

THE
WOLF
AND THE
CROWN
OF
BLOOD

ELIZABETH MAY

♦ Daphne Press



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For those who have always pondered the question:
If villain bad, why villain hot?

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

*A glossary of terms can be found
at the end of the book.*

The Wolf and the Crown of Blood is a dark fantasy romance. It has more mature themes, strong language, sexually explicit scenes, and graphic content than my previous books. It is not intended for those under the age of eighteen.

Evander, the main male protagonist, is a morally black bastard who does terrible things. If you're looking for a hero, you won't find it here.

Bryony, the main female protagonist, comes from a family bound to divine ritual sacrifice. Readers sensitive to depictions of self-harm, ritual suicide, suicidal ideation, and familial violence should approach with caution.

Additional content warnings for:

- Graphic violence with extreme gore and body horror
- Trauma and PTSD
- War crimes and massacres
- Substance abuse
- Mention of sexual assault.

The relationship depicted is a dark romance, with content warnings for:

- Emotional manipulation

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Dominance and submission

Rough play

Power dynamics that blur ethical lines

Darker intimate content with dubious consent, blood play,
knife play, breath control, impact play (spanking), primal
play, and consensual pain/bruising.

As always, a full list of content notes can be found on my website.

ETERNALS OF SCILLARI

Alexios—God of Storms

Also known as: Storm; Eternal of
Asteria (the Court of Storms)

Primary powers: weather manipulation, control
over lightning, some psychic abilities

Severin—God of Death

Also known as: the Dark King; Wraith;
Eternal of Nyholm (the Dark Court)

Primary powers: necromancy, death touch

Evander—God of Light

Also known as: the Wolf

Primary powers: light shaping and manipulation,
control over fire, healing

Bastien—God of Shadows

Also known as: the Blade

Primary powers: shadow manipulation,
psychic influence, control over metal

PROLOGUE

THE PRINCESS AND the god met in the ashes of a broken city and made a pact in blood and sacrifice.

War creates strange alliances—no one emerges unscathed when death leaves its mark. Humans turn savage. Gods become monsters. And there's a moment when the dead outnumber the living and everything you've ever loved lies in ruins at your feet that you're left with only two choices.

You either bury your pride or you die choking on it.

So Amalthea Devaliant, the last daughter of her family's dynasty, sought the enemy king. "I want to make a deal."

Alexios, Eternal of Asteria, God of Storms, had been alive long before humans dreamed of empires. He'd fought battles that had aged him more than seven thousand years ever could, and of all the wars he'd survived, this one had scarred him deepest. If the princess wanted peace, she'd have to prove it and pay the price.

And Alexios only traded in blood.

He drew a dagger from between his crimson and black wings, pressing the hilt to Amalthea's palm. "There are worse things than being tired of war," he said.

"Like what?"

"Being hungry for it."

She couldn't argue with that. They had a hundred reasons to hate each other, but hatred takes something from you, and neither had anything left to give. Just two broken realms

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and pyres stacked high with enough bodies to block out the sun for days. A conflict with no end in sight.

Unless *she* ended it.

The princess shut her eyes and raised the knife. It felt wrong somehow—too delicate for sacrifice, too cruel for salvation. But a bargain is a bargain, and the God of Storms wasn’t known for changing his mind. So she pressed the weapon to her chest.

Breathe in. Hold. Let go.

This is how you save a world.

She plunged the blade in.

It hit her all at once—metal scraping bone, blood spilling over her fingers, her legs giving out. Then falling, hitting the ground hard. Amalthea stared up at a sky she couldn’t quite focus on as numbness crept through her limbs.

It’s worth it. It’ll all be worth it.

Alexios kneeled beside her and cut open his palms, mingling his blood with hers. He spoke the ancient rites that would bind them. When the last syllable fell from his lips, a ripple went through the world. Starlight and iridescent color spread over the mountains—a veil separating the god and human realms. A Shroud held in place by a promise. A lineage. An Accord carved into every temple altar in Vartena, written in stone, in blood, in memory.

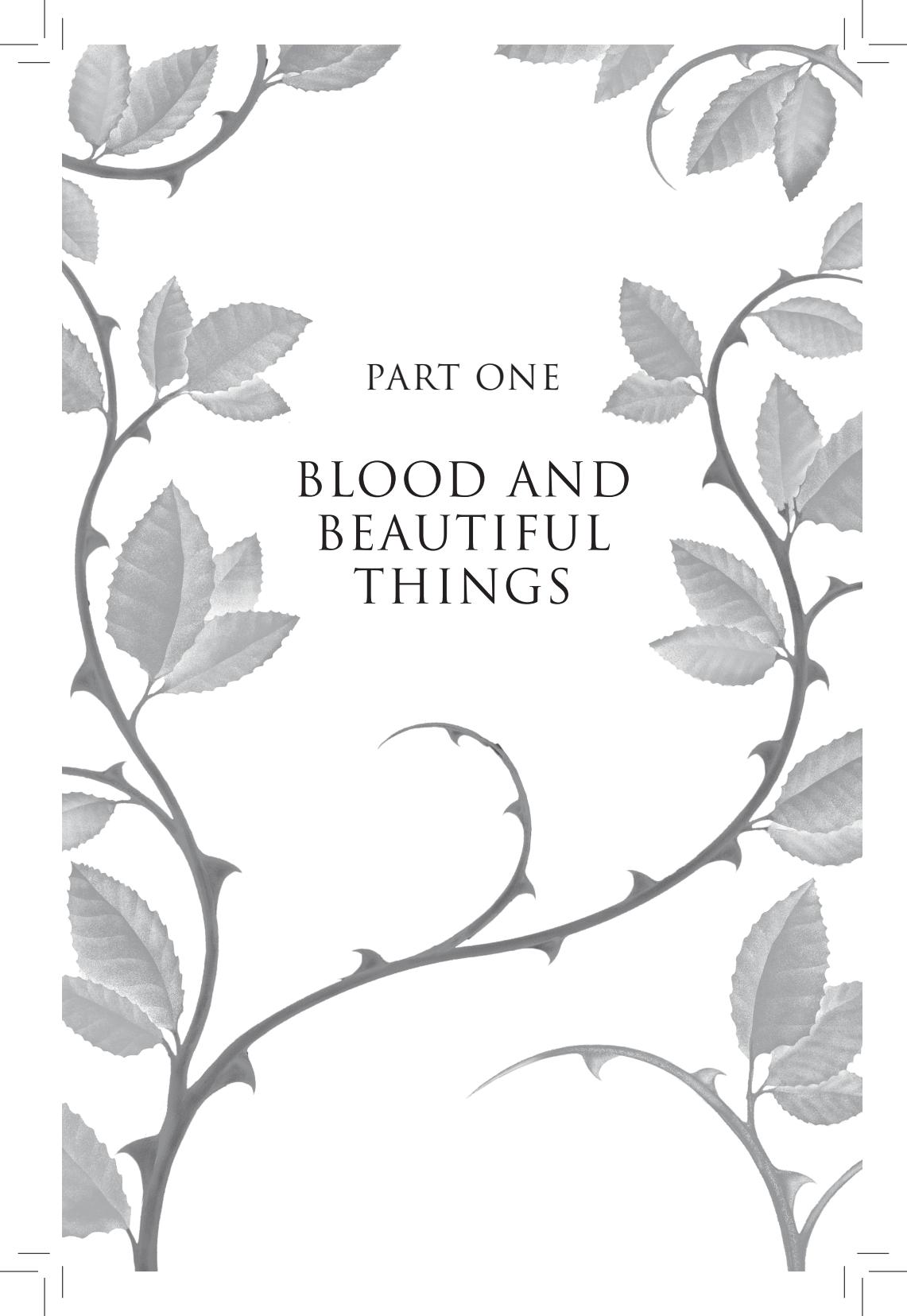
And with its birth, the war gasped its final breath.

