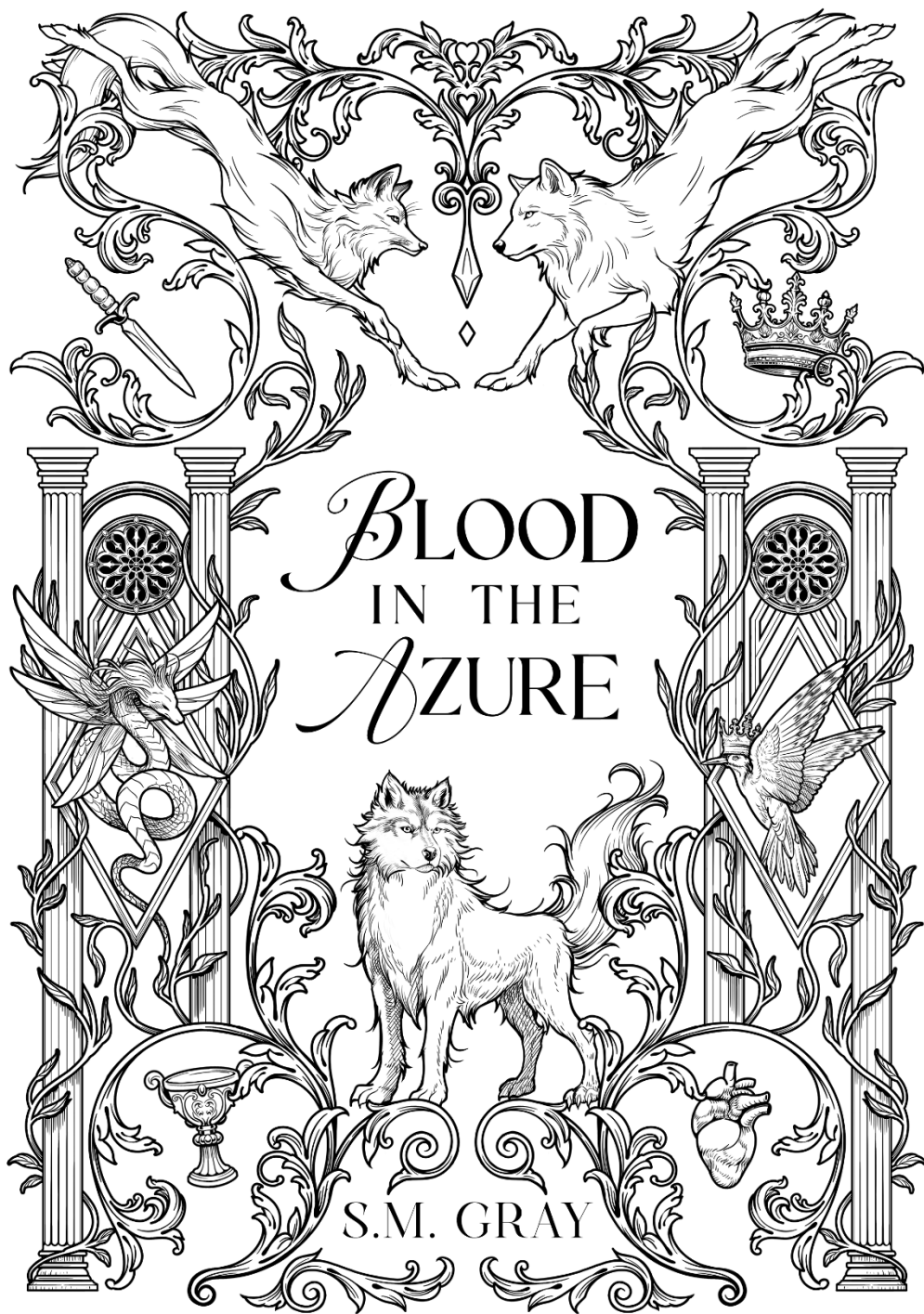






Chapter 1

K *eeep the crown.*

It had been Len's only goal for six years, before which it had been to *take* the damn thing. Had Len been a king, what she was about to do would have been laughable. Instead she was laced into a suffocating gown, preparing to humour her father's plans for her. Her deceased father, her *no longer breathing* father, yet here she was.

