nadirii, is aware of what takes place in her land.”

Nandra closed her mouth.

“Of the daughters sent forth, yours, I fear, my sister, my friend, will have the most difficult path to walk,” Rebecca remarked to Ophelia. “We, none of us, have blood in this game. It is not one from our own wombs who go forth into this tribulation. Only yours.”

“I am aware of that,” Ophelia responded. “But my Elena will, as ever, walk with shoulders squared to make her sacrifice.” Ophelia glanced amongst her sisters. “They all will. The lore has endured for millennia. The devastation the Beast wrought to this earth and its peoples may have become stories parents tell their children to give them a different type of chill on a cold winter night. But the Go’Doan will have felt it. The witches. The seers. The sorcerers. The veil of magic grows restless across Triton. Not one of them will desist. They will all agree. And it is not entirely a bad hand they’ve been dealt.”

“You are, of course, talking about the warriors,” Lena said tetchily.

“Or the warriors with staffs they only hold in their hands for personal purposes,” Rebecca murmured.

Ophelia drew breath in through her nose as her way of affirming.

“We must toss the tiles, make the matches and be done with it,” Nandra declared. “We all have rulers we must speak with and convince of their futures. And the tossing of the tiles will by far be the least onerous of our endeavors.”

She was correct.

On all accounts.

Including the fact they must toss the tiles.

Ophelia felt her heart clench.

“The Head is already mated with The Crystal, so I shall not toss,” Lena pointed out. “And it would best be remembered that has come about.”

“And why is that?” Nandra asked.

“Because it shares that this is destiny. They were meant to be,” Lena replied. “They mated without our intervention as, it could be, the others if given time would do as well.”

Ah, Lena.

Brusque to the witness, but soft within.

She sought to make Ophelia dread less what might be coming, especially in her current state.

But there was naught which could make Ophelia dread less what might be coming, no matter what the tiles decreed.

She had hoped her daughter would succeed her.

Second born.

But born to rule.

“It’s my understanding Aramus and Ha-Lah detest each other,” Nandra returned. “Has your king even consummated the union?”

“Not for lack of trying,” Lena retorted.

“His seed spent on his stomach is why we don’t feel their growing power,” Nandra observed.

“I’m uncertain when he spends his seed, it’s on his stomach...at least not regularly,” Lena muttered.

“That is worse,” Rebecca uncharacteristically snapped.

“Ah, the Dellish and their quaint customs,” Nandra muttered in return, her full lips quirking.

“Perhaps The Crystal will be more disposed to his charms if she knows mating with him will save the land,” Lena rejoined swiftly before Rebecca could.

“I hear she’s quite feisty, so even that might not work,” Fern murmured while leaning toward Rebecca.

“Bring forth the tiles,” Ophelia bid on a sigh.

Rebecca dug into the pocket of her skirts to find her tiles, her gaze on Ophelia, her tone again gentle.

“Would you wish to go first, my sister?” she offered.

“My daughter’s match will be the last,” Ophelia declined. “She will take what is left.”

They all felt that was wise. If Ophelia tossed the tiles, the magic would make the selection, but it would be direct from her hand where the fates aimed her Elena.

However, before they could decide who would go first—Wodell, Firenze or Airen—Rebecca bumbled the tiles in her hand.

Or...

She did not.

Either way, they burst from her hold and clattered on the slab.

Rebecca and Fern gasped.

Nandra's eyes grew wide.

Lena smiled.

Ophelia watched intently.

Sparks of cool marine, bright vermillion, leaf green, striking white and deep coral danced as the rectangular cream tiles danced.

The one with the crossed bow and arrow imprinted in black on two sides.

The Warrior.

Signifying Elena of the Nadirii. Princess of the Sisterhood. Daughter of Ophelia.

The one with the diamond shape.

The Crystal.

Ha-Lah of the Mar-el. New queen to King Aramus of the island nation of pirates.

The one with the shroud.

The Shadow.

Silence of the Dellish. Countess of the Arbor. Niece of the king.

The one with the hand with the eye in the palm.

The Sage.

Farah of the Firenze. Daughter to a traitor. Stripped of status and possessions. Living in the desert in exile.

Then there was the one with the upside-down triangle in the circle to which at two sides there were wings.

The Head.

Aramus. King of the Mar-el. Pirate. Protector of the Seas.

And the one with one triangle over the other in a circle, around which there was a flower.

The Heart.

True. Prince of the Dellish. Heir to the throne.

And the one with the crescent moon at the top, surrounded by two circles, which was surrounded by lotus petals.

The Cock.

Mars. King of Firenze. Ascended the throne after his father's assassination. Ruled now beloved by his people.

And the last, another upside-down triangle in which was a flame over a lamp, boxed in a square, surrounded by a circle, out of which, north, south, east, west, sprung lotus petals.

The Balls.

Cassius. The Second Son. Prince of Airen. Born but a soldier and now heir to the throne.

With a clatter, The Crystal and The Head shot together, clacked loudly, sparked marine fire and dropped as one tile with now the crystal in the center of the insignia.

The others snapped and rattled.

And with a strike of vermillion, The Sage mated with The Heart and fell to the altar, the wise hand now embedded in the center of the triangle on the sign.

And then there was a flash of green, The Shadow united with The Cock and fell to the alter, the shroud gone, a face with eyes wide open, lips curved into a small smile where the crescent moon had been.

It was that which made Ophelia emit a hushed whine she could not control before the blaze of coral took The Warrior tile straight to The Balls, and with a muted explosion, they dropped to the slab, the candle gone, a unicorn now standing proud in the center of the symbol.

The magic receded, and the altar was lit only by moonlight as the witches stared down.

They knew Aramus and Ha-Lah.

But now it was Farah and True.

Silence and Mars.

And Elena and Cassius.

There could be no worse coupling for Ophelia.

For *Elena*.

It was her deepest fear.

Realized.

Rebecca spoke first.

“I am sorry, my sister.”

“As am I.”

“As am I.”

“As am I.”

Ophelia gazed at the unicorn on the final tile for long moments, hoping its magic and abundance signified something promising, before she lifted her eyes to her sistren.

“It is done,” she announced.

It was not.

Not yet.

But it would be.

By every goddess and all things holy.

Ophelia just yearned deep into the core of her heart that none of those daughters suffered.

Overly much.

Especially her own.

But alas, for her own daughter she feared she would not be there to see.

## **Chapter Three**

### *The Second Son*

#### ***Prince Cassius Laird***

*Crown Prince's Bedchamber, Sky Citadel, Sky Bay*

*AIREN*

Cassius held his hand over the maid's mouth as he thrust inside her, his other hand tucked between her legs, his middle finger busy.

And effective, if the difficulty he was having containing her moans and whimpers and muted “Pleases” and “Mores” and “Harders” could be credited.

Fortunately, in short order, she climaxed.

Now, finally, he could see to himself.

This he did as swiftly as possible and with a grunt that he did not try to stifle and not only because it was not loud.

