

HELLION CHRONICLES #2



Hellion's Reckoning

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MAP OF HARROWSVALE



CHAPTER 1

Inias had witnessed bloodbaths before, but nothing like the scene spread out before his eyes now. Bodies were strewn across the village, their lifeless eyes staring up at the sky. Rising from the ruins of a once-charming village, plumes of smoke rose into the sky. Lifeless bodies lay scattered like discarded dolls, offering a feast for scavengers that dared to approach. This wasn't just a battle. It was a chilling massacre that left the ground stained with blood and vengeful spirits. His eyes drifted to a young girl who'd had her throat cut. The horns upon her head and fangs peaking from her lips struck him and he knew. "*Hellions*," Inias said, kneeling to brush the girl's hair aside.

Those fae with demon blood, the hellion breed. Legend claimed that the Fae were exiled from their homeland because they dared to unite with devils and demons. Over many thousands of years, the small clan of exiles had grown into many houses and clans. Until they cleansed those devils, they could never return home. Ambriel, the promised land. It was just a legend, an origin story for their people. That didn't keep the purists from using it to justify their hatred for the Hellions. It was their fault the fae couldn't return home. Demon blood still ran in his lineage, but it had been dormant for five generations, believed to be bred out, until Inias was born.

His uncle couldn't have ordered this, not after making an enemy of the Ravenmoons. They were looking for any excuse to rebel and the king had promised to seek a peaceful ending. Slaughtering hellion villages would only bring the two clans closer to war. Ivaran may have been a bigot, but he wasn't an idiot. War was the last thing the Hallow needed. Inias hoped he could reason with Ivaran and change him. Whoever attacked this village had done so with a sizable army. They came, plundered, killed, and burned it all to the ground. "Vigilantes?" Inias asked Ashryn as he stood up.

"The Magistrate," she answered, handing him a rolled piece of parchment. Inias recognized the seal, a mighty dragon surrounded by bolts of lightning. "By order of Magistrate Ailog Borseth Emberstone, the enemies of the crown have been crushed. May this serve as a warning to all other..." Rolling his eyes, he crumpled up the paper, throwing it to the ground. "Elkshit!" Inias spat and kicked at the pile of rubble beneath his feet. The Elk beside him let out a wail and Inias brushed his fur, "Not you, Fievel."

The Magistrate, Sylvis' father. He'd only met the man once, but all his spirited speeches about the new golden age made his thoughts clear. Another one of his uncle's followers. Once the devils were cleared, a new golden age would begin and, at the end, they would be welcomed home. Even his uncle found the magistrate to be a little extreme in his methods, but never chastised him. It served his interests, so why stop him?

Ashryn looked to the soldiers pulling rubble aside, hoping to find some survivors. "Ailog...he'd better have a good reason for this," she ground out as they walked along a once beautiful street. Inias growled and rested a hand on Fievel's neck. "There is no good reason for this," He answered her, thinking of what to do with the magistrate once they reached Dusk Haven. It had once been Caelan's city, the Skyfire clan's domain. Now with them gone, Ailog was getting bold.

"Any good news?" Inias asked one man, rubbing his hands clean. Twenty-five elite warriors were chosen to accompany him. "Nothing but rubble and bodies," the raven-haired man answered him with a shake of his head. "They sure put up a fight." He pointed to the many bodies clad in bright red armor

bearing the same dragon sigil as the crumpled parchment. “They didn’t bother to retrieve their own dead,” Ashryn snarled and spit towards the pile of bodies.

A woman with deep olive skin dressed in black armor approached them with a quick bow. Styx walked beside her, pulling a small wagon full of swords and other pointy weapons behind him. “Free weapons, that’s some good news, your highness,” she said, lifting her hazel eyes to meet his. The fox yipped to Inias, who knelt to pet him. On their journey Styx had seemed to become everyone’s familiar, eager to help wherever he could.

He brushed a kiss between the fox’s eyes and stood. “Be ready to put them to use,” Inias told the woman, looking at the pile of soldiers as they had poured liquor on them. “We’ll be paying his honor a visit.”

The raven-haired soldier, Ruvyn, stepped forward and took Inias by the shoulder before he could step away. “We should inform Lord Varen first.” He reminded the prince. Inias groaned but nodded and turned. They had a plan to meet with Lord Varen and discern his intentions, then discover what had become of Dusk Haven after Caelan’s fall. Only Ashryn knew of his plan to potentially take Dusk Haven for himself, should the Ravenmoons agree. They were the last great Hellion clan and the only force that kept his uncle’s wrath in check.

“Alright,” Inias answered as he pulled his shoulder away. “We’ll have a feast to honor the dead and for all your hard work. I’ll leave the rest to you and Elara.” The two bowed low as Inias turned and left with Ashryn by his side.

“Another feast?” she asked, narrowing her hazel eyes as Inias mounted his elk. This would be the fourth feast on their journey, not to mention the detour into the hot springs for a night. Every night he’d take turns with them on the night watches. “They deserve it.” Inias answered with a shrug as she mounted her white horse tied to what remained of the village gate. “I want them to like me. Is that a crime?”

As they exited, she couldn’t help but scoff, shaking her head. “You’re trying to buy them off,” she accused him playfully, a sly grin dancing across her pale cheeks. “You figured that out huh?” A soft blush tinted Inias cheeks and pulled his hair to cover it. They were elite warriors; some were veterans of war and others had once been among his uncle’s personal guard. The king had gifted them to him after the battle in Willowberry Forest when he had saved his friends and avenged his father.

“I have no idea what my uncle and Varen are brewing,” Inias confessed as they neared the camp nestled among the lush trees. “If they go to war, I’m siding with Keira.” His uncle was prepared to kill him, to wipe out Keira’s entire clan without a second thought. It was only Aubron and a sign from his father that held him back. His uncle and the Nightfang clan had forsaken him the moment he was born. It wasn’t them who stood by him all his life, believing in him through all his mistakes. If war was on its way, he would stand with Keira, who had stood by him when everyone lost faith.

Ashryn nodded and rested a hand on his shoulder. He winced as the sunlight bounced off her fiery red hair with hints of yellow and orange. “You don’t need to buy them off,” she told him, bringing a finger to trace the curved scar across his right cheek. Inias pulled his face away and growled. He didn’t mind the hand on his shoulder, but whenever she stroked his scar, it left him feeling exposed. The blush on his face, the way he looked away and groaned. She found it adorable. He hated it. “Just show them what a brilliant leader you are.”

“Do you remember the bridge?” Inias asked, crossing his arms. “I’m not brilliant.”

“You’re a better leader than you think.” She looked to the men outside the burned city digging holes to bury the dead. “You’d die for them. Once they see that, they’ll follow you anywhere.”

CHAPTER 2

Those sad, sullen faces were bright with smiles and laughter under the moonlit sky. A large fire burned at the center of the fallen village. They poured liquor over the invaders' corpses and set them ablaze. After the feast, they drank from the barrels of wine they found stashed in someone's basement. Several of them began dancing around the fire. Elara and Ruvyn had discovered a stash of instruments, drums, lyre, flutes, and guitars. Despite everything they had lost, they still found beauty and joy in creating music together under the stars.

The celebration aimed to provide solace to the villagers who had been lost. They hoped the spirits would join them or, at the very least, be entertained. Once the wine had gone around a few times, each of them took turns spitting and urinating upon the burning corpses. They hoped it would please the dead buried beyond the village to see their invaders insulted. The alcohol had stolen their wits, and some had taken to jumping through the large fire and shouting into the night. It was the perfect way to end such a sorrowful day.