The carriage vibrated against the cobblestone streets of Walin, Alphos' capital. Everything about the country was grating; the bumpy roads, the raucous crowd, and how white burst in her vision from every corner; bright flags that snapped in the wind, budding roses that seemed to lack any scent, and her horribly scratchy gown. Even the horses were unsaturated ivory.

Bardan had made this a show.

She'd been promised to the King of Alphos from shortly after birth. He was three decades older than her and she'd wondered if he'd forgotten his bride on the Northwestern shore, but she hadn't been so lucky. His latest wife had met an untimely end when Len had turned eighteen, a detail she didn't enjoy thinking about. If her father had still been alive she would have been sent as an immediate replacement, but the gods had blessed her with his passing. As such, she was left to flourish another six years before Bardan called her to Alphos to collect his purchase.

Purchase, as though she were something to be owned; some place to plant a flag. Unfortunately, Bravug wasn't in a position to buy Len back from the Alphese king, and so she went.

“It's not too late to declare war instead.” Woa, one of her generals, quipped from his seat. Only the two of them sat in the carriage; Len didn't have patience for anyone else.

“You want to add to the tower of gear you've stolen from battlefields.”

“I'm always on the lookout,” he smirked. “I'll keep your sword.”

She hesitated in handing him the blade, unsheathing the barest of it and tilting it lightly to admire the iridescent sheen. It had been years since she'd been without it. Disarmed, demure, and utterly disgusted, an interesting mix. Her stomach twisted violently.

“You're sure you don't want to kill him?” Woa joked.

Killing her betrothed had been Len's favoured daydream since his summons had arrived. “I do, but it's too early in the day for bad decisions.”

Woa laughed. From the outside Bardan was not undesirable, but his gaze left Len with a feeling close to nausea. Something lurked in him that she couldn't explain. Was he handsome? Undoubtedly, with ageless magic keeping him young and a smile that made women stare. Bardan's allure was tarnished by the way his eyes lingered a little too long, surveying what would be his, categorizing her like grain or land. The thought made her lip twitch.

Woa gave her an appraising look. Dress, carriage, sick upset on her face no doubt. He knew exactly how rattled she was. He also knew what arrangement she was walking into. “I made sure your belongings went to the right place.”

“Ever the knight.”

The carriage stopped. “So it begins.” Woa grinned and ducked out, but not before sliding one of Bravug's iridescent daggers next to her. “For good luck.” He left the carriage to greet their welcoming entourage. The dagger was immediately snatched by Len's desperate hand and clipped into the thick layers of her skirts.

Woa greeted someone outside and she toyed with the beading of her dress. *'You are not a bauble'* a rebellious voice wiggled its way in. Pride was a flaw in Bravug, but Len could admit that hers was iron strong. It made the carriage feel like a cage, her dress chafe just a bit more, and the pit in her stomach dig deeper. She was a proud, fickle thing, and she knew it might be her undoing.

Woa knocked; it was time to go.

The roaring crowd assaulted Len's ears when she stepped out. White petals floated to the ground by the thousands and sunlight glinted off the city's silver embellishments. It was as if the world's colour had been stolen by the same hand that twisted her insides. A statue of Temprius, the time god the Alphese worshipped, watched her through coolly dismissive eyes. People leaned eagerly as the royal guard surrounded the carriage, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the woman that would be queen.

'The woman that is already a queen,' Len's rebellious little voice chided. The parade roared. This wasn't a celebration of her, but of Bardan's victory. He was lavishing himself in excess for conquering her country without drawing a single sword.

It made Len seethe.

A white-gloved hand was presented. She studied it, then ignored it, stepping out into the blinding day. "Queen Adante," the man bowed. "I'm Olchev, general of King Alimen's first division."