What had just happened had been...

Adequate.

He did not bow into her when he finished in order to recover, mostly because there was not much from which to recover.

Drawing breath, he pulled out, dropped her skirts that he'd been holding up with a forearm at the front, her hips had done that at the back, and stepped away from her where she held on to one of the posts of his bed.

He put both hands to the buttons of his leathers after he tucked his still-wet-and-hard cock inside. He'd wash her from him later, when she could not see.

"Your Grace," she whispered, her voice trembling.

"Thank you," he muttered, moving toward the door, continuing to button his trousers.

"Your Grace!" she called.

By the bloody gods, this was the part he hated the worst.

He turned eyes to her to see she had languid, but bright and hopeful eyes on him.

"It is...always so quick. I could...visit you in the night," she offered haltingly.

"No," Cassius declined abruptly, turned and strode from the room.

Only to practically run into Mac as he made his turn into the passageway seeing as his man was leaning, shoulders against the black stone of the citadel right by the door to Cassius's bedchamber, head turned toward Cassius, sly smile on his mouth.

"We should get you a professional, my brother. You'd climax a whole lot louder," Mac, or as his father had named him, Macrinus offered.

"I tire of my hand," Cassius murmured, continuing to walk down the wide passageway, his boots muted by the thick runner swirled in dark colors from black to charcoal to midnight with bare hints of silver.

If you had the time, which he rarely had, and you stood in the corridor and allowed your eyes to take it in, the long expanse of runner looked like a never-ending strip of the night sky.

In truth, all about him was dark. The black stone of the castle. The carpet. The wrought iron around the large, grand and ostentatious chandeliers dangling from chains along the ceiling. The long, heavy, midnight velvet draperies dressing the sides of the wide, spiked windows to his right. The black leather shirt, trousers and boots covering his and Macrinus's bodies.

Bloody dark.

The lot of it.

A physical metaphor for Cassius's life.

Mac fell in step beside him. "You know, it's not just a bodily function."

This he knew.

So very well.

Cassius just stopped himself from closing his eyes at just how much he knew precisely that and kept on without breaking stride.

Macrinus's tone was much altered when he began, "Brother—"

"Speak more on this topic, you'll be doing it through swallowing your teeth," Cassius bit out.

Mac gave it a moment, striding beside him, before he said, "I wasn't hanging about outside your room for an audible audition of the comely maid you've chosen, Cass. Your father sent me to get you."

At that, Cassius stopped short and turned to his friend.

"For fuck's sake, *why?*" he demanded.

"I don't know," Mac answered. "The earth is round. The sky is blue. His eggs weren't done to his liking this morning. He breathes. You breathe. I breathe. Does Gallienus need a reason to demand your presence?"

Unfortunately, his father did not and never had.

This being not only because the man was his father but because he was also king.

Cassius resumed walking.

Mac did as well.

"The tremor happened again last night," Macrinus noted unnecessarily.

"I know, Mac," Cass said on a sigh. "I felt it. The trolls and pixies and gnomes felt it. Even the mermaids and gogmagogs probably felt it."

"Well, my guess is, earthquakes don't happen every fortnight on the hour for months," Mac declared.

Not missing a step, Cassius spared him a glance, inquiring, "Do you think?"

Mac's heavy brows snapped together. "You're in a foul mood for a man who's just used a maid for good purpose."

Cassius stopped dead.

So did Mac and his brow had not cleared.

“You need to—” his friend began.

“Be careful how you finish that,” Cassius growled.

“Cass, it’s been six years,” Macrinus growled in return.

Cassius turned fully to him, lifting his brows and crossing his arms on his chest. “And this? This is something you know? Is this the amount of time it takes to heal after watching your wife grunt and sweat and scream and push and pray and *bleed* as she expels your daughter into your own gods-damned *bloody* hands? And then the last thing on this earth she does is smile at her wee babe, smile in your face, and then *die*?”

“You know I have no wife and you know I can’t imagine—”

“No,” Cassius grunted, turning, dropping his arms and resuming his gait. “You can’t. So cease speaking of it.”

“Liviana would not wish for you to go on like—”

His friend didn’t finish mostly because he had Cassius’s hand wrapped around his throat and he’d been slammed against the black stone wall in a passageway of the Sky Citadel, the castle of the King of Airen, situated in the capital city of that great and terrible realm.

“Do not,” he rumbled, his face an inch from Mac’s, “speak of what Liviana would wish.”

Mac didn’t fight.

He also didn’t give up.

“She would not wish it and you know it. She’d want you to find happiness and not with a bloody *maid*.”

Like what he did with that maid brought him happiness.

He hadn’t been truly happy, sadly even in his daughter’s presence, in six bloody years.

Cassius’s fingers squeezed. “I’m warning you, Mac.”

“And Aelia needs a mother,” Macrinus spat.

Dear gods, he could actually *feel* the blood swarming in his head.

“For the gods sakes, would you two break it up,” Nero called, and both men looked to the side to see their brother striding their way. “Gallienus is in a snit. Whatever this is, finish it later.”

Cassius let his hand drop and turned away from Mac. “He sent you too?”

“He’s called for all your lieutenants, and when you didn’t arrive, oh, about two seconds after Mac departed to get you, he started getting testy,” Nero returned. “Or...*testier*.”

Cassius’s head turned again toward Mac. “You did not share this.”

“Sorry, I was too busy being accosted to dive deeply into all of this morn’s news,” Macrinus retorted.

Cassius moved his attention to Nero who had joined them. “Why are you all there?”

“I’ve no clue. I also don’t much care outside of having things to do this morning, wishing to do them, therefore also wishing whatever this is to be done so I can go about doing them. In other words, will you two stop dawdling?”

On that, Nero turned and prowled in the direction he’d come.

“We’ll finish later, *not* with your hand around my throat,” Mac muttered.

“We’ll speak no more of it, with my hand at your throat or otherwise,” Cassius muttered in return and resumed walking, now following Nero.

Macrinus was wise enough to keep silent.

Indeed, he was wise most of the time.

It would seem when he was tired of seeing his brother suffer that his wisdom receded.

In fairness, if the table was turned, he could see himself intervening with Mac.

That table, however, was not turned.

They descended the stairs, hit the grand entryway with its threatening, spiked, intricate, wrought iron candelabrum that was the breadth of two men—two *tall* men—hanging over it.

They turned left, as Nero had done, into the Great Hall where Gallienus held court, as his father had before him, and his, and depressingly for centuries before that, their fathers.

The king sat in the large, midnight-velvet-cushioned, dark-wood chair which was intricately carved, tall steeples rising high at each side, several feet over his father’s head. This behind a long table set on a raised dais where, during feasts, or required dinners as summoned by the king (which were often), Cassius sat to his father’s right.

And his three wives surrounded them.

It was nauseating, not only being in his father’s presence during these times (or at all), but also that his father was a man who was so little of a man he could not find what he needed in one wife.

He had none of their love.

Just their greed, need for status, fear, or all three.