Ashryn had cut her palm and swore an oath to avenge them. Others had joined in her pledge. Inias swore to do all he could, fearing he may fail them. He paid close attention to those who had chosen not to take any oaths. He'd be an idiot to assume his uncle hadn't planted a spy. One of his purist sycophants, they would never take an oath to avenge a hellion. Lying or breaking an oath to the dead would leave a curse upon their clan. Vengeful spirits would torment them and their descendants until they broke it or the bloodline ended. Purists were superstitious, fearing every dark omen they saw. There were other reasons one may choose to abstain. The king viewed hellions as his enemy; they feared being branded as sympathizers.

Turning against one's king wasn't a simple decision and, as determined as Inias was, he still wasn't exactly sure where he stood. He hadn't seen the tension growing in the court, too busy with his own mischief. If the Ravenmoons would maintain the peace, how many more hellions would suffer? There had been no peace for the hellions lost in the village. They had suffered all in the name of peace. Varen had never wanted a war; it would devastate their kingdom. Inias wondered how heavily all those compromises weighed on him. All the lives lost, their influence and pride stripped away.

A series of howls pulled him away from his thoughts. Styx came bounding towards him, leaping into his arms. Inias sniffed and pulled away, shaking his head. The fox's breath wreaked of alcohol and elk steak. "Are you drunk?" he asked, ruffling his fur. Styx licked his lips and grinned, leaning forward to lick at Inias' cheek. "Augh..." Inias groaned, pushing him away to wipe his cheek, "Eat some mint." Styx laid himself over Inias' lap, who reached down to softly stroke his fur. "You need a big bowl of water, buddy."

"*TO ARMS!*" someone cried as an arrow nearly grazed Inias' cheek. They were back, the Magistrate's men. He thought so at least. Who else would attack them? Styx shot to his feet beside Inias, growling. Everyone who hadn't passed out pulled their weapons.

Ashryn drew her sword and rushed to Inias' side. Cloaked figures emerged by the fire, striking his troop. Styx rushed out, tackling one to the ground. Inias saw the stag stitched on the cloak hood and threw his hand out. "Styx, let them go!" He ran past the fox and moved into the light, lifting his hands. One of the cloaked figures saw him and gasped, falling to their knees. "It's the prince!" They called out to the

others, who stopped fighting to turn to him. Inias' soldiers stepped away as one by one each of the cloaked figures either bowed or bent the knee.

"Forgive us, your highness," the first who knelt spoke and rose to their feet, "We mistook you for the Magistrate's force. The village begged for our aid, but I'm afraid we were too late."

"And you are?" Ashryn asked, stepping beside Inias. "The Knight's Shade, Ravenmoon's personal guard." Inias answered, "Is Keira with you?" The cloaked figure nodded and stepped aside with a bow to reveal Lord Varen and Keira stepping out from the shadows. The fire illuminated the amethyst highlights in Keira's hair and the smile on her face as she ran to embrace Inias. He caught her and slid his fingers through her hair. "I'm sorry," she said, squeezing him so tight he could feel her knives poking at his chest. "I didn't get to say goodbye."

"That's half the reason I'm out here," Inias grinned and let the scent of rose petals and dandelions surround him. "And I never thanked you for saving my son." Lord Varen rested a hand on his daughter's shoulder as she slid away from Inias. "There's a lot to talk about," Inias nodded. "Your knights are free to help themselves. There's plenty of elk and wine for everyone. Unless you got another few dozen lurking out there."

The injured were being laid out so Ruvyn could begin applying his healing magic on them. Only three, one knight, and two of his soldiers. "I'd like to speak with you, away from your troop," Varen told him. "Fine," Inias answered, narrowing his eyes at the elder. "None of your knights, either."

"Agreed." Keira answered before her father could object and shot him a stern glance. He met it with one of his own, but sighed and shook his head. "Agreed. Lead the way, your highness."

CHAPTER 3

Inias led them back to his camp and into his tent. Pouring a glass for the two of them, he then filled a bowl with water and set it out for Styx. The fox eagerly buried his face in the bowl, slurping noisily. “Why is the fox here?” Varen asked, glancing from Styx to Inias. “I asked to speak alone.”

“Without my troop is what you asked,” Inias gently reminded him, pulling up a chair beside Keira. “Styx isn’t just any troop; he’s my partner.” The three turned to see Styx sprawled out on Inias’ bed, sound asleep and snoring loudly. “And he’s passed out. So, what does it matter?” He took a long deep sip of his drink, cheeks red and eyes bright as he glanced over the table at Lord Varen. This wasn’t how Inias wanted to meet him, drunk and reeking of piss and sweat.

Keira’s eyes darted back and forth between the two who sat in silence. She nudged Inias with her shoulder, “Well?” she prodded. Varen’s voice finally pierced the silence between him and the prince. “Why aren’t you in Knivae?”

Inias hesitated for a moment before replying, “I hoped to spend the season in Dusk Haven. The hot springs are enchanting this time of year.” He had hoped to show up at the manor and surprise him, catch him off guard. Now it was Inias in shock, fumbling over what to say. Varen narrowed his eyes and Inias felt he could see right through him. He had once pulled the truth from Rurik simply by casting a hypnotic gaze upon him. Inias kept his eyes averted, avoiding those bright eyes of his.

“You’re not here to spy for your uncle?” Varen asked, causing Inias to grip his seat tight. He didn’t need to cast a hypnotic gaze upon him. The intentions of his uncle were obvious, using Inias’ friendship with Keira to uncover Varen’s plans. “That’s what he thinks.” Inias admitted. “You’re betraying him?” Keira asked, turning to him.

“Not exactly.” Inias said with a shake of his head, nervously fidgeting with the ends of his hair. He couldn’t reveal his intention to stand with them should his uncle strike. Saving Ashryn and Vestin had opened Ivaran’s eyes. “If you agree to stand down, rejoin the court, uncle will see that the hellions aren’t the demons he thinks they are. It’s a start.”

Keira sighed and shook her head, but Varen let out a laugh that echoed beyond the tent. “I envy your youthful naivety, young prince,” He said with a clearing of his throat, “We have loyally served the court for centuries and they still turned on us. How long can you expect us to stand by and watch? How many more lost lives until you see your uncle for what he is?”

“He spared my life!” Inias defended sharply. “I have to give him a chance.”

“A chance to what?” Keira asked, slamming one of her knives into the table. “Slaughter *another* village? Who do you think gave Ailog the order?”

“He’s not that far gone!” Inias snapped back, slamming a knife of his own beside hers. “What about the crescents? Forget about them? They’re an enemy to all of us, purist, and hellion.”

“Naesala is hard at work, forming a coalition to strike them. No doubt she has you two in mind to join her.” Varen explained and finished his glass. “Ivaran allowed a group like the Crescent to grow under

his watch. Allowed both the Rosethorn and Skyfire clans to use his hatred to exploit our people for their gain.”

Inias shook his head. Ivaran knew nothing of the Crescent, none of them had except for Aubron and Varen. “It was fine until they killed his brother,” Keira said, resting a hand on Inias shoulder. “His love for your father and mother saved your life. He changed his mind, not his heart.” Varen stood as he spoke and wiped some wine from his lips. “I admire your optimism, but I’m afraid your uncle cannot and *will* not be changed.”

“Why did *you* wait so long to act?” Inias stood and met his eyes, the anger burning in his voice. “*Centuries* watching your own kind suffer while you were safe behind your wards. And now, when the king’s wrath turns towards you, suddenly it’s time to protect *your* people?”