Len tipped her head to acknowledge him and schooled her features into curious wonder when instead she was underwhelmed. Typical of Bardan not to meet her, the self-important prick; he hadn't attended his last wife's funeral, why would he bother greeting her? A young girl, undoubtedly a noble's daughter, thrust an impressive bouquet of white roses toward Len and bowed. Len smiled and sniffed the scentless things. "Thank-you, they're beautiful."

Her white dress had been the right choice, itching and flowing around her like the voluminous spills of silver-white ivy that seemed to grow from everywhere.

Woa bowed, then extended his arm to the palace doors. He trusted her plan. Len hadn't expected him to, but they'd sat late into many nights discussing options and, although he hated the idea of her selling herself, they'd agreed this was the best chance for Bravug.

The palace doors opened smoothly, betraying their craftsmanship. To Len, they may as well have been the maw of some horrible beast waiting to consume her. Still, she floated gracefully through them with her entourage. If she had to do this, she wouldn't let them see her anger. She would be just as she and Woa had planned: meek and dainty, until they tried to pull the crown from her head.



Chapter 2

A n empire.
Bardan stood at a window that looked far across to the West. Within a day all he could see would be under his ownership. Everything he'd worked for; the planning and bargaining, had led to the moment where Alphos would take control as the main power in Serica. More impressive, he'd done it without mobilizing an army. The idea electrified him. True wars were won on the threat of violence instead of its practice. He'd chosen his allies well, and with them he'd been able to enact plans that had been decades in the making.

A little ball of glowing white hovered next to him. It was silent that morning, no instructions to give and instead, he felt it basking in the moment beside him. It had appeared months ago, with the first whispers of the Empire of Stone's alliance. He wasn't sure what it was; a sprite, a brightshade, either would be possible in his borders. Something about the little ball felt deeper than that, more eternal. It held wisdom that had brought him to the moment, whispered snippets of the future that had guided him to finally call for Lenina.

His bride was on her way to meet him for dinner. It had been over six years since he'd last seen her, when she'd been barely seventeen, still a lanky thing that hadn't grown into herself. She would have changed by now, a hair past twenty-four. It was later than he would have called her, a disappointment on top of many others, but she'd still be beautiful for some time. She always had been.

It was rare to spend more than a passing amount of time with a Bravugan woman; their customs strictly avoided outsiders, but he'd been able to visit her for years. Even then, she'd held the promise of becoming something stunning. Bardan would have married a dog for the rights to Bravug, but her beauty would be a final treat for his victory.

Lenina was irrelevant, though.

He smoothed the wrist of his jacket. What mattered was the ownership of Bravug and its resources. It was a quiet country that rarely interacted outside its own borders, full of citizens who observed traditions of modesty that made it dull in his eyes. What made it valuable was the tirulite that saturated its soil and the ability to forge it into weapons so strong they were nearly magical. He'd known about Bravug's acquisition for years and had painstakingly planned its political takeover, but without a threat of violence he knew its warrior culture wouldn't bow. The Empire of Stone was the threat he needed to move – a threat the rest of Serica had ignored too long.

Lenina's father was an idiot for letting religion dictate his country's future, but King Adante's failure was Bardan's gain; he was about to become the most powerful ruler Serica had ever seen.

Self-satisfaction settled warm in his chest. The Empire of Stone was a necessary evil but they'd brought him everything: the acquisition of Bravug, the eventual alliance of the southern nations under his rule, and the royal-blooded queen he'd been waiting for. The little ball disappeared with a flash.

"Queen Lenina Adante, Majesty." A voice introduced.

Bardan turned to greet her and stopped short.

Beautiful.

It wasn't any one feature that stopped him, but the entirety of her and how every facet played on the others. The *Queen of Beasts* was a beauty, how ironic. She was far from a young girl now; still small, barely reaching his shoulder, but filled out in a way she hadn't been before. He smiled. "Lenina."

"Len."

The correction was blunt, her full name prettier, but he obliged.
"Len."