Fortunately, after his father’s first attempt, he did not demand his granddaughter attend him there.

He had a second son, a spare to the throne.

When he attempted to make his rule include his granddaughter, he learned he would not have even that.

Gallienus never again made that attempt.

As he walked through the tables where the appalling number of courtiers sat to dine when his father was in full king mode, which was nearly nightly, Cassius saw that, indeed, all of his men were around. His personal guard. And this had been true even when they were but simply soldiers.

Then again, they each thought of all as their own personal guard.

As it should be with soldiers.

Macrinus, of course. Nero as well. Otho. Antonius. Severus. And Hadrian.

Every one a general.

Every one had things to do.

Cassius knew whatever was to come would not be a blessing.

He stopped directly in front of his father, absolutely did not bow, but instead noted, “You summoned?”

Cassius endured the flash of displeasure from his father’s eyes and it was not difficult to do so.

“Before I even had breakfast served to me, the witch Fern demanded an audience,” his father began.

“Is she still alive? Or have you had her beheaded for her insolence?” Cassius asked drolly.

“I can have you beheaded for yours,” Gallienus snapped.

“The truth of the gods, I might welcome it for it’d put me out of my misery,” Cassius murmured.

“And what of Aelia?” Gallienus pressed snidely.

Cassius felt a sharp pang rend his heart.

“She has six fathers. She’ll be all right,” he returned.

“This is not getting us to where I wish us to be,” Gallienus noted hostilely.

“Please,” Cassius rolled a hand, “do proceed.”

“I’m delighted beyond measure I have your permission,” Gallienus rapped out.

Cass sighed.

“The witch Fern has shared that the tremors mean the Beast is being roused,” Gallienus announced.

Cassius’s back shot straight and he felt the air in the room turn thick as his men went alert.

“You jest,” Cass whispered.

“I wish I did. Alas, I do not. All of the witches have met. They’ve been trying to put a stop to it as well as discover who’s behind it. Someone is rousing the Beast. They mean for it to rise. To surface. For what purpose, I don’t know, and it doesn’t matter. As it seems they cannot stop this from happening, we must be prepared.”

“And how exactly do we prepare?” Cass demanded. “If lore is true, nearly the entire population of the continent of Triton fell to this Beast before they fled to Mar-el. It was only the Beast’s aversion to water that kept them safe. But it’s been so long, and there are so many incarnations to that story, we can’t begin to truly know how it happened. Some say magical forces banished it. Some say the water injured it and it slithered home to recover. Others say—”

“I know the lore, Cassius,” his father interrupted him. “I also know that the Great Coven was formed back then for this exact purpose. They’ve met over the millennia for other reasons, but there’s a plan they concocted in that ancient time that they’ve carefully nurtured over the centuries. And the time is nigh for them to put it into action.”

“And the plan is?” Cassius queried.

“King Mars will marry Wilmer’s niece, a girl named Silence.”

Cass did not at all like how this had started.

And he knew, irrefutably, that Mars was going to lose his mind at having to marry a Wodell.

“And how is this marriage—?”

“And Prince True will marry a Firenz woman called Farah.”

Sad for True, who many said was deeply in love with the second daughter of the Nadirii.

However, he couldn’t think on True because this wasn’t getting any better.

“Oh shite,” Cass heard Otho mutter behind him.

Yes, it was not getting any better.

Gallienus didn’t hesitate.

But he did look like saying the words made him ill.

“And you will marry Elena, second daughter to Ophelia of the Nadirii.”

He felt his brothers sidle closer to his back, but even so, there was no sound in a room that seemed stripped of its capacity to carry noise, so heavy was the silence.

Finally, Cass was able to control his fury enough to declare, “That cannot happen.”

“Apparently, it must.”

“She’s Nadirii.”

“Nauseatingly, this she is,” his father spat. “And her sister killed your brother, my son, the heir to my throne.”

This, Cassius could dispute and every man in that room, save his father, would dispute it.

Trajan died of pride.

Serena, first-born Princess of the Nadirii Sisterhood, had, indeed, inflicted a wound on Trajan that had ended being mortal.

But if he’d had it cleansed, stitched, tended, treated, and the proud fool had rested, perhaps a day, or better, three, or best, two weeks, he’d be of this earth.

Enraged Serena had wounded him, he’d refused even a cleansing, carrying on a battle that was entirely lost, doing this for three days, losing scores of men, eventually falling weak as the poison set in the wound, and after suffering greatly, dying.

Serena might brag as broadly as she could that she’d killed the heir to Airen, and she did brag, as was her way.

But Trajan had died, if not at his own hand, to his own prideful, reckless, unwise, irresponsible decisions, which was poetic, in its way, as in his life, he had made many.

There was not great love lost between brothers. Cass’s brothers were not of his blood.

And they were all in that room.

But this meant Cassius Laird was not what he wished to be, a general in his father’s army, free (for the most part) to live his life as he pleased without the yoke of his father’s wishes weighing at his neck before the yoke of ruling bore down on it.

Now, he was heir to the throne and facing just that until his dying breath.

“I’ll not marry her,” Cass said low.

His father gave him a sick smile. “Apparently, she’s a powerful witch whose power will grow momentarily with the injection of your seed.” His smile died. “And there is the matter of you siring me a grandson to secure the throne to the direct line for the next generation.”

Aelia was bright, observant, learned quickly, was kind of heart, generous of spirit, sound of logic and thus would make a stupendous queen.

Cassius would never suggest that while his father was breathing, or he would indeed face a noose.

Or a guillotine.

“You suggest the next in line have Nadirii blood,” he reminded Gallienus.

“At this point, I don’t care if he has mermaid blood,” Gallienus retorted.

“Nadirii don’t abide male children,” Cassius went on.

“She can’t exactly put a future king in a basket and set him outside some cottager’s home, now, can she?” Gallienus returned.

“They ceased doing that a century ago, Father. They’ve now learned to use magic to stop conceiving a male child.”

“Well, you’ll have to find some way to stop *her* from doing *that*, won’t you?” Gallienus snapped. “And I daresay Fern can help you handle it. She knows to serve her king well.”

She did at that.

Not a female in Airen didn’t know exactly how to serve their masters well.

Even, and perhaps especially, a powerful witch.

“The Airenzian will never accept a Nadirii queen,” Cassius pointed out.

His father flipped a hand. “They’ll have no choice. They can accept her, or they can run from the Beast.” He shook his head. “But it really matters not if they accept her. Once the Beast is dispatched, she can reside in the dungeons and her cunt will still be there. You can visit her, sire a son, take him, and she can rot there for all I care.”

Cassius drew breath into his nose, and wondered, not for the first time, if his mother had found a man who looked much like his father and that was his true sire.

She was very dead, therefore he’d never know.

Oddly, Gallienus’s tone gentled. “It is done, my son. There’s aught to do about it. The others will have learned this news or will be learning it soon. We have no choice. We must ride for Firenze soon, leaving our staff behind to prepare for a royal wedding.”