“Inias...” Keira warned as she stepped back and pulled her knife, standing beside her father, who began snarling. The men’s eyes were glowing. Inias gripped the knife he left buried in the table. For a moment Inias’ eyes burned as Varen’s gaze bore into him. His other hand slammed onto the table, digging their claws through the solid oak. “Out of sight, out of mind.” Inias accused him, eyes flaring with rage. Varen widened his and glanced away. There was a hint of guilt in Varen’s eyes, uncertainty, as if Inias’ gaze had pulled it from him.

Varen rubbed his eyes and groaned, shaking his head. “Your gaze is strong,” he said, keeping his eyes averted from Inias as his head lifted again. “What does that mean?” Inias asked, pulling the knife from the table as Keira sheathed hers. “The hellion’s gaze. You didn’t know?” she asked, her eyes glowing a bright purple, then returned to their inky black coloring. Inias shook his head. He knew his eyes would glow when he was angry or even excited, but no one had ever taught him how to use it.

“You really know nothing about your kind,” Varen said, looking at the claws still present on Inias’ hand. “Let’s teach him!” Keira said, almost bouncing on her toes. She ran around the table and grabbed Inias’ arm, tugging it. “We need someone to guard our southern wards against the Magistrate.”

“Absolutely not-.” Varen sighed, looking between the two of them, shaking his head. “Despite your indecision, you saved my children.”

“So, you owe me!” Inias said, leaning in against Keira. “You’re the reason they needed saving.” Varen corrected him as he inspected the boy with a small smile. “But I will say, after witnessing your gaze, I’m curious to see what other skills you possess.”

Inias looked to the window, catching the red glow in his eyes. “I’ll leave his tutoring to you,” Varen nodded to Keira and Inias snapped his head back to him. “There’s a small cottage on our southern border and plenty of space for your company to camp.”

“You’ll love it!” Keira squeezed his arm. “Right by the waterfall!”

“I need to look for someone while I’m there,” Inias remembered Aubron’s advice to find a Thaddeus living south of Dusk Haven. “Do you know someone named Thaddeus? Served my father during the goblin war.”

Varen curled the end of his short beard with a light hum. “You must be speaking of the Sage, yes I know of him.” He seemed to think for a moment, then nodded. “After the war, he vanished. Many lords over the centuries since sought his services, but none have found him.”

“That’s discouraging…” Inias groaned, pulling away from Keira. “If no one can find him…”
Draw him out. He clamped his mouth shut before he finished that sentence. “Then it’s not worth looking.”
Varen nodded in agreement with the prince. “You’re welcome to spend the night, leave in the morning?”
Inias looked between the two, who nodded. Even Styx let out a bark, then laid back down. “And we’re keeping him up.”

CHAPTER 4

The Ravenmoon's forest was just as breathtaking as Inias had remembered. His troop and Ashryn beside him appeared mesmerized, their eyes drawn to the gathering specks of light surrounding them. The forest was alive with vibrant colors and the sound of nature's symphony filled the air, soothing the tension. As they walked among the tall trees covered in a rainbow of leaves, Inias noticed his troop and Varen's knights chatting more freely and not in hushed whispered.

Fievel let out a small whine as Styx playfully pawed at the Elk's neck. "He doesn't like to play," Inias said, gently pulling Styx back. Despite Styx's attempts to bond with Fievel, the elk preferred solitude, always keeping to himself. Inias stroked Fievel's neck until he felt him calm. "It's okay. He doesn't want to eat you." He wished his steed were more like Styx, able to perceive his words and intentions.

"Have you heard from Bacchus?" Inias inquired as they passed by the statue of the forest guardian, now adorned with offerings of wine, grapes, and ivy crowns. Keira pointed towards a woman dressed in vines, roaming through the forest. "Bacchus remains unseen," she explained. "His maenads have been vigilant in patrolling the forests, at his behest to protect us."

"As long as we honor him with offerings, they will watch over us," Varen stated as Keira, Ashryn, and Inias joined him at the front. "Do you really trust those untamed women to protect you?" Ashryn asked, casting a wary glance at the maenad with a haunting presence. Inias had shared stories of how they had dispatched enemies ruthlessly, like savage beasts.

"They have proven themselves as allies," Varen affirmed, gesturing towards the maenad, who lingered briefly before walking away. "Their silence may be unsettling, but we must rely on their protection."

Ashryn grimaced, her gaze shifting back to Lord Varen on his dark steed. "And the Magistrate?" she questioned, revealing a blood-stained bandage on her hand. "Many of us swore to end him."

Inias nodded and asked, "What provoked his attack on the village, anyway?"

"In his greed, the Magistrate seized control after the Skyfire's departed," Varen explained as his horse carried him forward. "When the village resisted his tyranny, he lashed out."

"He's Sylvis's father, right?" Inias asked as Styx jumped from his lap to stretch his legs and walk. Varen nodded, turning his horse around to stop with a raise of his hand. The knights were quick to stop. Inias followed his example, raising his hand as Ashryn barked an order to halt. "What do you intend to do with him, prince?" Varen asked, blocking the path so he couldn't simply slip by and ignore him. "He'll get what's coming to him." Inias answered, avoiding his stare.

"Even if that means starting a war with Sylvis?" Keira pressed him. "With your uncle?"

Inias hesitated, his heart pounding in his chest. Yes. *Yes*. Why couldn't he just say it? The silence hung heavy as Inias struggled to find the words. He had already voiced his intentions to Ashryn, leaving a glimmer of hope for reconciliation. Saying it aloud now, in front of everyone, would draw a line in the

sand. He felt so brave, ready to defy his uncle for his friends. That youthful naivety, the hope that things would work themselves out.

“When you’re ready to choose a side, come find me,” Varen stated firmly, then turned to his knights. “We part ways here. Keira will lead them to the cottage!” With that, the knights silently bid farewell and followed their leader down the road towards the manor.

Once he and his knights were out of sight, Inias turned to Keira. “When you’re ready to choose a side,” Inias said with a mocking tone, earning him a quick slap on the arm from Keira. “Do not!” she snapped, her eyes flashing with anger as she rode forward, following the opposite path her father had taken. “The king nearly wiped us out, and you’re defending him!”

Ashryn stayed beside Inias, who stared down at Fievel’s antlers, absentmindedly stroking his neck. The soft fur soothed his nerves, allowing him a moment to gather his thoughts. “He’s my uncle,” Inias finally confessed. “With my father gone, he’s all I have left.” Styx barked beneath them, causing Inias to look down at the loyal fox. “He’s right, you have Styx, Ashryn, and me,” Keira said, reaching out to rest a comforting hand on Inias’s arm with a gentle squeeze. “We’re your clan.”

“Yeah...” Inias murmured, turning his gaze away to admire the surrounding scenery. Ashryn narrowed her eyes at him, exchanging a concerned glance with Keira. Seeing their expressions, Inias shook his head and gestured to the men behind them, who were listening intently. “I believe the trees have ears. One shouldn’t speak of rebellion so openly,” Inias warned through gritted teeth, looking back and forth between his companions. Anything to end the conversation.

Beyond the trees, Inias could hear a waterfall crashing. Keira pointed to the cliff high above them, then to the waterfall as she led them onto a wooden walkway. “Here we are!” She said cheerily as she dismounted her horse. Ashryn turned hers around and gave the order to break for camp. Inias dismounted Fievel and tied him to a post and followed Keira over the wooden deck.

“Wow...” Inias breathed when he saw the little thatched cottage. It sat at the center of a small pond connected to the wooden deck by a bridge. However, it was the breathtaking sight of the cascading waterfall behind the cottage, sending a misty spray into the air, that truly captured his heart. Beneath the deck, water rushed from the pond over the stones and further down, emptying into a small river far below. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” Keira said beside him, “At night, the moonlight dances over the water like little fireflies. My parents spent their honeymoon here.” With a smile, she kicked off her shoes and walked barefoot over the wooden bridge leading to the cottage, resting serenely at the center of the pond.