The humans rebuilt and recovered. Their recollections of those dark days were worn smooth by time, and eventually, all who fought and survived that horrific era were gone. Their descendants remained in blissful ignorance.

But the gods? They lived with the terrible clarity of immortal memory. They couldn’t erase the taste of ashes, the sight of the pyres, the trauma of losing children and lovers and family.

This story is about what comes after, when promises are stretched thin and treaties wear down until they break. This is about what happens when humans forget that peace is paid for in blood.

This is what happens when everything goes to shit.



PART ONE

BLOOD AND
BEAUTIFUL
THINGS



1



BRYONY

Three hundred years later

DEATH WEARS A beautiful face, and he's come to collect a soul.

I take my morning walk through the palace woods, counting my steps like always, when a strange pressure builds in the air. Like before a storm rolls in and the world seems to hold its breath. A sparrow's trill cuts off mid-note. The breeze dies. It all just...

Stops.

“Help me.”

A man staggers from behind a tree. One look, and I know he's not supposed to be here. He's not a guard, not a servant, and definitely not a noble. Just an intruder caked in days' worth of dirt who somehow slipped past walls and sentries meant to keep him out.

“Hide me,” he says, lunging forward to seize my arm.
“Please.”

That's when I see it: seared into the skin of his inner wrist is a closed eye slashed through.

Oathbreaker.

The power saturating the forest, the unnatural charge—it's a god. And this man is what it wants.

“I'm sorry, but I *can't*.”

I pull against him, but the stranger is desperate, and desperate men are strong. Dangerous. He's panting in uneven little gasps,

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his hold tightening. The palace is right beyond those trees. Guards patrol these paths. If I run—

“Let her go. Now.”

The words drop like stones into a still pond.

The stranger and I freeze. My heart gives a painful lurch as that stormy pressure from before suddenly shoves hard against me.

Shit.

Slowly, I turn.

The god is beautiful in that alluring way of predators. Tall, dark-haired, wearing gleaming golden armor that leaves his muscular arms bare. He has a face more suited to a work of art than a death dealer. Like all gods, his skin shimmers in the light, but his wings are unique. *Singular.* Pure gold feathers from ridge to tip, as if they’ve been dipped in molten metal.

He flexes them slightly, an unmistakable warning in the small movement. *Don’t touch.*

Don’t even think about it.

I’d know him anywhere. No one grows up in Vartena without hearing stories about the golden assassin who serves as Alexios’ right hand. I’ve seen the murals on the temple walls painted with images of this god and the carnage he leaves behind.

The Wolf.

And I’m standing between him and his prey.

My eyes meet his, and I go cold. Not because of the bright, unnatural color—gilt and amber—but the way they pin me in place with the flat, dead glare of a hunter deciding which category of problem I fall into: nuisance or inconvenience.

“Please.”

The whimper yanks me back to the oathbreaker. He collapses to his knees, pressing his forehead to the ground. Poor bastard. Begging won’t soften a creature who has murdered thousands without remorse. The Wolf’s probably played out this exact scene every time—watched these desperate, weeping victims try to appeal to a sense of compassion that doesn’t exist.

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To feel compassion, he'd have to have a heart. And the Wolf of Asteria is a soulless monster. Everyone knows it.

“Mercy.” The oathbreaker’s voice cracks. “Please.”

But the Wolf is still staring at me. I shiver as he takes in my walking dress, the waist-length braid of silver-white hair resting over my shoulder. Lingering on my features, my violet-colored eyes, and the gleaming skin that’s not quite as ethereal as his but suggests a demigod in my ancestry. My skin is as unusual as his wings—it tells him exactly who I am before the gold cuff on my wrist confirms it.

Bryony Devaliant. Princess of the Blood. The youngest Anchor of the Shroud.

In other words, I’m not a human he can fuck with.

The Wolf’s mouth curves into a mocking smile as if he plucked the thought from my head. His hand drifts up almost lazily and curls around the sword sheathed between his wings.

“Five seconds, Devaliant.” His voice is smooth and deep. Resonant.

I blink. “What?”

“You get five seconds. I want you to close your eyes and count for me, nice and slow. Then keep them closed.”

It takes me a moment to grasp what he’s offering. Is he... seriously giving me an out? Some twisted courtesy so I don’t have to witness him butcher an oathbreaker?

I hesitate. What might he do the second I look away? But his expression darkens in a warning that reminds me I’m in no position to refuse. So I let my eyes fall shut.

“One.”

My nails dig into my palms.

“Two.”

My pulse roars in my ears, nearly drowning out the man’s whimper.

“Three.”

Every muscle tenses as I brace myself.

“Fou—”

A whisper of steel cuts the air, and something wet and warm

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splashes across my face—*blood*. My stomach lurches, but I force the bile back down my throat.

Thump. The sound of a corpse hitting the dirt is its own particular horror.

“F-five,” I gasp.

My eyes fly open. The Wolf is close—*too* close—and still holding his dripping sword. Near enough that I can see the flecks of amber and bronze in his irises. Neither of us moves. Neither of us speaks.

Then he reaches his free hand out and skims the pad of his thumb along my cheek. Smearing my skin with the dead man’s blood. “What did I say about keeping those pretty eyes closed?” There’s wry humor in his voice that’s all wrong for this moment. Like this is a game we’re playing. “It was a simple instruction.”