Trajan’s decision to battle on wounded by a woman meant this was Cassius’s life.

He had no choice.

In anything.

But with a fury beginning to boil in him the strength he had not felt since he roared his lament when the life left his wife's body, he realized he was heir to a bloody throne and yet utterly powerless.

Including who he would, or would absolutely *not*, take to wife.

## **Chapter Four**

### *The Bluestocking*

#### ***Lady Silence Mattson***

*Study Corridor, First Floor, Bower Manor, The Arbor*

WODELL

I walked down the corridor, my feet in their slippers silent on the carpets.

I'd felt it in the night, the tremor. It brought a chill of fear and foreboding, as it had done now for months.

Even as the sensation of the earth moving was getting stronger, these feelings normally receded, perhaps slowly, but they did.

This time, they grew. So much, I was not able to regain sleep.

Now it was early evening of the next day and my father's house had seen much activity.

Including a visit from a royal messenger, straight from the king, which caused a flurry of activity not only from the servants, but from my mother and father as well.

As usual, I had not been a part of it.

So, as usual, I had to use certain means to discover what was happening.

This I did, wending my way toward my father's study, where I heard his voice, always loud and thus it traveled, as well as my mother's, which was neither.

I heard this long before anyone I knew would hear it.

It was an oddity of mine, one of many, this unnatural hearing.

I'd long since learned to hide it, just as I had long since learned to do what I did once I'd stolen even closer.

Shifting into a recess in that corridor of my father's castle, one that held a table with a bust of some proud, puffed out, male ancestor of mine that for some reason commissioned a sculptor to

sculpt him while his lips sneered, I focused my mind, experienced the tingle up my spine, and I drew my cloak over me.

It shimmered just a moment before I felt the ethereal shadow overtake me, warm and snug.

Truth, I would live shrouded by my precious shadow if I could.

Not to be seen.

Not to be known.

Naught to be expected of me.

Naught for others to be disappointed about in me.

And mostly, naught for me to be disappointed about in others.

“Johan, we simply cannot ask this of Silence,” my mother said shakily, taking me from my thoughts, and I focused my attention on their conversation.

“We won’t be *asking* anything,” my father retorted. “It is her duty to her king, her father, her title, this very *house*. And Vanka, it cannot be borne that you don’t realize how bloody opportune this is. The chit has demonstrated we’d never find her a match, until now, and not surprisingly, it isn’t *her* who made it.”

My breath snagged.

A match?

My father continued.

“Now she’ll be wed to *a king*.”

Oh, by the goddesses, *no*.

Was King Gallienus looking for another wife?

He seemed to collect them at an alarming frequency, each one younger than the last.

Could he—?

My mother interrupted my rampant thoughts.

“It’s only in his father’s reign before him that land has even become a degree of civilized. They’re still barbarians.”

But...what?

The Airenzian could indeed be considered barbarians, if pressed. Their treatment of females left quite a bit to be desired. If history told it true, it was actually worse now after the Night of the Fallen Masters those centuries ago, when the Nadirii Sisterhood was born.

But mostly, it was civilized. They had laws (however, not reasonable ones for women). They had taxes. Schools. Hospitals. And they had the best engineers and architects in Triton, so they even had running water in their abodes, and in some, you could turn a lever, and it would run *hot*.

I couldn't say in my several journeys there that it was not austere (though the countryside was lovely, the vineyards, olive groves, vast fields of grain, and the lovely, large Cairngorms Lake was astonishingly beautiful).

However, Sky Bay was actually quite terrifying, the whole city built from that glinting black stone. Of course, the buildings were beautiful, in their way, considering the talent of the architects that designed them. They were still frightening.

And the severe citadel carved into the side of the highest peak overlooking the bay was *definitely* terrifying (though also quite lovely, in a daunting manner).

But for all intents and purposes, Airen was even more civilized than Wodell.

Unless you were female.

Though, even females in Wodell (and, I'd heard, in Firenze) didn't have it like the Nadirii.

Ah, to be a Nadirii.

I'd often thought I'd do quite well with the Sisterhood.

Though I didn't reckon I'd be very good with a sword.

Or a bow.

Or a staff.

Or daggers.

Alas, perhaps the Nadirii was not for me.

"They're also the richest nation in Triton," my father said, interrupting my thoughts.

I blinked into my shadow.

The richest nation in Triton was...

"The Firenz don't practice fidelity to their mates," my mother remarked sharply.

...Firenze!

"Not the men, *nor* the women," she went on. "And they have those retched communal baths where they all, *women and men*, bathe naked...*together*. They freely engage in that *terrible* smoke. And the violence practiced there is irrational. They fight amongst themselves, *liberally*. Since his ascendance, the king himself has quelled *three* coup attempts. These happening in the

first two years after he assumed the throne. But even if in the last three there have been no rebellions, there still has been fighting. Their clans regularly—”

“*You* don’t have to live there,” my father noted.

Shockingly, my mother’s voice was rising. “But *my daughter* will!”

“By the goddess,” I breathed.

The messenger from the king.

I was to marry King Mars of Firenze.

Balls and begorrah!

How had this come about?

“By the goddess,” I repeated on a whisper.

“Yes, she will,” my father declared.

Oh, by the goddess.

*I was to marry King Mars of Firenze.*

“He will not take to her,” my mother snapped, and my heart lurched.

My father had very little use for me.

This was because my mother could not give him what he wanted, a son, or even a second child who was more to his liking than me. He had tried, in his ways (which were not enjoyable), to make me the daughter he wished me to be, the Countess of the Arbor he felt fit the title.

But I preferred my own company, truth be told. Or if I had it, the company of my mother, who was dear to me and in her way showed I was the same to her. Or Estrilda, my Tril, who had been my lady’s maid for years now.

I liked people.

I was heartened by companionship.

I just did not enjoy groups and definitely not crowds. It was fun to watch, for a spell, but after that, it became boring and sometimes could feel oppressive.

I therefore preferred reading to attending large dinner parties. I did not enjoy dancing a’tall. I further did not enjoy making banal discourse with suitors (or, really, anyone).

This, indeed, was perhaps my least favorite thing in the world. And I’d long since learned if I attempted something not banal, exposing I had read many books, traveled across Wodell, Airen, even had been amongst The Enchantments of the Nadirii once on a state visit with my cousin, Prince True. Or if I shared about the many times I had been in the presence or at the courtly

affairs of our very own King Wilmer, and I had watched and listened well, learning much, my dinner or dance companions were shocked.

I had become known as The Bluestocking.

When I was not known as The Mouse.

I did not find this insulting (though, the second wasn't my favorite).

My father found it infuriating.

He wanted a bright, lively (but empty-headed) daughter who made a spectacular match to build the power of his title, which would carry forward to my child through me.

Instead, he got me. A quiet, watchful mouse whose head was far from empty.

But now it seemed even my mother did not think I could turn the eye of a king.