“I never asked,” Inias began as he pulled his boots and socks off to follow her. “What happened to your mother?” Keira stopped and turned to look at him. “Ask your uncle.” She said and ran her finger along the doorway covered with a long green cloth. Something shimmered around the cottage as Keira stepped through the opening. Stepping through the doorway, Inias saw the enchanting interior of the cottage. Half of it was an open patio, adorned with a hammock, a quaint table, and a cozy sofa under a canopy of vines.

“Did he-” Inias began, but Keira shot him a glare and pointed her finger, silencing him. “I said ask him.” She spun away, wiping her face with a snuffle. Leading him towards a wall covered in ivy leaves, she pulled them aside to reveal a small bedroom. Inside, a bookcase, table, and small stove created a cozy atmosphere, with bedding made of soft animal furs. “Cozy,” Inias remarked with a smile, eyeing a tightly sealed door. “I assume that’s the bathroom?” Keira nodded and closed the vines as they exited the

room. With the sound of the waterfall in the background, Inias suspected there was no conventional shower or tub.

“Do you like it?” Keira asked, playfully bumping Inias’s shoulder. “It’s paradise,” Inias replied, resting his hands on the gate to gaze at the waterfall. The gentle mist was refreshing, inviting. As the sunlight hit the falls, a rainbow spread across the sky above them. “I never knew this place was here. To think hellions built this.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Keira inquired, studying the waterfall beside him. “We’re demons, right? Demons don’t live in paradise,” Inias stated.

“And who defines what a demon is?” she challenged, narrowing her eyes.

“Demons are full of malice; they bring decay and ruin. They don’t give life, they take it, feed on it,” Inias explained, recalling his upbringing. Their ancestors had been outcasts for mingling with demons, considered impure and dangerous. “Are *you* full of malice?” Keira asked, perching on the wooden fence. Her legs dangled over the side, toes skimming the cool water below.

Inias gazed down at his reflection in the water, his long raven black hair framing his face and bringing out the deep red in his eyes. Running his tongue over his fangs, he frowned and turned away, covering the scar on his cheek discreetly. “I don’t think so,” he whispered, lifting his head.

Keira swung her leg around to face him, gently sweeping his hair back behind his elegantly pointed ears. Inias instinctively wanted to retreat, but the firm touch of her hands on his cheeks anchored him in place. His cheeks flushed a deep crimson, mirroring the intensity of his eyes as they locked with her mesmerizing, inky black gaze. “Unlike your uncle, you see the good in people, even him.” She pulled him into a hug, letting his head rest against her chest.

Inias blinked but hugged her back, letting his fingers slide through her hair. He could feel her fingers gently stroking his hair, her cheek resting atop his head. As Keira held him close, Inias felt a warmth spreading through his body, a feeling he hadn’t experienced in a long time. It was a stark contrast to the chill of the water beneath them, the darkness of his past, and the uncertainty of his future. He closed his eyes, allowing himself to exist simply in that moment, embracing the comfort Keira offered.

Their embrace lingered, the quiet surroundings providing a sense of peace and calm that Inias hadn’t realized he craved. The gentle lapping of the water against the posts of the fence, the distant calls of birds in the forest, and the soft rustling of leaves in the breeze filled the silence. Keira’s heartbeat thudded rhythmically against Inias’ ear, a steady reminder of her presence as his eyes closed. “Thank you, Keira,” he murmured. Taking a deep breath, Inias pulled back slightly from the hug, meeting Keira’s gaze once more. As her fingers slid from his hair, she gave it a light tug. “Don’t hide it,” she said. “Show your uncle and the world you’re not afraid of who you are.”

CHAPTER 5

The cozy fur enveloped Inias as he woke up to the harmonious sounds of the flowing waterfall and chirping birds. He turned his gaze towards the cascading water with a content smile. "What do you think?" Inias asked Styx, his fox companion lying beside him. Styx affectionately licked his cheek and wrapped him in a tight hug around the neck, eliciting giggles from Inias. Through the lush ivy covering, Inias noticed a stack of old books and scrolls on the patio table.

Inias slipped out of the comfortable bed and draped a light black cloak over his shoulders before stepping out of his room. The top book seemed ancient, with only two decipherable words: 'hellion' and another that he interpreted as 'scourge' or 'invasion.' "Is she expecting me to read all of this?" Inias grumbled to himself as Ashryn walked across the bridge. "How are the others?" Inias inquired, excusing himself to return to his chamber.

"Everyone's settled," Ashryn replied, facing away as Inias dressed himself. "They're curious about our next move. The Ravenmoon clan has rejected peace, and the Magistrate's influence still looms."

As Ashryn briefed him on the camp's status, Inias donned a tunic and leather pants. "Have four of them disguise themselves as patrols and scout the city," Inias instructed, adjusting the sword slung across his back. "Inform them you've dispatched a letter to Ivaran, detailing their response." They had stolen plenty of armor off the Magistrate's men and it would take time for 'orders' to return from the King. For now, it would keep the party settled.

"Should we send Ivaran anything?" Ashryn asked, her tone laced with concern. "Silence might arouse suspicions. I suggest we tell him we were delayed, give us a few days, maybe a week." She took a loud bite from an apple Inias had failed to see in her hand a moment ago. He turned to meet her hazel eyes sparkling in the sunlight and she pointed up. Above them were several apples, red and green apples growing from the vine roofing. "That's...incredible." Eagerly, he grabbed one and Styx leapt into the air like a bolt of black lightning to take one into his mouth.

"Tell him we were delayed five days due to storms or something," Inias agreed to her plan, taking a bite from the apple. The sweet taste rippled over his tongue, bringing a smile to his lips. "They weren't growing yesterday."

"I believe they only bloom in the morning," Ashryn said, delicately tracing her fingers over one of the ancient scrolls. Her nails, painted a deep shade of black, stood out against the intricate patterns on the parchment. A pair of red gloves covered most of her hand, leaving only the tips of her fingers exposed like crimson flames. The gloves matched the bright red of her light jacket, which contrasted with the dark black of the top she wore underneath.

Inias set the top book aside to reveal a worn leather journal hidden underneath. "The diary of Rhalyf Nightfang." He read the name written in centuries old ink. "Your grandfather?" Ashryn asked, reaching out for it as Inias pulled it away, unrolling the string. The black leather binding opened to reveal a date on the first page. "He wrote this six hundred years ago, at least." Inias pulled a chair and sat down as Ashryn sat upon the arm beside him. She rested a hand on his shoulder, which Inias ignored as he crossed his legs.

“On the night of the blood moon I witnessed a feral wolf devouring all in its path, running this way and that across the Vale until all under heaven had become his domain.” Inias read from the first passage, shaking his head. “It’s just his dream journal.” He flipped a few more pages and found his uncle’s name written. “Ivaran’s glamour weakens, and I fear his resentment only gro-.”

“That’s enough reading,” Ashryn said, gripping his chin to meet his eyes. The sunlight bounced off her hazel hues and bright red hair with hints of orange and yellow. He found himself lost in the colors and the gaze she fixed upon him. He could barely feel it as she pulled the book from his hand, hiding it away somewhere. Unable to blink, look away, a smile spread across his face. Something about the way she looked at him, the way her delicate fingers fell against his neck as she leaned in.