She watched him through piercing azure eyes, a Bravugan trait created by exposure to tirulite. Her dark sand hair was twisted intricately up and around her head in her country's modest custom, accenting the rich golden tone of her skin. He imagined the length of her hair slipping through his fingers, pooling on his sheets.

“Is something wrong, Majesty?” So soft, her voice.

It broke his thoughts and he tamped down the warm lick in his veins. “You've become an exquisite woman.”

“My lands have blessed me.”

“So it would seem.” *His* lands. *His* exquisite wife. He was giddy. “Have you toured the palace? We’ve made some changes.”

“No, but I'd like to. Is there time? It's my understanding that our ceremony is happening immediately.”

Bardan laughed. “Yes, there’s time for you to see the palace. Immediacy is always exaggerated with these things.” They should have married immediately but Alphese traditions needed all three suns to peak; Lenina had arrived too late. It irked him, but it was better to appear gracious until all was assured. “The ceremony is tomorrow, today is for you to acclimate to your new home.”

Lenina’s expressions were impossible to read. “Will you show me?”

Many, many things. “Of course.”

She took his offered hand and he was surprised by her calloused fingers, a disappointing touch. She was meant to be perfect, kept pristine for his enjoyment. She lacked the Bravugan scars that marred so many of their people, but the callouses were a slight he would have chided her father for. No matter, they could be erased - *would be* erased - before their ceremony.

He abandoned her hand for her lower back and was delighted by the way she went rigid. Bravugans were known for their obsession with purity, he doubted she'd ever had another man's hand on her. Part of him salivated at the thought. In a motion no others would see, he rubbed his thumb along her spine and savoured her shiver; what a gleeful delight she'd be to unwrap.

He'd never know that hours later, in the darkness of her room, she retched.



Chapter 3

Morning light in Alphos felt sterile; the suns' rays bounced off the calcified white of every city surface to pound directly into Len's eyes. Still, she stood on the balcony to try and breathe. She felt so far from home, from any piece of calm.

The night before she'd ripped the horrible white dress off and considered throwing it in the fire. It was beautiful, yes, but it represented everything she resented... most of all, Bardan's pale hand on her as she'd entertained his touch. Her fingers had itched to pull Woa's blade from her skirts and sever the offending limb, but she resisted. Bardan's greed wasn't the dress' fault, so she'd draped it on a chair in a hidden corner of the room before trying to relax in a bath.

Sitting in the marble tub she'd never felt so naked. She looked at her muscular legs, her strong arms, her small breasts, and felt like she was looking from Bardan's gaze. What she saw was something he felt he was *owed*. It made bile rise in her throat, and the memory of his possessive touches sent it the rest of the way out. In Bravug it was sacrilegious to touch her; she was considered next to the gods. Here? It was an afterthought to him, a silent reminder of what would come.

To Bardan, she was a tool – a pretty one.

Len was waiting for salvation.

She'd seen the look in Bardan's eyes: *victory*. With Bardan there would be nothing left for her, even the flesh she was bound in. Bile started to climb but she shook her head, eyes closed. They snapped open as a series of knocks rattled her door. Dread rose when a team of attendants flooded the space with a sense of duty.

Len watched her crown be taken for polishing and only the barest tethers of politeness stopped her from demanding it stay within sight. Len's focus was distracted as an ornate lace dress was hung to air out. Her tongue felt thick. "I suppose I have little say in the details of today?" She murmured as she was led to a seat.

"The king had specific requests. It's been taken care of, there's no need to worry," an attendant informed. "Hands please." Of course, why should she have any say in her own wedding.

Len gave her hands and they were immediately wrapped in cream and large, thin leaves. Her stomach dropped. "What is this?"

"Aredwater cream, to erase your callouses."

Len panicked. "*Take it off!*" The room quieted and Len struggled to calm herself. "Please remove it. I need the callouses." They'd been earned through years of repetitive training with her swordsmaster. Her hands were small, which meant every blade came with a different pattern of wear, and she remembered weeks of wrapping blisters as she trained with each one. She fixed the lady with her saddest eyes. "Please."