By the goddess, I wasn't that difficult to look upon, was I?

I thought my ebony hair was rather lovely. Very long, it wasn't stick straight, it had nice curls. It also had a rather impressive gleam.

And I'd always liked my eyes. Even my father said I had extraordinary eyes (albeit he said this grudgingly). I'd never seen my eyes in another's face, not *ever*.

Silver.

Not a blue that could be construed as gray.

*Silver.*

Polished.

Shining.

Dare I say my own self...*luminous*.

I knew the servants (and others) whispered some male ancestor of mine had been able to charm a mermaid (or, perhaps, more shockingly, my mother a mermale), for there was no other explanation for my eyes.

(I didn't mind these whispers, by the by. If I had mermaid blood, that would explain a lot.)

Not to mention my skin wasn't bad a'tall. Nary a blemish. Pale to porcelain, if I was out in the elements, or had made some effort, what I thought was a becoming rose would tint my cheeks.

I wasn't unsightly and the abundance of suitors I still had regardless of the fact I demonstrated I had a brain twixt my ears would demonstrate this as truth.

At least to my thinking.

"It's my understanding he has no choice," my father replied.

“The Firenz women are known for their shocking beauty. They are tall. Lush. He will not be best pleased with the beauty our Silence can give him, even if it is most remarkable in a variety of ways.”

I settled as that kindness, coming from my mother, was not surprising and part of it not being surprising was that it was lovely.

My mother was often kind like that (and gentle and thoughtful), with me and everybody.

That was, she was like that when my father wasn't around.

“I prayed to the gods for years to give her at least another inch, though I would have preferred five,” my father murmured. “At the best of times, you can barely see the girl.”

Sadly, he had not noticed that this was due to an effort I made, not simply because I was petite.

But I had seen some Firenz on occasion, men, often with their women, who had come through Wodell to hunt or acquire wool or attend our merchants.

They were all uncommonly tall, like their brother nation of Airen were.

Indeed, although I had only seen him from afar—and even though True was exceptionally tall, his build was lean—therefore Prince Cassius, with his height and bulk, seemed like a veritable giant.

The Firenz men were just like that.

And their women were far from dainty.

“Though, if I know a Firenz, at the very least he'll enjoy her curves,” my father carried on.

One could say I did have curves.

“Johan, I beg you,” my mother did indeed beg. “Speak with my brother. Ask him to find someone else to make this alliance. I know he's angered King Mars...”

This he had.

King Wilmer, my uncle, had angered the King of Firenze. Repeatedly.

It was a daft thing to do.

Everyone knew their warriors were unbeatable. They might fight amongst themselves, but when threatened, their clans allied and the front they made was invincible.

Even Serena of the Nadirii, who didn't seem to have trouble picking a fight with anyone, wasn't stupid enough to go against the Firenz.

Uncle Wilmer picked fights with them all the time.

“...but the Firenz are boisterous and rowdy,” my mother continued. “They have more celebrations in a month than both Wodell and Airen together have in a year. They live *so very differently* than we do. The shock of culture change would be difficult for our Silence to countenance. She would not fit. She’s safe here, with me, you, Tril, her amusements. She’s our daughter. It’s our duty to keep her safe.”

“She’s our daughter. It’s *her* duty to strengthen our title,” my father returned. “But you heard the messenger, Vanka. The Beast rises. The coven has made the matches. It is out of Wilmer’s hands. It’s not even in Mars’s hands. It’s definitely not in *our* hands. She must wed Mars. It’s not simply her duty to me, her king, her country, but to all of Triton.”

I heard my father, but I was having difficulty breathing.

The Beast rises?

The tremors.

Oh *faith*, the Beast *rises*.

And I, somehow, in the misfortune that seemed to make up the entirety of my life, had to wed the king of a barbaric, but wealthy, nation in order to...what?

It was not lost on me I could hear quite well. I had also learned some time ago that I read more simply regarding a person’s expression than anyone I knew. And testing this mermaid theory, I was, indeed, able to dunk my head in the bath and hold my breath for long periods of time.

And then there was my shadow.

But I was no Nadirii, that was for certain. That Sisterhood of Warriors carried most of the magic in all the land. They’d amassed it ages ago to instigate the Night of the Fallen Masters. Even the weakest of their witches was stronger than any sorceress of Wodell.

But it was not lost on me I held magic.

And this must be the reason why I was destined to be consort to a barbarian king.

“But we have an opportunity,” my father decreed. “We will make the best of this match as we can. Our daughter will be his wife, and it is known wide, even if fidelity is not expected, a Firenz warrior dotes on his chosen one. We will make the most of this with Firenz rubies, saffron, silk. We will be the richest house in Wodell. She finally has come to mean something to my title, *her* title. And if this is true, if she can make an alliance that will somehow defeat the Beast should it rise, she, and this house, will be *legend*, my Vanka. Not to mention, we will also be *rich*.”

“And you’d sacrifice your own daughter to such aspirations of *greed*,” my mother stated with disgust.

There was a moment of silence before my father’s voice came again, and now it was gentle.

Therefore now, I knew that he had approached my mother and was cupping her cheek in that tender way he had that, even with the difficult relations I shared with my sire, always melted something inside me.

“I very early came to love you, my beautiful wife,” he said. “It was impossible not to, and not simply due to your great beauty.”

Yes, I felt that something melt inside me.

“But you know, my dearest love,” he went on, “that your father made that same sacrifice of you. Yes, he was king, but you were the seventh of seven daughters, his chest was running low due to war with the Firenz, and the Arbor is the richest estate in the land. No other of your sisters made a better match, even begotten by the king. Our marriage was arranged to further strengthen his house, his chest, his alliances, and thus, also his title. Now, shh...” he shushed her, and I knew she’d opened her mouth to speak. “It is how things are done and you know it. So think not of what may come for Silence. At the very least, fates are explained for she is no frivolous chit with no thoughts of her own. She is canny and vigilant. This will aid her in the months to come.”

“This is true,” my mother murmured.

“And she may be legend, and this might not be something she desires for herself, but I have seen her disappointment that she consistently disappoints me,” my father continued. But this was not true. My disappointment was that *he* disappointed *me*. “She will be glad of this match. She will be glad she has something important to do. She will be glad she’s of service to her parents, her country, her continent. She will do her duty, my dearest. And in however way it comes about, in the end, it will be fine.”

To that, my mother whispered something even I could not hear, and I sensed their discussion was ending.

Therefore, I scanned the corridor with eyes and ears before I released my shadow, stepped out of the recess and my inanimate (which was often how I preferred it) company of the bust, and hurried along the hall toward the stairs to get to my rooms.

I did this not sharing my father’s sentiments.

First, the Beast was rising and that took more than a few moments of reflection.

I'd heard tales of the Beast as far back as I could cogitate, these coming from my nanny (who was a harridan, for what nanny would share such stories with a wee child? I remembered being very happy when my mother sacked her, and I fancied myself kind-hearted, but I was not sorry to see her go). And then spoken of freely around fires for no purpose but for the teller to spook the listeners.