Before her lips could brush his, a voice pulled him away. “Interrupting?” Keira asked, standing in the doorway with her hands on her hips. She wore a long black sleeveless cloak over her a blue tunic top stuffed with knives. Keira stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips, narrowing her eyes at Ashryn suspiciously. Inias couldn’t tell if it was jealousy or concern that flickered in her onyx black eyes. It had all happened so fast. He was holding something and then he saw those eyes pulling him in, stripping his senses. It was all becoming so fuzzy as he tried to recall it. *Hormones*. That was it. His uncle was often blaming his moodiness on hormones or something. Although, Aubron said the king never understood teenagers at all.

Of course, he’d wanted to kiss her. Ashryn was beautiful and a fierce warrior. They’d fought side by side on many campaigns in the past. With the sounds of birds and water surrounding him, he had just gotten lost in the moment. As he pieced his excuses together, he felt her fingers against the back of his neck, causing him to straighten to his feet and step away from her. Inias looked between the two and shook his head. “Dismissed Ashryn,” he said, watching as she bowed and left the two.

Keira turned as she passed, sniffing with a slight growl. “What were you two doing?” she asked, pulling the cloth over the doorway as she entered. “I was...we were...” He looked at the desk and blinked. What were they doing? Reading? He couldn’t recall. She began tapping her foot and Inias lifted the old book sitting to the side. “Reading,” Inias answered, clearing his throat. The more he tried to remember, the wider the gap seemed to become.

Keira eyed him with the same suspicion she’d eyed Ashryn. He’d never let anyone touch him like that, she was the only one he’d ever allowed that close. “What is all this?” Inias asked, clearing his throat. “Sorry,” Keira apologized, throwing herself into his chair, “Father insisted I bring *all* the reading material. Don’t tell him, but I haven’t read most of it either.” The sunlight hit the intricate tattoos along her bare arms, causing them to shine as she took a deep breath. The black ink let off a purple glow against her fair skin. “Hellions draw power from nature. Everything here is so alive and full of magic.”

Inias took a deep breath, but nothing glowed. His neck had a fox tattoo, and, on his chest, there was a black scorpion in honor of his mother’s chosen familiar. He set down the book and sat on the table, facing his friend. The magic was in the air, in everything around them. He could feel it against his skin, in every breath he took, but it didn’t fill him with any power. “So that’s my first lesson?” he asked, throwing his feet up on the armchair beside her. “Learning to draw power from nature? I can do that, just not in here.”

Keira gave his legs a shove. His boots hit the floor with a thud as he chuckled. “You’re not a Ravenmoon. The forest sees you as an outsider and won’t share its secrets.” She stood and pulled one book from the pile, featuring a man standing in a striking pose with two swords. “We’re going to start with the devil’s dance.”

CHAPTER 6

The early morning sun cast a golden glow over the forest, breathing new life into Ashryn. She gingerly pulled a weathered black leather journal from beneath her jacket and elegantly sank to her knees beside the swiftly flowing river. The water tumbled over polished stones, composing a symphony that intertwined with the chirping of birds and the whisper of leaves in the breeze.

“*Inias...*” Her voice quivered as she peered at the tattered leather cradled in her grasp, “I hope you can forgive me.” The journal glided gracefully along the current, carried away by the river as she arose, swallowing hard against the knot in her throat. “For all of it.” Get close to him. That’s what his uncle had told her to do. He had known nothing but ridicule and forced praise his entire life. Just a sprinkle of affection and *Inias* would melt in her hands.

Ashryn wasn’t sure which was worse, the crescent or the halls of the Nightfang court. Whichever it was, she was glad to be free of both. Chained and forced to display her fire magic or twirl her hips for the crowd’s leering eyes night after night. There was no collar upon her neck within the castle, but the chains were still real.

As she approached her tent, Ashryn hung the jacket on a branch and sat on a fallen tree stump. Her tent, adorned with scarlet crystals that caught the dying light of the sun, stood out among the others with a touch of passionate elegance. Inside, the space was cozy and inviting, filled with furs and cushions to provide comfort during the long nights on the road. Now that they had finally settled, she had organized her belongings.

In one hand she held a knife and in her other a wooden carving of a man and woman together. In front of her sat a makeshift desk she had nailed together for a specific purpose. Ashryn pulled her long hair back into a ponytail and settled her elbows on the table with the carving in hand. Slowly, she began carving the hair from the woman’s head with elegant waves that mirrored her own hair. She set down the knife and placed the statue on the desk with a smile.

“Hi mom,” she said, wiping tears from her cheek, “Hi dad.” From beneath the desk, she pulled a couple of sticks of incense and a bowl of sand to stick them in. With a light breath from her lips, each stick lit and burned, filling her little camp with a pleasant vanilla scent. She breathed it in deeply and grinned. “I haven’t had time to make an altar for you, but I hope you like it.” Ashryn looked away from the statues whose carved eyes seemed to watch her with a hint of disappointment.

They could not speak, but their words seemed clear. The same words that had echoed in the back of her mind throughout the trip. ‘You’ve betrayed him, betrayed us.’ Slowly she brought her knees up and rested her chin on them.

“Grandma and I, we’re all that’s left.” Ashryn whispered, thinking of her grandmother locked up in one of the Magistrate’s cells. After their return, the king discovered the clan’s secret and had them eliminated. Knowing she would leave with *Inias*, he left her grandmother alive. So long as she did what he asked, she and her grandmother could flee the Hallow. The king wanted to know all his nephews dealing, what he felt, and to keep him from discovering any Nightfang secrets. Those secrets her clan had before their demise.

Whenever she asked about why they hadn't tried to end the king's slow purge of hellions, she could see the guilt weighing on her grandmother. "We sacrificed to protect our clan. It was all we could do." She would say and hide her eyes, "But it's never too late to set things right."

It was on her now to carry the weight of her legacy. The king had taken them all out of fear. Had offered them up to the Magistrate on crimes of treason all because of who they were. They had made it treason to be born a hellion. They declared two centuries ago that the demon's blood had been cleansed from their line, and her clan masked their devilish nature for years. All those years they hid instead of taking a stand. Many hellions, their people, had paid the price.

She would play along with the magistrate for a little longer. She had not made her vow to kill him in the village in vain. When her grandmother was safe, she could end him and gain Inias forgiveness. "It's not too late to make things right," Ashryn said, her eyes finally meeting the statue again. "I'll hang on a little longer." The crescent had tried to break her, but she never gave up hope that she and Vestin would escape. Their magic sucking collars hadn't broken her resilience then. 'Just a little longer.' She would remind herself every night.

The king had not snuffed her fire out. He hadn't broken the hellions. The blood of the innocent had awoken the demons and filled them with resolve.

CHAPTER 7

Inias stood on the deck, perched precariously over the cliff, the wind whipping through his hair as he gazed out over the vast expanse. After traversing his camp, he discovered it half-hidden amidst the towering trees flanking the ancient cottage. Gripping his diamond-edged sword and a dagger borrowed from Keira, he embarked on the intricate dance once more. Each movement required precision, every step an odd angle that had to be executed flawlessly. The dance demanded mastery, using the sword for defense and the dagger for offense, a deadly symphony in motion.

Since his childhood, Inias underwent training in various sword dances to familiarize himself with the blade. Like his tutors as a boy, Keira meticulously pointed out his missteps, even throwing a knife dangerously close to his foot to correct his stance. Beads of sweat shimmered on his skin, highlighting the two scars that marred his chest and the one etched into his back—an ominous reminder of a past confrontation with a redcap in these very woods. Unlike the burly fae warriors, Inias possessed a lean frame, yet he could feel Keira's gaze lingering on him as he twirled through the intricate motions.