I let out a slow exhale, resisting the urge to turn out of his touch. “You said I got *five* seconds. That wasn’t even four. But I suppose Death finishes his work fast.”

“Death is still here, Devaliant. I haven’t gone anywhere.”

“Hard to miss that fact when you’re finger-painting your handiwork on my face.” I can’t hold back the slight tremor that goes through me.

He drops his hand, and some of the pressure eases from my chest. “Most humans can barely string two words together around me unless one of them is *please*. Yet here you are, running that smart mouth.”

Every instinct is screaming at me to run. But what’s the point? There’s nothing he can do to me that hasn’t already been done hundreds of times over.

“You know what I am,” I say, forcing calm into my tone. “I spend half my life on an altar. You’re just another kind of knife.”

His gaze falls to my wrist. Hidden beneath the cuff is a brand seared magically into my skin that marks me as the protected human property of his monstrous king. I’m one of Alexios’ Claimed. The Wolf could murder me in seconds, but there would be consequences for him if he damaged the goods.

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His eyes snap back to mine. “Never give me a reason to come for you. I’d be so fucking eager to put another Devaliant in the Void for good.”

My eyebrows pull together. Not a *human*—my family specifically. Did he hunt them before the Accords? Did he kill my ancestors?

The question burns on my tongue, but different words come out instead. “Then I want to make a deal.”

He blinks at that. “Excuse me?”

Too late now. *In for a broken drachma, in for an aurelii*, as they say. Death is the one thing this monster and I have in common; we’re two sides of the same bloody coin.

“If Alexios ever decides I’ve outlived my usefulness and sends you to take me out”—I gesture to the body cooling in the dirt—“I want a better end than that.”

“That sounds a lot like a demand.” There’s a strange glint in his eye—something feral and almost hungry peeking out from behind the killer’s mask. “I didn’t realize we were on demand-making terms.”

With a jolt, I realize what that look is: *interest*. Eternal save me, I’ve caught the attention of the god-king’s Wolf.

I swallow hard. “You only come to this realm when you need to murder someone. I’m using this as a chance to negotiate. Just in case.”

“Just in case,” he mutters with a short laugh. “Unbelievable. And what makes you think you’ve earned the right to negotiate shit with me?”

“House Devaliant bleeds out every fourteen days to keep your king’s precious Shroud intact. Be as eager as you want to kill me, but I want to choose how I go. Let me have that much.”

No flicker of empathy at the reminder of what I endure for his king, not even a twitch of emotion. The Wolf just studies me in that unnerving way of his, then leans forward and taps my cuff. “You get this conversation because of what’s under here. Never forget that. It’s the only thing standing between your neck and my blade.”

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My thoughts are shouting. *Shut up and go. Just nod and walk away.*

But an image flashes of the temple altar slick with my blood, the ceremonial knife opening me up over and over and over. After all that, I've damn well earned some basic courtesy.

“I haven’t forgotten. Will you bargain or not?”

He shrugs. “Tell me what you want.”

I nearly gag when he leans down and casually wipes his blade on the dead man’s clothes before sheathing it between his wings.

“Let me guess,” he says when I don’t answer, his sharp stare settling on me again. “A string quartet playing your favorite song while I butcher you? Some pretty flowers to brighten up the proceedings? Want me to tell you how *special* you are?”

What an asshole. I should’ve known the monster from the murals would be an unbearable prick.

I glare at him. “Leave my guts where they belong and my head attached to my body. Don’t steal any trophies for whatever murder collection I’m sure you keep. Sound fair?”

“It *sounds* like you’ve given this an alarming amount of thought.”

“When you die as often as I do, you think about the permanent version.”

“Clearly.” Now he just looks bored, as if I’ve somehow disappointed him. “Anything else?”

“Treat me like an equal,” I tell him, just to see what he’ll do. “Or should I lower the bar even more?”

That finally gets something out of him. “Bury it in the ground if that’s what you expect.” His lip curls in disgust. “You’re not my equal.”

Right. Seeing humans as insects scraped off the bottom of his shoe is probably how he justifies his daily slaughter quota before he goes to bed at night.

Well, fuck him.

“Pretend for one occasion,” I snap.

His eyes narrow. Just when I think he’ll declare he’d rather

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eat glass, he says, “Only if you don’t make me hunt your ass down. Chasing my targets is irritating.”

I snort. “Like there’s anywhere I could go that you wouldn’t find me.”

The Wolf doesn’t disagree. “One more thing.” His smile is sharp. “I want eye contact the whole time you’re bleeding out.”

I cringe. Good gods, he’s vile. I’d heard the Wolf was part feral, like a toddler with a knife and the skill to use it, but I always thought those were exaggerations meant to terrify children into good behavior. Of course, I had to go and negotiate with Alexios’ most unhinged Enforcer.

Too late to take it back now.

“Fine. Uninterrupted eye contact until my last breath.” *You heartless bastard.* “Sound good?”

“Deal. If it comes down to it, I’ll make it a good death.” Those gold eyes rake over me one last time. “See you around, Devaliant.”

Then he spreads those massive golden wings and leaps into the air, disappearing over the canopy in seconds.

Leaving me to deal with the corpse.

2



BRYONY

Two years later

THE CROWD ROARS beyond the gates as Theodora and I step out of the palace. My older sister and I wear matching gold gowns shot through with crimson, rubies glinting at our throats and earlobes. Our gaudy temple regalia as Princesses of the Blood.

Another day, another death.

The city sprawls past the royal square. Hellevig is a patchwork of ancient ruins and buildings constructed after the Godkiller Crusades, when the war between humans and gods nearly wiped this place off the map. During the rebuilding, House Devaliant's colors became the dominant palette. Red spires. Red domes. Red pillars. Red arches. Red, red, red. There's a reason the capital of Luceni is called "the city that bleeds," not just because of what my ancestress did with that blade, but because you can't escape the color of Amalthea's sacrifice.

Theodora's nails dig into my wrist, jolting me to the present. To the crowd clamoring for our attention.

"Smile," she tells me. She tucks an errant curl of copper hair behind her ear. "They're all watching."

No one could accuse me of being anything but well-trained, so I plaster on a smile and follow her toward the carriage waiting in the drive.

The portcullis groans as the servants heave it open.

"Princess Bryony!"

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A girl darts under a guard's arms before he can grab her, skidding to a halt in front of me.

My bodyguard tenses, but I wave a dismissive hand. "Stand down, Silas. She's six, not an assassin. Just give her a minute."