But such tales always ended with the fact the Beast would someday again be roused. He would rise. And he would feast on wee children and snack on the babes and tear the women asunder with his horrifying shaft and rip the heads from the men, drinking their blood from their necks and making the women weave the hair together so he could wear them as a necklace.

Larger than a gogmagog by thrice, faster on foot than an eagle in flight, able to spew venom from his mouth—venom that with a single drop touching the skin could stun entire villages into immobility for days, beings wasting away from no food or water, unable to save themselves, frozen in the poison as still as statutes.

His rising was not to be borne.

And apparently, I somehow played some part in stopping it.

Which, frankly, scared the knickers off me.

Far more than being wed to the barbarian King Mars of Firenze.

But it must be said, if not equally as terrifying (for nothing was as frightening as the Beast), it was still bloody terrifying.

I did not want to be legend.

I didn't like any attention a'tall.

It seemed I had no choice in that.

Worse, the king of a neighboring country who evidently didn't exactly get along with my king (it must be said, King Wilmer did some rash things, he truly needed new counsel, I knew that even before True shared with me his (vast) frustrations about this very topic) had no choice in it either.

This absolutely did not bode good tidings.

What was worse, when I entered my bedchamber, I saw Tril standing there, her pretty face pale, her chignon at the back of her head coming loose like she'd been worrying it, and her mouth instantly moved.

“I’ve had orders from your father. I’m so very sorry, but we need to make haste in a wedding trousseau, my lovely. I’ll explain on our way, but we must needs get to town. We have lace, satin and velvet to look at and it will take far less time for us to go to them than for me to summon them to us.”

I stared into her charming, but anxious, hazel eyes.

Balls.

And bloody *begorrah*.

## Chapter Five

### *The Damned*

***King Aramus Nereus***

*Throne Room, Keel Castle, Nautilus*

*MAR-EL*

Aramus felt like a bloody damned fool sitting on his ridiculous throne.

He never sat his throne.

If he was not on his ship, marauding, or hunting, he was in a pub, drinking, or at a table, feasting, or at a wench, doing other things.

And it didn’t help that his men stood around the foot of it—or the eight-foot high sirens-damned *pedestal* of the thing—bloody snickering.

“Be gone,” he ordered.

“And miss this?” his man Bondi asked.

Fuck, but if he relished the idea of marking his wife’s perfect skin, something he did not, he’d have the bitch brought up, tied to the pedestal under his ludicrous throne and order her flogged.

“Cap, not sure it’s a good idea to sit your throne,” Tintagel called up to his seat. “Also not sure I need to remind you she’s not cowed by authority.”

Ha-Lah was not cowed by anything.

At first, he liked this about his wife.

Being married to the bloody woman for six months and not even tasting her cunt with his tongue, not feeling its wet even on the tip of a finger, this feeling was waning.

“Tint, take the men and get out,” he ordered his most level-headed seaman.

“Let’s go, men,” Tint said without delay.

There you go.

Level-headed.

“Tint, my brother, this is bound to be good,” Oreti, Aramus’s *least* level-headed seaman protested.

Xi was looking up at his king, thus catching his expression, and therefore repeating after Tint, “Let’s go, men.”

Aramus got looks from Nissi, Navagio, and Catedrais. They read their captain and king and spared no time rounding up the dissenters.

Aramus watched as they walked across the cavernous expanse of the room, their boots sounding, then echoing in the massive space.

He had learned, at his father’s knee, a father who sat in that very chair with Aramus’s arse on a cushion on the wide dais surrounding it, sheltered by the six colossal ibex-whale horns that formed the base which measured at least fifteen feet across, the ten-foot tall tips curved around it, that the throne of the King of Mar-el had been built to intimidate anyone who walked in that room.

Ibex-whales, outside angmostros (though, thankfully, those massive eel creatures did not have horns), were the hardest thing in the sea to kill. That throne up on its five-foot wide, eight-foot high pedestal carved out of coral (that also had the stairs up to the damned thing pared out) having the mighty horns of three of said beasts was impressive even to Aramus, who’d killed four times that many in his lifetime.

But this was lost on just about everyone, considering the only being on the mainland he liked was Prince Cassius, thus Cassius and his men were the only ones who’d walked into that fucking room, and none of that lot were intimidated by anything, so it was a waste.

Days of yore, all right.

Now it was just a place the bounden had to mop since now, they might accept visitors on their shores to attend their merchants or collect fish to take to the mainland, but no one not of Mar-el came inland.

And no one not Mar-el came to his castle.

On this thought, one side of the two enormous doors that were three stories tall and thus, if one of his men wasn't opening it, it took at least two bounden to do it, opened, and he saw the tall, slender, lithe, bloody-sirens-damned *regal* body of his wife wander through.

Born to be queen, if that body was anything to go by.

And her demeanor.

And bloody fucking *everything* about her.

She wandered amongst the four-story high columns that held up the domed ceiling, each column's width spiraled up with identical carvings of what looked like floating vines of seaweed.

And she did this like she had all bloody day.

The dress she wore clung to her body. Sleeveless. Sparkling. With some lace, some see-through sea-green at her calves, and a drape of netting at her middle that could be construed as being ready to cast for fish. But it was hung with some coins that flashed, torn in places that looked deliberate, and the whole fucking thing made a man wish to take long moments dissecting it visually before he ripped it off with his hands.

She stopped at the foot of the pedestal, tipped back her head, and the abundance of long, springy, soft, tight, black ringlets tipped back with her as she gazed up at him with her big, crystal-blue eyes.

"You've returned," she said in her siren's voice.

And *that*, Aramus had determined, along with her hair, those eyes, her elegant hands, her perfect *lait café* skin, her long-arse legs, and her rounded behind, had bewitched him.

Unfortunately for her, through her own endeavors, he was bewitched no more.

"A week ago," he grunted.

"Ah," she murmured disinterestedly.

Gods.

"We had another wave last night."

He noted the tension that hit her shoulders at his announcement.

This was because she knew, as they had, and those waves were difficult to miss. As they'd been doing for months, it came but minutes after they felt the tremor. Fortnight after fortnight, stronger and stronger with each wave hitting the western shores of Mar-el.

The cities, ports, and villages there had been built to withstand just that—waves, and the worst of storms. And his people had learned to batten, long before the regularity of the current strikes.

But even being hewn from the rock of Mar-el to withstand such occurrences, doors, shutters, windows, even latched strongly and barred even stronger, couldn't withstand a tidal.

And Aramus knew that was coming. Each wave higher and higher, it would take but months before they would face a tidal. Regularly. Every two weeks.

His people were seafarers. Their life was the sea. They could swim. Surf. Ride any wave in boat or by body.

They could not ride a tidal.

No one could.

“Lena has come to see me,” he told his wife.

She could not hide behind disinterest at that, as she wouldn't. She was a bloody witch herself. The most powerful of her kind having an audience of the king, her husband, would be of interest.