“How is this dance helpful?” Inias asked when he finally came to a stop. “You missed three steps.” Keira said. He growled and flared his eyes at her. “To answer your question, the devil's dance awakens the demon within.” she explained, pushing herself off the fence to meet him. “It's cursed.”

“A cursed dance?” Inias asked, watching as she demonstrated the first step. With two daggers in hand, one was pointed outward towards an invisible enemy, the other remained at her chest. The daggers matched the sudden glow of her eyes, emitting an amethyst aura around them. “With every step,” she spun, as if evading an enemy. The blade flashed and he could almost see it cutting into someone's throat as she spun around and thrust the other dagger forward.

“It delves deeper. You must press on with every strike.” Her movements flowed across the deck, a symphony of kicks and slashes punctuated by the glinting daggers. Sunlight danced off the blades as she twirled them expertly, her hair whipping around her like a cyclone as Inias watched in awe. The aura surrounding her weapons expanded, her limbs a blur of graceful precision. Approaching the last flourish, all Inias could see was a mesmerizing swirl of sapphire and amethyst, a spectacle of lethal beauty. “It feeds on aggression.” She explained once she came to a stop.

Inias stepped back onto the deck and eyed the row of blades. He set the dagger down and took a slim blade like his sword. “Aggression,” He repeated, pointing the diamond edged sword forward with the other clutched to his chest. Taking a deep breath, he shut his eyes and pictured Sylvis' smug grin staring at him. He recalled the slaughter at the village, Caelan's betrayal. A warmth spread over him as if his blood were boiling. “There it is,” Keira said.

He snapped his eyes open to find both swords pulsing with a similar amethyst glow, but darker, with flickers of black. The red in his eyes flared as he spun around the invisible enemy, bringing the sword across its throat and, as he brought his right foot forward, thrust the blade as if shoving it straight through an enemy's chest. With every strike, he imagined it cutting through Sylvis, the Magistrate, Caelan. They all appeared before him in his mind. The world around him had become a blur, the forest symphony a mere hum in the background.

"*Innie!*" Keira cried, but he couldn't hear her voice. He had lost the elegant gracefulness of the form and moved like a beast as he crossed the bridge. His feet carried him south as he moved down the path. His soldiers took notice, rushing to the path to discover what all the commotion was about. They watched as their prince spun his blades blindly in the empty air. A black swirling aura surrounded his blades, casting out tendrils that whipped at trees.

The Magistrate, that's all he saw before him. He had to pay. Storm the city, tear him to pieces. His eyes shimmered with a blood-colored luster. The footsteps behind him caught his attention, and he lashed out, striking down, only to be caught by two daggers. "Get out of my way!" Inias growled. Keira buckled beneath him, the ground cracking slightly beneath her feet. She drove one straight into his groin, causing him to drop his blades and fall over.

"*Innie...*" She reached down to brush his shoulder as he gripped his groin, groaning. That rush of power was gone, and only the pain from her kick remained as he groaned, tugging his shoulder away. As the pain subsided, he looked around at the faces of his soldiers. Their expressions were a mix of fear, confusion, and morbid curiosity as he stood. "Training, that's all." Inias said, waving them away. A few remained, but finally returned to their duties. "What happened?" he asked in a whisper as he stood at his feet.

Keira leaned in and rested a hand on his shoulder. "You lost control," she said, pulling him back towards the deck. "I was afraid that might happen."

"How do you stay in control?" He asked her, setting both swords down so he could take a couple of sips of water. "You need to find your anchor." She explained, sitting on the fence facing him. "Anchor?" Inias asked, sitting beside her. "The reason you're fighting. I'm fighting for the hellions, for my father, and for you. I focus on that."

Inias thought about why he was fighting. "My anchor...what keeps me grounded?" He turned and rested his hand on hers. "I'm fighting for you, too. We've held each other together all these years."

"What about your uncle?" she asked, letting his fingers close around her little hand. "If he won't condemn the Magistrate's actions...then I can't fight for him." He answered her, as her head came to rest on his shoulder.

CHAPTER 8

As Inias and Keira engaged in an intense sparring match, the troop gathered around the cottage deck, egging them on with enthusiasm fit for a royal tournament. They cheered and applauded with each clash of her daggers against his diamond blade. Exchanges of coins followed whispers as the two pushed each other back. It was as if the cottage deck had transformed into a makeshift arena, complete with its own set of rowdy spectators and lively commentary.

Her movements were a whirlwind of purple and blue as she effortlessly danced around him. She executed every strike with precision, performing each step as if she had planned three moves ahead. Inias moved with a predator's ferocity, every muscle in his body vibrating with primal power and determination. His eyes, blazing with intensity, never strayed from Keira as she danced around him with graceful agility. Unlike her smooth and calculated movements, Inias' fighting style was rugged and untamed, akin to a beast unchained. His powerful and impactful strikes forced Keira to constantly adjust her stance and strategy.

Keira's dazzling agility and fluid movements mesmerized the audience, her swift strikes painting streaks of purple and blue in the air. The observers couldn't help but gasp and cheer in awe at her finesse and precision, their admiration growing by the second. Meanwhile, Inias' primal ferocity and raw power were like a force of nature, each of his thunderous blows sending shockwaves through the deck. She would patiently endure his onslaught until she caught an opening to unleash her own flurry.

Whenever she broke through his attack, he would stumble on the defense. As Keira forced Inias back with a swift strike of her foot, she twirled her daggers playfully, a smirk playing across her lips. "Is that all you've got, Innie? I expected better from the hellion prince," she taunted with a light wiggle of her brows. Inias, his chest heaving with exertion, flashed a sly grin. "Oh, I've got plenty more. I'd just like to keep you in one piece."

Keira raised an eyebrow teasingly, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "Oh, so we're holding back?" She raised her daggers, taking a step back as he lifted his sword again. "If you won't take this seriously, then don't bother." Awaken the demon within and tame it. That's what she wished to teach him. He couldn't free it if he continued to hold back, even against her. That darkness was meant to be tempered, channeled, not hidden away.

Inias' eyes narrowed, his gaze piercing through her like a sharpened blade. With a low growl rumbling in his chest, he lunged forward with a ferocity that shook the very foundation of the deck. She brought both her daggers up to catch his blow, grunting as her knees bent under his strength. "Is this serious enough for you?!" He challenged her through gritted teeth, pressing down with all his strength.

She met his eyes from beneath him and shoved against him, pushing him back a step. "No!" Keira shoved her foot against his stomach, sending him tumbling off the deck. As Inias splashed into the cool, rushing water below, Keira stood at the edge of the deck, her chest rising and falling with each breath. "Had enough, Innie?" She called out, her voice carrying a playful yet victorious tone as she watched the water carry him away, her expression daring him to come back for more.

Inias emerged from the water, his wet hair plastered against his face, his eyes ablaze with determination. His soaked clothes clung to his frame as he pulled himself up into a rock with his sword

drawn. His eyes flared with fierce determination, the same as he had when they fought Sylvis and the crescent together. Keira chuckled as she watched Inias emerge from the water, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Little cold water woke you up!" Her voice carried a teasing tone, filled with excitement.

Inias stood firm upon the rock, raising his sword, challenging her to meet him out there. The water rushed around the large stone and the others around him. Meeting the challenge in his eyes, Keira wasted no time in kicking her boots off and leaping gracefully off the deck and landing with a splash in the rushing waters below. She let the current carry her down, weaving gracefully between the large stones. Her feet landed softly on the rock across from him, grinning.