The last thing I need is an overenthusiastic member of my security pulling a sword on a child in view of a few hundred spectators. The broadsheets would have a field day.

I crouch down, my skirts pooling around me. "Hi there. What's your name?"

"Ara." She sticks out her small hand. "May I have your blessing?"

For a moment, I'm sure I misheard her. But no, those words definitely fell out of her tiny mouth, hanging between us like an accusation. Theodora goes rigid beside me. We both know blessings are the Eternal's purview, not mine.

I bend and kiss her knuckles. "May Eternal Alexios protect you always."

A standard non-answer. But the girl isn't having it. Her grip tightens, nails biting at my Claim cuff. "Please, Princess. A blessing from *you*."

Theodora's lips press into a thin line, her expression hardening. *No. Don't you dare give that girl what she wants.*

So I kiss the girl's head and say the most neutral thing I can. "Fortune keep you, little one. Now get back to your mother before she worries."

Silas scoops her up and deposits her behind the gates with a scowl darkening his face.

I smile and wave at the rest of the spectators, blowing a few kisses. "Remember to visit the temple and offer your tithes!" I call out. "Eternal bless you!"

I'm signaling our procession onward when a voice shouts, "*The Princess will lead us to ruin! Alexios' butchers will come for us all!*"

My head snaps up, but I can't see anything past the sea of faces. A ripple goes through the crowd as confusion gives way to anger. It looks like a fight might break out.

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“Time to go, Bry.” Theodora’s grip on my elbow is firm as she guides me to the carriage.

The door slams shut, muffling the chaos outside. I stare out the window, watching as the guards attempt to calm down the masses and clear the road. Some people are still shouting.

“It’s always a delight joining you on temple day.” Theodora settles across from me and arranges her skirts. “I never know if I’m going to see a brawl or a parade in your honor.”

I glare at her. “Hilarious.”

The famous Devaliant skin is the only thing that marks my sister and me as related. Our father once told me that Theodora got her looks from our mother, who died giving birth to me, while I inherited features from a dead grandmother. Where my hair is nearly white, hers is a rich, glossy red, spilling over her shoulders in loose curls. Her bone structure is elegant, with a willowy physique that resembles a dancer’s. Mine is more petite. The Hellevig broadsheets often remark that we’re equally beautiful, but Theodora has an austere face that comes across as aloof. Remote. *Cold*.

People call her *the ice princess* when they’re being kind.

Frigid bitch, when they’re not.

“Should we take bets on when they build you a shrine?” Theo asks me. “Ten aurelii says it’s up by next week. Twenty says someone tries to steal a lock of your hair for a holy relic.”

“People are literally screaming about divine wrath, and you’re making jokes?”

“What else am I supposed to do? Uncle’s too busy drowning in wine and women lately to listen about the crowds outside our gates. Last week, he face-planted in his soup before I could even finish a sentence.”

I slump against the seat with a sigh. When the emperor spirals like this, it never ends well. Last time, he vanished for half a year, hopping on our family’s private train to screw his way across the empire while Theo kept the capital from crumbling.

Not that I could blame Idris much, to be honest. It’s tempting to throw yourself into any random vice when your life revolves

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around scheduled ritual sacrifice. That's the price House Devaliant paid when we brokered peace with the gods three hundred years ago. Meanwhile, every other citizen gets off easy with a fingerprick and a single drop of blood for their tithe.

I trace the notches I carved on my inner elbow—five cuts, five steps to resurrection. *Breathe. Feel. Name. Present. Real.* To remind me that I exist and that I'm more than just a vessel.

Outside, gravel crunches under the carriage wheels as the vehicle makes a turn. Silas bellows at someone in the crowd who strayed too close, “Back the fuck off before I remove your head!”

I wince. “Could Uncle not find me a bodyguard who's less... threatening? He made three children cry yesterday.”

“Listen, that man might have a brain like a rusted bear trap and the personality of a hostile brick wall, but he's very large and enjoys hurting people who come near you.” Theodora taps her fingers against her armrest. “Which, given current events, makes him more useful than our wine-soaked excuse for an emperor.”

“At least Uncle isn't riding with us.”

“Oh yes, I'll miss his lectures on our many failings.” She mimics Idris' voice, slurring slightly. “Theodora, you empty-headed waste of space. Probably dropped you on your head as a baby.” Like he has any right to criticize when his idea of leadership is bellowing at people until his face turns red.”

Laughing, I peer out at the streets rolling by, at the stone towers and their massive stained glass windows. Every pane depicts some Devaliant sacrifice in revolting detail. You can't walk ten feet in Hellevig without seeing our family's offerings commemorated somewhere. They've made our deaths into decoration, our suffering into architecture.

And perched on the hill in the center of the city, with spires piercing the low-hanging clouds, stands the temple where I've been summoned for my tithe. Alexios' holy building is the only structure built entirely of pale marble, probably because blood shows up better on white, and the God of Storms enjoys

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watching us all bleed from wherever he is in Scillari. The facade comprises multiple twisting steeples that loom over the landscape like jagged teeth.

I hate that damn place.

Theo's hand finds my knee. "You okay?"

"Fine. Thanks for coming with me today. You didn't have to."

"Please. I'd crawl through broken glass to escape the palace. Made the stupid mistake of smiling at the new footman, and now he thinks we're destined for true love."

"Is he the one who's been leaving flowers at your door?"

"Flowers, poems, and yesterday, a note comparing my eyes to 'emerald pools of eternal longing.'" She shudders. "There are only so many times I can hide in the library before it gets pathetic."

"And here I thought you came for moral support."

"Well, that too." Theo sits back. "Speaking of support, I'll tell you my new coping mechanism for when the Oracles shove that blade in."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Of course not." A wicked grin spreads across my sister's face. "I think of all the filthy things I'm going to have Kas do to me when I wake up. Really takes the edge off dying when I know I'll be riding my guard's cock within the hour."

I choke on air. "Theo!"

"What? It's practical. Strategic." She lets out a satisfied sigh. "I ride that man before the carriage even leaves the temple grounds. You wouldn't believe how hard he gets when I'm still covered in blood from the ceremony. Something about seeing me come back to life really does it for him."

The noise I make is something between a retch and a whimper. "Stop. Stop right there." I hold up both hands. "I don't need the visual. I don't *want* the visual. The visual is burned into my brain. What in the Eternal's name is *wrong* with you?"

"So many things. Want the list alphabetically or by order of moral depravity? We've got time before we reach the temple."

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“I’d rather throw myself in front of a train.”