“The Beast rises,” he shared.

Her perfectly formed, puffy lips parted.

Right.

And there were those.

Those lips had bewitched him as well.

Bloody hell.

“It seems our marriage was not the greatest beauty of our island mated with her king, as it is now and has been for centuries. Apparently, the fates chose you for me, as you and I consummated will assist to beat the Beast,” he declared.

With that, she shuttered herself away.

“This is not a tale I tell to pry open your legs,” he bit out. “Lena spoke it herself.”

“Then I'll need to speak with her,” she replied. “For that's frankly ridiculous.”

“Indeed,” he agreed, staring down at her indifferently. “Great beauty, cold fish. My desire for your charms has faded as the months since our wedding have receded into memory and you've kept those charms from me.”

If he was not wrong, those ringlets swayed with a slight jerk of her head.

Aramus no longer cared if he wounded her.

She was his wife and he knew the reasons she withheld were far more than “frankly ridiculous.”

They were, if read a certain way, fucking treasonous.

“But friction, if not passion, will seal the deal,” he concluded.

She had her side partially to him, but at that, she turned to face him full on.

“And as you rode the seas prior to your return a week ago, how many beasts did you kill?” she asked.

He sighed.

“Aramus, you sit on a throne made of the horns of the most magnificent creatures in all of Triton,” she stated impatiently. “Perhaps all of the earth. Did you bring the oil and meat and bone for lamps and perfumes and candles and Airenzian corsets?” She tossed an elegant hand up his way as her crystal gaze heated with ire. “Those horns represent three *fathers*.”

“These horns are five hundred years old,” he ground out.

“So, five hundred years ago, calves went without their sires, as they probably went without their mothers, though no horns could be displayed from the mothers to pointlessly boast of the might of their murderers.”

He sat back on plush cushions that were bunched at his back against the ornate gold that made his throne.

And he sought patience.

Finding at least some of it, he said what he had been saying most every time he was confronted with his wife.

And he decided to make one last go of it, therefore he tried to do it gently.

“Ha-Lah, it is not lost on you, since you are Mar-el and have lived on this isle since your first breath, this is the way of our people and has been since history has been recorded.”

“And, Your Grace,” he was not surprised she returned without a hint of patience, “it should not be. Not the whales. Not the dolphins. Not the octopus. I’m telling you, they do not only think, they *feel*.”

“I have sailed the seas since I was a lad, wife, and this is not true.”

“It is.”

“It is not.”

“Does a cow not keel when her bull is taken? When her calf is cornered?” she asked.

He shifted in his seat for the she-beasts did.

It was the most heinous thing he'd ever heard.

And every seaman knew, you did not take a cow if her bull was near, not of any type of whale. You'd lose your ship, and your life, if you enraged the bull when you were close.

"You stop the killing, you will find me not cold, my king," she shared, not for the first time. "And you stop the killing, I daresay you make allies of the sea you would never have imagined."

Now *that* was frankly ridiculous.

"And what will fuel our lamps, make our soaps, fertilize our soils, feed our people, our animals?" he demanded. "What will we sell to add to the treasury to keep our roads clear, roofs on our hospitals, arrows in our quivers?"

"Something else, something from the mainland," she returned. "They have oil. They have more animals who naturally make fertilizer. Grain by the bushel. Spices—"

"Cease," he bit. "We do not trade with them, they trade with *us*."

"But why?"

"You forget, my wife, my *sister*, they cast us to this isle years ago when *that* isle was *ours* and they conquered it and wrested it from us, banishing our people here and doing it *knowing* we would not survive. Mar-el's rocky shores dig deep inland. It does not have vast tracks to roam sheep and cow and sow seeds. We survived on the blessing of the great god Triton. His wife, our goddess, the beneficent Medusa. The spare sympathies of the sirens. They gave us the blessing of the seas. The bounty of the *whales*."

"The ire you hold is simply because we were defeated and you cannot abide the idea of Mar-el in defeat," she retorted on a lift of her chin.

There was the treason.

Aramus ground his teeth.

His wife was not done.

"But even if that is so, now, millennia later, you hold tight to these transgressions that did not befall you, or me, your father or my mother, your *grandfather* or my *grandmother*, but beings who are no longer even bones in the earth, but long since ash who have mingled with the rock and the mud. You do this when we hardly suffered. We not only bested their banishment, *we own the seas*. It was the *fates* who brought us to this isle, my king. It was the fates who brought us *home*."

Aramus didn't like it, but he couldn't exactly argue that.

They had not flourished on the mainland.

On this isle, they had grown prosperous and they had grown fierce.

His wife intoned just that. "We are the mightiest of all the kingdoms. We don't clash in their silly skirmishes, losing man and blade and blood. Our fleets grow larger, our men and women strong and healthy and *thriving*. They've long since ceased attempting to raid our shores, even find their way east of our island, for they can't pass our armadas *and they know it*. They can't even send a ship with their goods across the sea for trade *unless we allow it*. If a vessel from the Northlands or the Southlands from across the Green Sea comes, it is *we* who decide if they sail through our waters."

Aramus couldn't argue this either because it was all true.

Ha-Lah was not quite finished.

"We can use the bounty of our pearls, the treasure wrested by our raiders, sell the vast *fleets* of ships collected from the seas—"

He had to put an end to this.

She spoke blasphemy.

All of it.

"This is our insurance," he clipped.

"This is our *treasure*, our *due*, our *commodities*, and our *reward* for not allowing them to *best us*. You do not bow in victory, Your Grace. You crow it to the heavens and hold it over those defeated."

Aramus said nothing for part of him felt, uncomfortably, he couldn't argue that either.

It would seem when the fierceness went out of her beautiful features, and they gentled, his wife, too, had decided to seek patience and for the first time in their acquaintance, reach him a different way.

"I am not the only one who thinks this way, my husband," she said softly.

"And you touch the pulse of all Mar-el?" he asked curtly.

Though he knew she didn't, he also knew she spent most of her time out and about in Nautilus when he was gone (and even when he was ashore).

So she undoubtedly knew better than he.

She shook her head, which shook her shining curls. “No. But our coffers grow, and it takes months for a ship to cross the Green Sea and come back with coin for our goods, and different goods for our people. It takes nearly half a year to get to The Mystics.”

“You tell me things I know,” he replied.

“It takes less than a day to sail to Triton,” she stated carefully. And even more carefully, watching him closely, she finished, “They banished us centuries ago. It is our king who keeps us banished.”

His wife said no more.

But it was safe to say, especially with that last, he was now at his end.

He stood and walked to the edge of the dais, staring down at his bride.

“It is my duty as king of my people to keep them safe. To build their wealth. To protect our secrets. To guard our magicks. It is also my duty as king to provide an heir, which, wife, I will do, with your cooperation, or without. And now, it’s my duty to shield them from the tidals, the threat of the Beast rising, and this I will do as well, sewing my seed *in you*.”

She glared up at him, her exquisite face no longer gentle, but set.