With a swift and graceful motion, Keira lunged forward, closing the distance between them with a twirl of her body. The water splashed around her as she moved, her daggers glinting in the sunlight as she closed in on Inias, who stood firm and ready for her approach. His sword gleamed in the light; his muscles tensed with anticipation as he prepared to meet her head-on. He caught her daggers as they crashed down on him. Her inky black eyes glowed a vibrant purple, like a burning amethyst.

Sparks flew as their blades continued to clash upon that small rock, each pushing for one more inch against the other. In such a small space, she couldn't maneuver around him so smoothly. With each fierce blow, she felt her feet slipping. He had become relentless towards his one goal of breaking her. She could see the fire blazing in his eyes, admiring the way the sunlight sparkled in them. The moment her foot slipped from the rock, she grabbed him, forcing him to fall as the current carried her away.

The swift current whisked them away. Unable to fight against its force, Keira and Inias found themselves laughing amidst the chaos. Their weapons fell onto the rock, safe from the current. The cool water splashed against their faces, invigorating their spirits as they surrendered to the ride. The warmth of the spring sun embraced them, casting a golden glow over their intertwined forms as they floated effortlessly downstream. Keira's smile was infectious, her eyes sparkling with a daredevil thrill. Her spirit seemed to shine even brighter amidst the chaos, her laughter carrying a sense of freedom.

The gentle current carried Keira and Inias further downstream, the rush of the water calming into a tranquil flow as they drifted along. Their laughter echoed through the valley, blending with the soothing sounds of nature that surrounded them. The warmth of the sun kissed their skin, drying their hair as they relaxed in the moment's embrace.

"The river wins," Keira said, giggling as she climbed up onto the shore, reaching out to pull him up. "Sure, kicked our asses," Inias spoke and began squeezing out his soaked hair. Their clothes were soggy and clung tightly to them under the growing heat of the sun. As they stood there, dripping wet and smiling at each other, Keira reached out and took his hand, "That's enough sparring for today."

CHAPTER 9

Ruvyn Grovewood laid out under the sun as the other warriors watched the prince and lady spar. His keen ears couldn't miss the excitement. He didn't wish to spend such a beautiful day watching those make eyes at each other as they danced around. After the weeks of travel, he wished to spend as much time as he could resting. A battle lay ahead of them, whether the prince wished to admit it.

His attire looked as though he had effortlessly blended with comfort and style. He wore a set of dark green trousers that were loose-fitting, allowing for maximum relaxation. His shirt was a simple white linen tunic, its sleeves rolled up to his elbows, revealing toned forearms that bore evidence of his warrior training. The sunlight played off the sleek, black leather of the boots, adding a touch of elegance to his otherwise casual attire.

As he closed his eyes, a gentle breeze carried the scent of fresh pine and wildflowers, soothing his senses and easing the tension that coiled within him. The rustling leaves overhead provided a rhythmic melody that seemed to lull him into a state of relaxation, the distant chirping of sparrows a sweet serenade to his ears. Ruvyn welcomed the peaceful respite from the chaos of their upcoming battle as he lay there, basking in the sun's warmth. The tranquil surroundings seemed to envelop him, offering a moment of solace amidst the uncertainty that loomed ahead.

The golden rays of sunlight caressed his skin, creating a halo of warmth that melted away the tension in his muscles. The earthy scents of the forest mingled with the sweet floral notes, creating a symphony of fragrance that danced around him. Even beyond all the shouting, he could hear the violent rush of water over rocks, the waterfall crashing into the cottage pond. In the solace of that moment, his ears seemed to stretch over the entire forest, catching every little movement.

Ruvyn basked in the tranquility of the moment. A mischievous thought crossed his mind. "Ah, the calm before the storm," he mused, a smirk playing on his lips. The whispering wind seemed to tease him, as if knowing that the impending chaos would soon shatter this peaceful interlude. But for now, he allowed himself to sink deeper into the blissful reprieve. Whatever lay ahead, the future would be fraught with adventure and danger.

Just as he was reveling in the peaceful interlude, a fiery vision interrupted his musings. Her outfit was a bold mix of crimson and gold, the colors complementing her vibrant red hair that seemed to dance in the sunlight. The fabric of her attire was both elegant and practical, hugging her form in all the right places while allowing for ease of movement in combat. A pair of boots made of snakeskin covered her feet.

With a raised eyebrow and a wry grin tugging at the corners of his lips, Ruvyn couldn't help but admire the way Ashryn carried herself, exuding both strength and allure. "A fiery enchantress gracing me with her presence," he remarked, his tone light and playful. Ashryn's eyes sparkled with a mixture of amusement as she met Ruvyn's gaze. Her lips curved into a smile as she replied, her voice carrying a hint of playful challenge, "Well, well, Ruvyn Grovewood, lounging around while the others sweat it out. You're getting lazy."

"I prefer to think of it as conserving my energy," he said, his gaze lingering on her a moment as the sun reflected off her hazel eyes. Ashryn chuckled, a sound that seemed to blend with the rustling

leaves and chirping sparrows in perfect harmony. “Conserving your energy or enjoying the view?” she teased, a smirk playing on her lips as she settled down next to Ruvyn. “Can it be both?” he asked, sliding closer as she sat.

Ashryn’s contagious laughter rang out across the clearing. “Trying to charm your way out of guard duty?” she asked, lightly bumping him against the shoulder. Aside from some light chatting, they hadn’t spoken much on the journey. The Grovewoods and Redwoods rarely had any reason to interact, and she only knew a couple of facts about him. He held a sword, but his preferred weapons were the twin battle axes. She couldn’t help but find his amber eyes inviting, but during their travel, she had no time for flirting.

“Who? Me?” Ruvyn placed a hand on his chest and gasped, “Never!” He wasn’t a fan of the night shift, but he was the one to draw the small straw. “Fear not, milady, for I shall brave the depths of the shadows to defend our camp from any dangers,” he declared with a flourish, accentuating his words with a dramatic sweep of his arm.

Ashryn giggled at his theatrics. “Ever the valiant hero, Ruvyn Grovewood,” she replied, “I will feel most safe.” The exchange between them felt like a welcome respite from her worries.

“I should rest. Can’t be caught napping on the job,” Ruvyn sighed and stood up, taking her hand in his and brushing a kiss over her knuckles. “Until we meet again, my fiery enchantress,” he whispered, a smoldering smile playing on his lips as he released her hand and turned to prepare for his duties.

CHAPTER 10

Keira promised him a world of hurt in the next week. There was no holding back. He couldn't tame himself if he was too afraid. The devil's dance took the power inside and gave it form. Darkness was and would always be a part of him. He couldn't run from it or lock it away in a cage. The power to shine through is what set hellions apart. Without them, the light would blind the world into arrogance.

Inias would need to see it, whatever was holding him back. The next day, she took him to a small lake with an island at the center surrounded by a thick purple fog. "Spooky..." Inias muttered as they approached the water. Keira bent down and ran her fingers over the crystal blue surface. "Seer's Island," she said as he knelt beside her, "Saevel Ravenmoon, my fifth great uncle, could peer into people's souls. He's buried there, his spirit blesses the island."

He looked out to the island, and the small boat tied to the tree. "That won't hold both of us," Inias said, walking towards the tree to untie it. "You'll be going alone," Keira told him, stepping away from the water with a wary smile. "Thought we were in this together?" Inias asked, looking at the island with a nervous chuckle. "Always," Keira said, pulling him into a hug, "But if I'm there, you won't see what you need to see. Trust me." Inias groaned but returned her embrace. "Fine..."

The further he rowed out to the island, the thicker the mist grew. He kept his eyes pinned on Keira, but the moment he looked back at the island getting closer, she wasn't there when he looked back. Fog shrouded the shore, leaving only the island visible. His heart beat faster as he rowed nearer. It was a tiny island with one tree covered in amethyst and azure leaves.