The attendant's lips pursed. "I can't, the king specifically requested it."

Len struggled to quell the boiling fury that flashed through her. She nodded. It wasn't the woman's fault, and she could imagine disobeying Bardan had unsavoury drawbacks.

"*Len!*" A squeal sent the room back into its bustling work. *Marelia!* Len watched her sister stride through the space with the confidence of a visiting monarch. "I'm so excited for you!"

Len's surprise bubbled. It had been nearly a year since she'd seen Marelia, and Len didn't know if she wanted to scold her or cry with happiness. "Fotra's green looks good on you." It did. Marelia was dressed in emerald, a long-sleeved gown that made her golden skin glow. The young queen twirled and Len managed a smile. Marelia had always been envious of other princesses and their dresses, considered indecent in Bravug. As Queen of Fotra, she could now own as many gowns as she wished.

"White will look better on you." Marelia smirked. "A queen of two nations, you must be giddy!"

There was little point in correcting Marelia, she was blissfully unaware of political implications outside of hosting parties and touring cities. In truth, she was lucky to be a queen at all as a second daughter. All Marelia saw was a handsome king and a pretty crown for her sister. "I'm too nervous to be giddy." Len muttered.

"Yes, very like you to think of the worst-case scenario. I don't have much time; they didn't want to let me in at all, but I insisted on doing your hair. I doubt anyone here knows how to tie it properly."

The attendants eyed her but didn't interfere. "Thank you, I'd like that." Bravugan women grew their hair throughout their lives, only cutting it at certain birthdays or out of necessity if its weight became too much. It came from some age-old tradition whose meaning had been lost in one of her country's many rebellions, but Bravugan women still observed it. Her sister started separating Len's hair. Both had worn their hair in tight, traditional twists for as long as she could remember. It was an intimate thing to wear their hair down.

"You've always had the healthiest hair; it twists so easily." Her sister chatted as she tugged the heavy sections into place.

"You still wear yours high." Len observed. Marelia's dark locks glittered with green gems, but the braids were unique to Bravug.

"It's a small reminder of home."

Len understood. Had their father seen them with their hair down there would have been a fitting punishment. Even six years after his death, his traditional mindset was hard to unlearn. Regardless, Len knew she'd never wear it down in Alphos. As her sister moved to work on the front of her hair, Len took a risk and leaned close. "Things are going to happen today that you won't understand, that will seem unthinkable. I need to know you'll be with me always." She whispered.

Marelia's hands halted, then kept working as she eyed her sister curiously. "Am I not your sister?"

"I hope you'll still want to be, after today." Len held her gaze. "Before long I'll call for you. Let Conras know I'll need you both." The Fotran King would be a useful ally. They were interrupted as Len's crown returned to the room but Marelia nodded, barely perceptible, as she continued to braid and tuck. Marelia left shortly after, and Len hoped she'd said enough.

The cathedral was what Len had expected it to be: gaudy, ostentatious, and overbearing. Everything was devoid of colour again and the lack of pigment was starting to hurt her eyes. Even so, she appreciated the happiness of the people who filled the massive space.

The smiles of curious children hurt her soul as she entered. She pulled a silver flower from her dress and gave it to a wide-eyed little girl whose tiny hands clutched it with a delighted squeal. Youthful innocence was beautiful and it made Len feel wretched. The girl's life would be harder than hers in every way and yet Len felt like she was dying, dripping in wealth.

Selfish.

‘Dripping’ was the right word; she'd been wrapped like a gift. Her crown sat heavily on her head, adorned with strands of pearls and gaudy silver flowers that had no place touching what it represented. Attendants had meticulously painted her cosmetics on and dutifully ripped out whatever hair they deemed unbecoming; even her nailbeds had been made pleasing. Swaths of silvered lace flowed down her body and were carried behind her by girls covered in flowered tunics and silver shoes. She didn't miss the impenetrable wall of guards that made running unappealing.