“Maybe save that move for after your wedding. And remember, if you need to plot your new husband’s tragic end, I know people who know people.”

I elect to ignore that in favor of hunching in my seat. The last thing I want to dwell on is my wedding to Markus von Reding tomorrow. I’ve only met him three times, and I don’t think he’s ever bothered looking above my breasts. But I suppose that doesn’t matter. The marriage is purely transactional to get me pregnant. Devaliants are only good for two things—dying and breeding more Devaliants to die.

The carriage makes a hard turn. The road is closed to all but our procession, with storefronts shuttered until after we finish. Even the temple has been emptied to prepare for our arrival.

We stop along the rounded royal entryway, where a statue of Alexios glares down at us. The sculptor caught the striking lines of his face, every feather of his wings. He’s seated on a throne with one hand holding his sword and the other reaching down. I can’t tell if it’s meant to look like he’s blessing me or threatening me, but maybe that’s the point.

The wind lashes my cheeks as we climb the steps and push open the doors. The smell hits me first, the heavy incense barely masking the strong, coppery scent of centuries of blood coating the holy stones.

The candles in the alcoves illuminate the reliefs painted on the walls. In one, Alexios sits in judgment while a human grovels at his feet. In another, he flies into battle with his sword held high, and his red and black wings spread.

And in the next panel is the Devaliant princess who changed the realms. *Amalthea*. Offering her life to anchor the Shroud, seal the Accords, and end the war that nearly brought both worlds to ruin.

At the end of the naos rises the altar stone, a simple slab of rust-stained white marble. Three dark-robed Oracles stand around its base, their faces obscured behind gauzy veils. I see them every fourteen days for the ceremony, but we’re not on

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friendly terms. It's difficult to establish a cordial relationship with the women who've held you down and shoved a knife in your chest since childhood. You don't look so fondly on them after that.

I dip my chin in a curt greeting. "Good morning."

The Head Oracle steps forward, her vestments shimmering. "Princess Bryony, the Eternal sent word that your tithe isn't welcome."

Theodora freezes, her breath catching in her throat.

I'm certain I've misunderstood. The incense fumes must be causing me to hallucinate. "I'm sorry. It sounded like you said—"

"You heard her correctly," the second Oracle says. "There will be no anchoring ceremony today. Your tithe is no longer required."

No longer required. The words make no sense. *No longer required, no longer required, no longer—*

All my life, I've been *necessary*. I've played my preordained role, a linchpin of the Shroud. One of Alexios' Anchors in the mortal realm. I've bled for him since I could walk. Died for him again and again and again. I'd say it's almost impressive how thoroughly I've debased myself.

And now I'm no longer *required*?

"I don't understand," Theodora says. "Has my sister offended him?"

The Oracle's head turns toward my sister. "The Eternal's will isn't for mortals to question."

It takes every scrap of courtly training I possess not to lunge across the altar and throttle the Oracle with her veil.

"Two weeks ago, I was indispensable. Now I'm nothing," I say, my voice calm despite my pounding heart. "Did Alexios share his reasons, or does he prefer to keep us guessing?"

The third Oracle answers. "You live and die by the Eternal's mercy, and he's revoked it. There's nothing more to be said."

Mercy. How precious.

"Unrevoke it," Theodora says sharply. "My sister is ready to

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make the tithe and do her duty.” She rakes them with the glare that earned her the *frigid bitch* moniker. “It’s your obligation to take her blood.”

“You’re not regent anymore, Princess,” the Head Oracle says. “You have no authority here.”

Theodora flinches, and I see the barb hit home. She swallows hard at the reminder of everything she’s lost.

“Ah, yes,” I say. “I’d forgotten that obedience is a requirement of Alexios’ faithful. Tell me, do you gain your position only by being the bastard children of demigods and humans, or is there a test you have to pass for sycophantic devotion? Does he screen for a lack of individuality? I’m curious how that works.”

The Oracles gasp. I think one of them might be choking on her own spit behind that veil.

“Bry,” Theodora says. “Come on. We’re going.”

I’m reaching for Theo’s arm when the third Oracle says, “If you doubt our words, Princess, look at your Claim.”

I turn back. “What did you just say?”

The Oracle points at my wrist—at the golden cuff that’s been there for as long as I can remember. “See for yourself.”

I fumble with the clasp, my breaths growing shorter. This has to be a mistake. Some sort of sick, ritualized humiliation.

The cuff falls away, and branded on my inner wrist is a slash through the eye of Alexios’ mark. The same sigil that’s declared me his Claimed since the day I was born and given the drop of his blood like every other infant in Luceni. Only now, the eye is closed.

And I’m marked for death.

3



BRYONY

ATINY MARK. That's all it takes to destroy a life. All these years, I've bled for the Shroud—died hundreds of deaths for it. Laid myself on that altar, over and over, and felt my heart stop long before I even understood the meaning of *sacrifice*.

Memories flicker of a little girl, confused and terrified, tears streaming down her cheeks as she pleads with them to stop. Begs them not to hurt her again. But the ceremonial blade splits her skin, the world goes dark at the edges, and the Void rises to claim her. No one listens. No one cares.

The gods don't answer prayers. Monsters seldom do.

“I've never missed a tithe,” I say faintly, staring down at that damning symbol. “Not once.”

The Head Oracle regards me in silence. “For months, the people in this city have been tossing roses at your feet instead of spilling their blood for the Eternal. He's given them more grace than most. These are the consequences.”

My face heats. I never asked for their worship. I only ever did what Theodora needed me to do—put on a united front when our uncle abandoned the throne. Offered the public some small reassurance that House Devaliant wasn't crumbling.

But I watched their tentative questions turn to admiration and then twist into something far more dangerous: reverence. Every offering and prayer whispered in my name gave the

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Eternal more reasons to despise me. I should have recognized the warning signs when the crowds swelled outside the palace walls.

The child today begged for my *blessing*.

“You can’t be serious,” Theodora says, eyes blazing. “They love her because she *dies* for them. Because she’s the one out there showing them we give a damn. Maybe if Alexios dragged his ass across the Shroud to reassure *his* Claimed instead of sending his rabid dogs to slaughter the masses, people wouldn’t be so damned eager to break their oaths.”

Scandalized gasps rise from the cluster of Oracles.

“Watch that mouth, girl,” the Head Oracle hisses. “Or the Eternal might decide your tongue would look better decorating his wall.”

Theo steps forward. “Then he can come down here and cut it out himself.”

I have to fix this. He can’t just mark me for execution after a life of service. “Let me make the offering now. There’s still time—”

“No.” The Head Oracle cuts me off. “The Eternal’s judgment is final. It won’t be overturned by an arrogant girl who doesn’t know her place.”