“Lena shares that we will need to attend the weddings of the King of Firenze, the Prince of Wodell, and Prince Cassius of Airen, all happening to bring about the prophecy so we can know peace. *That* is what I will give to those who abide on the mainland. And I will only do it in order to protect my sirens-damned *own*.”

Ha-Lah said naught, just continued to glare.

He continued to speak.

“Amass your chests with appropriate garments. Arrange for your servants to travel and attend you. We set sail in a week and we’ll be gone months. And I’ll warn you, you have until the time our feet hit Firenze to make your decision, wife. Or I’ll make it for you.”

She continued to glare up at him for long moments before she demanded, “Am I free to leave?”

He crossed his arms on his chest and jerked up his chin.

At that, she whirled and strode much faster, the skirts of her gown drifting like blades of sea lettuce around her calves and feet, and in far less time than she’d made the trek to his throne, she disappeared through the mighty doors.

To the truth, he didn't quite credit Lena's words of that morning, and wouldn't have, if the waves were not hitting with regularity, the tremors forewarning them.

But Aramus knew something not many did.

Something his father had shared with him very late in his training, in fact, close to the great last king's passing.

And that something was that the Beast did not make this isle those many years ago because water harmed it or because the Beast feared the salt, the wet, the ibex-whales or even the angmostros or sirens.

It was confounded in arriving at his isle for a wholly different reason.

And if his wife and he, Mars and his future bride, True and his intended, and Cassius and his female warrior did not mate...

They were all damned.

## Chapter Six

### *The Lore*

#### ***Frey Drakkar***

*Adela Tree Glade, Outside Fyngaard*

*LUNWYN*

*Northlands*

Frey Drakkar stood in the snow, shielded by the elven mist, watching the adela tree before him glow as the diminutive shapes formed at its base, touched it, and grew to human proportions.

He looked to his left at his son, Viktor.

Vik showed no surprise at this magic, not anymore. As the next Frey in line, even if he didn't hold that Keerian name, his first, as his father did, his son had been attending his meetings with the elves for the last fifteen years, since he was ten.

Frey looked back to the elves who were now standing in the snow, with one having gotten close.

"My lord Frey," Nillen, the Speaker of the Elves, murmured.

"Nillen," Frey greeted.

Nillen looked to Frey's son. "My lord Viktor, my other Frey."

Vik grinned at the elf. “Nillen.”

Nillen dipped his chin and stated, “Congratulations are premature, but I extend them to you for your upcoming coronation.”

Frey drew in breath.

It was time.

His son was twenty-five.

When he turned twenty-six, he would become King of Lunwyn, taking over for his grandmother, who Frey himself had sat on that throne.

Queen Aurora was still sharp, and as savvy as she had been two and a half decades ago.

But Viktor Drakkar was ready to rule.

This did not mean Frey did not still see him as the dark-headed boy in short pants dashing around the decks of The Finnie with a wooden sword, learning swordplay from Frey’s men...and his own mother.

It was just that now, he was as tall as his father, nearly as broad, the elves attended him, and they both had command of the dragons.

Not to mention, he had his grandmother’s cunning, his father’s strength, his mother’s charm and the loyalty to his country of all three.

So yes, it was time.

Viktor gave a short bow. “Thank you, Nillen.”

Nillen again dipped his chin then looked to Frey, and his expression had Frey bracing.

“I have news of great import,” Nillen announced.

“And I have ears so let us hear it,” Frey invited.

“The Beast rises.”

Frey stared at the elf in his blue cap with its white feather, his icy eyes, his pointy ears, and he could not believe his own.

“Do you mean the Beast across the Green Sea?” Frey asked.

“The exact,” Nillen confirmed.

“’Tis only lore,” Frey stated.

“Regrettably, it is not,” Nillen refuted.

“By the gods,” Frey whispered.

“That can’t be,” Viktor declared.

“I am sorry, my young lord,” Nillen said to Frey’s son. “It can, and it *is*.”

“It’s been—” Frey began.

“Over three thousand years,” Nillen finished for him.

Vik shifted beside him.

“What magic is this?” Frey demanded.

“We are unsure. He has been a mystery to us as well. We believe it to be a sorcerer, very powerful. So much power, he is hidden. Even from the elves. Feedings, as he did back then when he made the surface, blood, this through sacrifice. Torture, in this case rape—”

“Fucking hell,” Vik bit out.

“Collaborators,” Nillen carried on, “who performed these rituals for centuries, which did naught but stir the Beast. It is this sorcerer, his seed mixed with the blood, torture and sacrifice, that rouses the creature.”

“And you don’t know who he is?” Frey asked.

“We don’t even think *he* knows who he is,” Nillen answered. “Though we know he does not know what he does. We feel he thinks to rouse the Beast, surface him, and control him. But not even the elves could control that monster. Not the sirens or the fairies or the Green Men or the gods or goddesses of that realm. Certainly not the false gods of the scholars who reside there. And my lords, if he is not stopped, this time, he will traverse the sea.”

“Bloody *fuckin*g hell,” Frey clipped out.

“*Can* it be stopped?” Viktor queried.

Nillen tipped his head to the side. “There is a prophecy. It is our reading the witches of that realm have initiated its commencement. But we fear they don’t understand where the true power lies,” Nillen shared.

“And the true power?” Frey prompted.

“They facilitate the matings of the four most powerful witches of that realm to the four most powerful warriors,” Nillen explained.

“This sounds bloody familiar,” Frey muttered irritably.

“Indeed, but it is not the matings, my lord—” Nillen began.

“It’s true love,” Frey deduced.

Nillen nodded. “The passion they share will surely augment their power, all of them, in the females, their magic, in the males, their strength and invulnerability. But they must come to love each other, Frey Drakkar. Or all will be lost.”

“And what are we to do about this?” Frey asked.

“You command the dragons. If the Beast rises, they will, as ever, be indestructible. But they alone cannot defeat him.”

“And their fire, can it destroy the Beast?”

Nillen shook his head. “Slow it, perhaps. But if one should get within arm’s reach, the Beast can send it nearly back to Lunwyn with one swing.”

Slowing it wasn’t much.

But it was something.

And they’d need something if even half of the lore of that Beast was true.

Including the fact it was immune to dragonfire. Not a being on that earth was immune from the fire of his dragons.

“Where the dragons go, I go. Or Vik goes,” Frey reminded the elf.

Nillen dipped his chin. “This is so, my lord Frey Drakkar.”

Well, one thing could be said about this, his gods-damned son and the future king of his country was not going to cross the bloody Green Sea.

One other thing could be said.

Finnie, his wee wife, Lunwyn’s Winter Princess until Vik found a wife and made a daughter, was going to be all for a voyage across the Green sea.

Because no matter the venture, Princess Seofin Drakkar rushed to face it.

And further, she would never allow her husband to leave, even on the most dangerous mission, without her at his side.

Not ever.

Bloody.

Fucking.

*Hell.*

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