Front and centre, clothed in white, was Bardan. He stood with the assuredness of someone who believed he'd won, silver crown gleaming almost as smugly as his eyes. His ageless magic kept him young but all Len could see was a future she'd spent her life dreading. Still, she walked.

Step, step, agonizing step.

The moment that had been tearing her apart was coming. Soft white petals graced her cheeks as they fluttered to the ground and the sound of the crowd rose. Was she doing the right thing? It was too late to undo it now. Her heart thundered in her ears until time seemed to stand still.

A thunderous *crack* rang through the room.

Shocked silence enveloped the cathedral. Len closed her eyes as the scent of chemical magic filled the air.

“Well, aren't you a pretty little thing.”

A velvet voice.

His velvet voice.

It smoothed into her ears from behind, where her little flower girls screeched and ran. Len heard Bardan call for his guards but they froze in place, magic sinking into their muscles. The silence turned to urgent whispers of recognition. *Kaseus Collabel*. “That's not a very warm welcome, *King Alimen*,” the voice dripped with disdain. “Is this how you greet every visiting ruler, or am I special?”

“*Cannibal!*” Someone hissed. Anticipation rippled over Len's skin, hair prickling as he drew behind her.

“I...” Bardan looked for words as he pieced together what was happening. “The only thing *special* about you is that I'll have your head for this.”

Kaseus's chuckle was patronizing. “I doubt it.” His fingertip tucked a wisp of hair behind Len's ear and fluttered down to her hammering pulse. The touch made her flinch. “Poor thing is terrified. Do you think your betrothed will save you?” He cooed.

An ironic statement.

It seemed Bardan had the good sense to be alarmed. Len watched his mask slide back in place, trying to manage the situation. “Kaseus, do you think you're getting out of here alive?”

“Yes, I'm quite certain of it.” He toyed with one of the gaudy strands of pearls in Len's veil, making a show of how comfortable he felt. She wanted to see him but stayed immobile. “I told you I'd never let your name know peace.”

“And yet I've been blessed with it for decades.” Bardan bit.

“True. It's why I couldn't let this fanfare go to waste. Neglecting your hard work would be rude.” Len's eye caught a hand dismissively waving at the cathedral.

“My wife hasn't done anything to deserve this, Kaseus.”

“*Wife*. Premature, aren’t you?” Len kept fearful eyes on Bardan as she felt hands in her hair, pulling out pins and flowers and letting them unceremoniously *clack* to the floor. “You have excellent taste, Alimen. I should visit more often.” Bardan’s jaw betrayed how furious he was that someone was touching what he thought was *his*. The defiance sparked something in Len as the veil slid from her shoulders, pearls tittering to the ground with it. Her hair spilled down her back in dark golden waves. Kaseus left her crown.

“What do you want with her?” Bardan was stalling, eyes flashing between his immobile guards, willing them to move. All that Royal power and no control; Len had to fight a smirk.

“That’s between me and your pretty trinket.” *Trinket*. It was the truth. She shuddered as Kaseus’s hand wove into her scalp, caressing and dangerous at once. It didn’t feel wrong. It *should have* felt wrong. “Do you want to marry him? Be honest.” She stayed silent. A violent tug ripped a cry from her. “Hm?”

“*Yes!*” No.

Kaseus hummed and patted her head, fingers smoothing through her locks. It should have been debasing; she should have been ashamed. Instead, she felt victorious while Bardan watched. He could do *nothing* against the man whose lips hung at her ear.

“Bad things happen to girls who lie.” An unfamiliar tingle flushed her skin, then curled slowly down her spine. Warm breath fanned her cheek when he loosed dark chuckle, then pulled away.

Before she registered the buzzing in her skin her hair was pulled back from her throat where a golden cuff snapped shut. “We’re leaving, and *look*,” a pause. “I still have my head.” Len saw Bardan’s face melt from barely contained rage to hideous anger a moment before he lunged down the aisle, Kaseus’s magic finally releasing him. It was blissfully too late.

The cathedral swirled away as the thick scent of magic stole Len’s consciousness. Finally, *safe*.



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