And there it is. I’m nothing. Worse than an Unclaimed. Someone to be shunned, hunted down, and butchered in the streets. Because since when have the gods been fair to those they subjugate? Those they *own*? I’m only a tool that’s outlived its use.

My hands shake as I slide my cuff on my wrist and cover up the mark. I turn and stride out of the temple, Theodora and Silas falling into step behind me. My guard shoots a furtive glance my way. I wonder what he’s thinking, knowing the princess he’s sworn to protect is a pariah.

It doesn’t matter, I suppose. When the Enforcers come, his opinion will be less than worthless.

The courtyard sunlight is too bright. I pause before the largest statue of Alexios, studying the perfect features of the god who

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sentenced me to death. He towers over us in obsidian and marble, with red gems glinting in the carved folds of his raiment, meant to depict droplets of blood.

“Bry.” Theodora’s voice is soft. “What are you doing?”

“Just having a moment with my executioner.” I blink back the sting of tears. “Seems only polite.”

My gaze catches on the fresco painted across the back wall of the courtyard. It illustrates Alexios’ six Enforcers soaring above the smoke and rubble of a broken city, their swords bared and their wings spread wide. Savage and terrifying. Beautiful and cruel.

And *him*.

The Wolf is front and center. His gilded armor is splashed with gore, his irises blazing like molten gold. I remember the weight of his stare. The suffocating pressure of his power, old and unfathomably vast.

Never give me a reason to come for you.

Well. Here we are. I guess he’ll be collecting soon.

I should give him no cause. Let him look me in the face and know this isn’t my fault.

“Silas.” I extend my palm without looking away from the painting. “Let me borrow your knife.”

A beat. “Princess?”

“That pretty blade you love so much. Hand it over.”

I can see him wondering if his charge has finally cracked. If I’ve given in to the madness that runs in Devaliant blood like a bomb waiting for the right moment to detonate.

It’s not an unreasonable fear. My family isn’t exactly known for our sterling mental health after dying and coming back so often. We hide it well by staging the deaths and changing the stories, but suicide has become something of a family tradition.

“I’m not going to off myself,” I mutter, my lips twisting. “Not permanently, anyway.”

Another moment of hesitation. Then he draws the weapon from his belt and places it in my palm. Such a paltry thing to wager against a god’s wrath, but it’ll have to do.

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“Tell me you’re not about to do what I think you are,” Theo hisses. “Tell me you aren’t about to defy the Eternal’s direct orders at his *own temple*.”

“I’m just performing a Devaliant’s duty,” I say with a shrug. “One last tithe for old times’ sake.”

“This isn’t the altar, you reckless idiot. They can’t resurrect you if you bleed out here!”

“Alexios’ power flows through every inch of this sanctum. So either he accepts this offering and gives me back my Claim, or he sends his dogs to finish me off. I’ll give him something to chew on while he mulls it over.”

The Eternal bound our lineage to the Shroud, with the blood of citizens across Vartena as a sympathetic link. But he never said *where* on the temple grounds we had to bleed. Let’s see how he likes that little loophole.

Theo’s mouth tightens, and she jerks her chin. “Fine. Lie down.”

I move to the base of the steps and settle on my back on the warm flagstones. It’s now or never.

“Your Highness,” Silas says, “I don’t think you should—”

“Quiet,” Theodora tells him, her voice brooking no argument. “Go get the Oracles.”

Silas curses under his breath, but he spins on his heel, hurrying toward the temple entrance. Probably trying to figure out how to salvage this mess.

I’d pity him if I had any left to spare. But monstrous kings and sacrifices don’t deal in tender mercies. We barter in the hard currencies of blood.

Theodora sinks to her knees beside me. “Want me to do the honors?”

Forcing a smile, I tell her, “Tempting, but no. I’ll see to my own stabbing today.”

I focus on the knife, on the hammering of my heart against my ribs, on the sick swoop of my stomach as I raise the blade. I inhale through my nose. Hold it.

And slam six inches of steel through my chest.

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Pain explodes through me. I can't breathe. Can't scream. Every muscle locks up.

How do you like this tithe, you bastard? I think as my gaze finds Alexios' stone face once more. Is it sweet enough for you? Loud enough? I hope you choke on it.

Someone screams—the Oracles are here. Tugging, pulling at me. A veiled face blocks my view of the statue. “What have you done, you foolish child?” she snarls. Ah, the Head Oracle.

I laugh—or try to. “I thought... it was... obvious. I’m making... a fucking point.”

“Bring her back.” Theodora’s voice cracks out. Through my dimming vision, I see her grab the Head Oracle’s arm. “The instant her heart stops, you’ll perform the rite, or I swear by all the gods, I’ll have my loyalists sack this temple and tear you apart with their bare hands.”

Darkness spreads, reaching for me, eager to drag me down into the Void. Strange how after so many deaths, I still manage to forget this part—the inexorable slide into the abyss, the helpless feeling of being pulled against my will as all the light fades. *Under, under, under.* No air, no sound, just a crushing pressure like I’m being buried alive.

In those final, fading moments, my thoughts drift to the Wolf. When I come back, I wonder if this will work or if Alexios will send him to hunt me down and finish what Silas’ knife started. If he does, I hope my blood stains the Wolf’s hands, his wings, his soul, if he even has one. I hope I haunt him.

The shadows claim me. They always do.

Then the Shroud’s power wraps around my soul and *pulls*, dragging me upward. Hauling me through the suffocating blackness. The pressure shatters, and the Void spits me out.

I gasp awake, choking on air, my fingers already scrambling at my sleeve to find the scars.

One. Breathe.

Two. There’s a breeze on my face and the warm flagstones beneath me.

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Three. My name is Bryony.

Four. I'm at Alexios' temple.

Five. This is real.

I open my eyes, blinking against the harsh sunlight. When I look down, there's no trace of the wound that killed me—only the sticky, cold residue of Alexios' blood smeared on me from the revival bowl.

“Get up.” The Head Oracle's sharp voice cuts through the fog. “And get out. Don't come back.”

No gentle words to ease the transition. Just a perfunctory ritual, the minimum required to pull my soul from the Void. The message is clear: they don't give a shit about me. I'm not protected by my service to the Shroud.

I'm *no longer required*.

It takes two tries to stand even with Theo's help. Resurrection never gets easier—my body always aches after, like it's been broken apart and stuck back together wrong.

Silas hovers behind the Oracles, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else. Jumping into the Rionese Sea, perhaps. Or taking a walk off the palace battlements. Honestly, that makes two of us.

I return his knife, and he takes it without a word, probably wishing he'd never handed it over.

“You okay?” Theodora asks quietly as she leads me down the temple steps. “They didn't do the aftercare.”

“Fine.” The word comes out flat. “As fine as I can be.”

She helps me into the carriage. I stare out of the window as the vehicle starts toward the palace. For years, this route has defined my existence—palace to temple, temple to palace, over and over again. A life shaped by orders and duty. I've given up this body to a god for so long that I can barely remember what it was like to be mine.

And I won't ever have that again.

Theodora grasps my hand. “We'll fix this. Just keep up appearances for now, and don't take that cuff off.”

“Right. Play my part tomorrow night, too?” My lips

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twist. “Spread my legs for my new husband like a good little princess?”

“One crisis at a time, Bry.”

I nod. It’s not that I don’t trust my sister’s plans. It’s that deep down, I’m already preparing for the Wolf.

4



EVANDER

THE STENCH FILLS my lungs, one I've encountered a thousand times before: mortality combined with power that doesn't belong to a human.

The man is unaware he's being hunted. I first caught his scent after an execution in Montorosa, the capital of Havenridge. Then I followed him on the train to Valchek, and watched as he went about his business for the last week. Patiently biding my time. Other than the scent, there's nothing noteworthy about him. Unremarkable face, average body, *boring* life. He wears Alexios' Claim, but that won't save him—he's going to be another tally on my centuries-old kill count. Yesterday, I watched him clip his toenails at the dinner table, gather them in the tobacco tin, and eat one. Honestly, I'm doing the realm a favor by killing him.

After he leads me where I want.

He walks the dark street with his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets. I follow from the rooftops, feet soundless. Windows across the city glow as I leap from building to building. Smoke curls from chimneys, and the occasional burst of chatter drifts up from the roads below. My wings tense as I land on another roof, but I keep them tight against my back. No need to announce my presence yet.

He turns onto a narrow lane just off the main road, pausing

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in front of a shitty little apothecary shop with a faded wooden sign creaking in the wind.

Roots & Remedies. How quaint.

My target knocks on the door, and something dark clenches in my gut at the familiar pattern, the sign I've been waiting for: *quick-quick-quick, slow-slow*—the code of fleshtraders.

The door cracks open. “Yeah?”

“Here for the Butcher.”

The doorman grunts and opens the door wide. “Inside.”

I drop to street level, wrapping myself in invisibility before slipping in after them. The shop looks innocuous enough. Dried plants hang from the ceiling rafters alongside bones and animal hides. Shelves groan under the weight of colored glass jars, their contents floating in murky liquids and oils. Roots and leaves fill the tiny cabinets built into the wall behind the counter.

But it's for show, a cheap veneer of legitimacy hiding the real merchandise in the back.

My nostrils flare as the apothecary worker's scent wafts over me. I narrow my eyes at the tall, thin man. He's been indulging. And if the strength is anything to go by, he's been on dust for years.

Humans can't seem to help themselves.

I trail after them as they head down the hall. They stop at a door, and the apothecary fumbles with an oversized ring of keys.

“In here.” He jerks his head, flipping on the light. “Special stock.”

The air inside is cold and tinged with the stink of preservatives. Shelves are packed with my realm's spoils—books, scrolls, trinkets, and oddities. Stone carvings of Scillarian beasts are perched alongside busts displaying jewelry our demis wore into battle. Beside that sit precious gems in open velvet boxes, infused with god power that glows from within. The plunder of thousands of destroyed lives, stolen from corpses and homes during the human occupation of my realm.

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Magic rises with my anger, the heat of it sliding across my skin, but I shove it down before it betrays my presence.

Not yet.

The apothecary approaches an ornate wooden cabinet, pulling out a silk-wrapped parcel.

Something stirs in me—a resonance, like plucking a string and feeling another vibrate in harmony. Power recognizing power. I know what's in that bundle before he opens it.

No. Not here. Not like this.

“Just got these in,” he says, laying it on the table and unfolding it carefully. “Found in an old war cache. These came right off some ascended prince’s back.”

He flips back the fabric to reveal four dark feathers sparkling with starlight. *Bastien*’s feathers.

I’m going to rip their throats out.

Memories flash of my brother shackled to the wall of a filthy cell, with his blood pooled on the floor and his wings hacked off. There’s a reason my people call that war the *Devouring*.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” I watch as the apothecary strokes a feather, picturing myself cutting off his fingers. “Grind these up, and you’ve got pure power. Most just want the high—like swallowing stars. But if you take enough and let it build up in your system? The magic becomes yours.”

Fuck.

I figured the forbidden knowledge still circulated in some corners of the mortal world—it’s what started the war and left gods trafficked for parts. But I haven’t heard it spoken aloud in years. I’ve worked with Alexios and his other Enforcers to eliminate every trace of that information from mortal memories and any documents we could find.

The buyer plucks a feather from the cloth. He holds it up to the light, turning it this way and that, watching the stardust glitter. “They’re old, though. Won’t that affect the potency?”

“Not from an Eternal. You want a taste? First pinch is free.”

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At the buyer's nod, the apothecary reaches beneath the counter to retrieve a silver tray with a tiny pinch of dark powder in the center. My target shoves his sweaty black hair out of his face and bends to snort the dust. When he straightens, his mouth is slack with pleasure, skin pulsing with the glow of stolen Eternal magic.

This. *This* is what my people broke ourselves trying to stop. What countless demis died fighting.

“Holy fuck,” he gasps. “That’s... That’s...”

“Unreal, right?” The apothecary grins and gestures with his fingers. “Go on, try the power. Just focus a little, and you’ll feel the pull. See what you get.”

The buyer closes his eyes, brows furrowed in concentration. I watch as all the shadows in the room detach, writhing and curling around him like tendrils of smoke. Waiting for his command. Bastien’s magic—the ability to bend and manipulate darkness to his will—flows through this human, diminished but unmistakable.

Just as quickly, the shadows dissipate and settle.

“Shit,” the buyer pants, wiping some of the sweat from his forehead. “It didn’t last.”

“Takes more than a pinch to keep it stable at first,” the apothecary explains. “But that rush? That’ll last a few days. Still feeling it?”

“Yeah.” A jerky nod. “Fuck yeah. I’ll take them all.”

“Two thousand aurelii.”

“Two thousand?” The buyer shakes his head and curses under his breath. “That’s robbery. I can go to the docks and get twice the product for half that.”

The apothecary scowls, expression darkening with impatience. “You can’t compare the demi parts at the docks to the power of an Eternal. I’ve got another buyer who’d kill for this.” He jabs a finger at the feathers. “You want these? Pay up. Eternals don’t exactly grow on trees these days.”

The other man swallows hard, hesitating, but then he reaches for his pocket and pulls out a sweaty wad of folded-up aurelii.

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And now it's time to add some red to my ledger.

With a lunge, I seize the apothecary by the neck and slam him into the wall. The buyer bolts for the door, but a flick of my power freezes him in place.

"Stay," I snarl. He'll wait there obediently until I'm ready to deal with him.

The apothecary claws at my wrist, and it's like watching a fish flopping on the end of a hook. Only in this case, the hook is a pissed-off god he can't see, and I'm this close to snapping his damn neck. But that would be a waste.

"Where did you get the feathers?" I growl.

"I-It wasn't—"

"Did you know," I interrupt in a soft, conversational tone, "that there are fourteen major bones in the human face? And over forty-two muscles working in tandem to create those delightful micro-expressions you humans are so fond of. The one you're wearing right now is that special expression that says 'I'm about to lie to the angry god holding me.'" I squeeze hard enough to make him gag. "So let's try this again. Where the fuck did you get the feathers?"

"Collectors," he wheezes. "People who scavenge the war zones. Sometimes, they find valuable things."

"Have more Eternal parts changed hands?"

The apothecary bucks against my hold. Stolen power crackles through him, searing my skin where we touch. He's devoured our essence for so long that magic saturates his entire body. But it won't save him from me. I'm more powerful than whoever he's been consuming—an Eternal. *An ascended prince.*

"Get fucked," he says, still struggling. He scratches at my arm, nails digging in. "I've got Alexios' protection."

This smug prick thinks he's untouchable. He's got no clue who I am. *What I am.*

"Seems you're confused about who has you pinned to the wall. Let's have an introduction, shall we?"

My invisibility drops, and I let him get a good look—my

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gold wings, the wrath burning in my eyes, the promise of a painful, messy end. His breathing quickens, and he releases a pathetic whimper.

Ah, there it is. I love that sound.

“Yeah, you recognize me, don’t you?” I glance at the buyer frozen by the door, smirking as a dark stain spreads across the front of his trousers. “Your friend over there’s already pissed himself. Want to see if you can do better? Tell me where you got those feathers, and I may be moved to mercy.”

I never am, but he doesn’t need to know that yet.

His body shakes against mine. It takes him a few tries to speak. “The m-market. Silk Street, beneath the old tannery in Hellevig.” He lets out a sob. “That’s all I know, I swear. Please—”

“Shhh sh shh.” I tap his lips with a finger. “That wasn’t so hard, was it? But there’s still one more thing I need to do.”

I mentally reach for the tether that binds me to Alexios—a shimmer at the edges of my consciousness. When I pluck gently, his attention sharpens.

What is it, Wolf?

I need you to burn two Claims, I tell him.

Why?

Alexios will do it without hesitation, but he likes to remind me that for all my power, he’s the one who holds my chain.

Because these sick fucks have been trafficking Eternal parts. They have Bastien’s feathers.

His silence has a weight that crushes. The tension in my skull swells as his power gathers, dark and dense as a singularity.

Show me.

My will becomes subsumed by his. I’m helpless as he forces his way in, peeling back my eyes and flooding my senses. He feels the apothecary’s body pinned against the wall. Sees the buyer cowering by the door. He turns us to the till’s table where the four feathers rest, each one a damning indictment of all he’s built and bled for.

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Destroy them. Make it slow. Make it painful.

With pleasure, I say.

I wrench the apothecary's wrist up and watch as a slash cuts through the Claim. And then the eye in the center of the triangle winks shut.

“No,” the apothecary whimpers, sobbing now. “No—”

I hush him again. “Quiet. It's time to revisit your chat about getting acquainted with an Eternal's power. I'd hate to leave you unsatisfied.” I graze my thumb over his throat. “Few humans know what we can do with these pretty feathers on our wings once we become Eternals. Want me to show you?”

His eyes bulge. “Please, I—”

I unfurl my wings with a snap, and the razored edge of my primary feathers slices through his shoulder to the bone beneath. Quick and clean as a scalpel.

The apothecary's severed arm drops to the floor with a thud.

He gives a choked gurgle, gaping at the bleeding stump where his arm used to be in silent shock.

“Not so amusing now, is it?” I ask mildly. “Being vivisected for parts?”

I take my time dismembering him.

The apothecary's screams ring out, but I don't let him die. He'll feel it all—every cut parting skin from muscle, muscle from bone. I carve my fury into his body and paint sigils in his blood. Killing him is *art*. Each wound tells the story of how he died, why he deserved it, and what drove the Wolf of Asteria to visit this shitty little shop in Valchek. I break him so badly that he weeps for his mother like a fucking baby at the end.

When his whimpers fade to noiseless twitches, I finally end him. My magic unclenches, and his head topples from his shoulders.

It's almost anticlimactic.

My focus snaps to the buyer still held in place by my power. His breath saws in and out, panicked.

“And then there was one,” I say with a grin. “Want to tell me about those docks you mentioned earlier?”

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I don't play in this one's guts. But I do get him to sing for me, and he babbles about the docks in Valchek getting shipments, but he doesn't know from where, doesn't know the suppliers—just knows where to go when he needs a fix. So I torture him a little more to make sure he's being honest. By the time my flames start burning his lungs, he's whimpering that he doesn't *know*, and that's my sign to finally put this bastard down. He combusts from the inside out in a blaze of my burning power, skin melting off and bones blackening. His screams echo long after his lungs collapse to ash.

When it's done, blood drips from my wings and pools at my feet. Something in me settles. Quiets. I want to etch this into my bones as fuel for the hunts to come. For all the deaths I'll grant the oathbreakers, the fleshtraders, any buyer who sets aurelii down for god parts to consume like we're animals.

I collect Bastien's feathers and tuck them into my armor to burn later. There's still something I need to do here first.

I shut my eyes and gather my magic, letting it rise until my skin heats. And then I release it in a searing wave that crashes over the room.

When I open my eyes, nothing in the shop is left but drifting motes of ash and the crackle of super-heated stone. I stride into the waiting night. The cobbles steam in my wake, puddles flash-boiling to vapor. Passersby scramble out of my path.

Good. Let them remember what happens to fleshtraders in this city.

Alexios' voice slides into my thoughts, as cold as a blade. *If you're finished playing with your food, I need you at my palace. I have another throat for you to slit.*