Inias stepped out onto the emerald grass and took slow steps towards the tree. "Hello?" He called out, scanning the ground for a grave of some kind. Nothing but grass and that one tree. As he approached it, a gentle wind blew rustling leaves.

"There you are! The devil prince!" A familiar voice echoed. Inias turned and gasped when he saw Tremaine, covered in blood, gashes covering his chest and stomach. The last time they'd been together, Tremaine had followed him into a death. "Tremaine, I..." Inias stammered as his heart pounded. "I believed in you," Tremaine growled, balling his fists. "I'm sorry..." Inias said, stepped back against the tree.

A flash of black crossed his vision, and he turned again to find his father, back still littered with arrows. Cyran glared at his son through his shaggy black hair. "Dad..." Inias sobbed, tears welling up in his eyes. The two stepped towards him, corning him against the tree. It was all coming back, the bridge, the redcaps. He thought after rescuing Ashryn and Vestin he had moved on, but all of it came rushing back like a tsunami wave.

"What do you have to say for yourself, boy?" His father growled, reaching out to grip his son's throat. Inias gasped for air, desperately trying to pull his father's hand away as his father lifted him against the tree. "I saved your life so you could turn on us? *Our clan?*!" The man's words cut at him like a dagger and Tremaine faded away, replaced by his uncle hunched over against his cane. "He's a *hellion* monster." Ivaran sneered, "What did you expect?"

Inias gasped and pushed both his feet against his father's stomach. Cyran stumbled over the grass as Inias pushed him back. Inias fell to the ground, gasping for air. "I'm not a monster." He whispered,

cupping a clump of grass and dirt in his hand. Ivaran laughed as his brother stood, “Then what are you, boy?” Cyran chuckled beside him, grinning down at his son, “Look at you, how could you be anything but a demon?”

These were the visions. They *had* to be. They felt real, perhaps in a way they were. Keira’s ancestor could peer into the souls of others. “My fears,” Inias whispered, looking up at the two men. That’s what the island was making him see. Their words throughout his life had driven a fear of his power and hellion nature into him. If he allowed them to dictate his life, they would forever trap his heart.

“Demons are full of malice,” Inias said as he stood to his feet. “The only ones full of malice were the two of you.” He turned to his father and offered a light smile. “Sorry I wasn’t the son you wanted, but I didn’t get a choice in that. I never wanted to hurt anyone. You made the choice to save me because honoring my mother meant so much more.”

Cyran’s eyes glistened with tears. “I couldn’t face her if I let you die.” He said as those tears spilled down his cheeks, “And despite what you are, you’re still my son. I wanted to be with her as she watched over you.” As he spoke, Ivaran faded away into the purple fog around them. “Any regrets?” Inias asked, his voice shaking until he felt the firm hand on his shoulder. He looked up to find his father smiling. “Not a single one.”

Inias couldn’t stop the tears from falling as he rowed back. A mix of joy and sorrow. Part of him had accepted what his father’s choice meant, but to hear it from him, even as a vision, lifted a burden. Sunlight peaked through the fog as it cleared, and he could see Keira sitting on the grass.

She helped him pull the boat in and tie it up. “Well?” she asked, giving his shoulder a playful bump. “I’ll tell you on the way back,” Inias answered as he threw his arms around her. “Thank you.”

CHAPTER 11

With Inias busy training, Ashryn sat out on the forest's edge, looking out at the city's towering walls beyond the rolling hills outside the forest. She sat high upon a branch, watching the expanse. Spying on the city, that was the excuse she used to come out here. They had all agreed to take rounds for the watch, except Inias, whose training kept him busy and too tired to serve as a proper sentry. There was no army massing outside the city, no sign that Ailog planned to attack the forest soon.

She thought about her chat with Ruvyn. It made her feel a little better to have someone else to talk to. However, she felt she couldn't just accept Ruvyn's affections while she was getting close to Inias. They had rarely spoken before that day, but his flirting and charming smiles lifted her spirits at that moment. He was a renowned warrior in his own right, famed for his service in the borderlands, repelling redcap, and goblin raids.

Get close to Inias, soften him with affection and mold him into Ivaran's tool. That was the plan the king and the Magistrate had laid out for her. So long as he remained conflicted, his power was useful. If he strayed, joined with the Ravenmoons, she knew what they would ask her. Never. She would never let them use her to kill Inias. He had crossed the Vale to find her when Caelan betrayed them to the Crescent.

Ashryn's affection wasn't all an act. That's what made the deception so hard. His fiery red eyes held a hint of danger in them she found alluring, but they were friends. He was a friend that came once in a lifetime, the kind you didn't wish to ruin or complicate.

Her heart pounded with conflicting emotions as she grappled with the weight of her mission. The dark shadows of deception loomed over her, threatening to engulf her in a web of lies and manipulation. She glanced back at the city walls, a reminder of the powers at play, each stone a testament to the Magistrate's strength and ruthlessness. They loomed in the distance, casting long shadows that seemed to stretch towards her like fingers of fate.

Ashryn's thoughts drifted back to Ruvyn, his light-hearted presence pulling at her resolve like a relentless tide. The memory of his affections ignited a flicker of warmth within her, a dangerous spark during icy treachery. The lure of his charm had tugged at her like invisible hands, beckoning her toward a path fraught with betrayal and broken promises. She was used to attention from others. The court boys, sons of powerful nobles, had surrounded her at almost every gathering.

A distraction, that's what Ruvyn offered her, that's what appealed to her most. A distraction from the web of political madness that had killed her clan and driven her to betray her friend. A glimmer of hope sparked within her as she thought of her goal: to avenge her clan's slaughter by Ivaran and the ruthless magistrate. They could not break her resolve; she couldn't let her conflicting feelings get in the way.

With a steely look in her eyes, Ashryn's thoughts turned to Ruvyn once more. His charming presence had stirred something within her, a glimmer of warmth amidst the cold calculations of her mission. But she knew she couldn't afford to be swayed by distractions, no matter how tempting. She would play her part in Ivaran's twisted game, dancing along his strings with elegant grace. Every smile, every gesture, every whispered word of false affection would serve as a steppingstone towards her end game - vengeance for her clan.

The shadows of the city walls may loom large, but Ashryn's spirit burned bright with the fire of determination. She was a warrior, a survivor, and a seeker of justice in a world shrouded in darkness. And with each passing moment, she edged closer to the day when she would bring Ivaran and the Magistrate to their knees, avenging her fallen clan with a heart as fierce as the forest that cradled her.

Ashryn shook her head and sighed. Why should she let herself remain miserable when there was a friend willing to make her smile? What was so wrong with having something or someone for herself? Inias had Keira. She needed someone to remind her that there was some light in this world. Ruvyn's smile and lighthearted flirting may be just the spark she needed to keep her flames burning strong. Sliding off her perch she decided to see if Ruvyn wouldn't mind a little sparring match of their own.

CHAPTER 12

Ruvyn's muscles tensed from the morning's labor, each swing of the axe resounding through the forest with a sharp crack. Beads of sweat glistened on his brow under the sun, casting long shadows across the forest floor. The nights were still chilly, a welcome respite from the hot couple of days they'd endured. It was a nice way to start his day, get the blood flowing before his rounds on the guard began. After just an hour of rhythmic chopping, he felt a newfound sense of readiness to face whatever dangers awaited him on his upcoming guard duty.

His attire was simple yet sturdy, with leather breeches and a well-worn tunic that bore the insignia of the Grovewoods. A weaving of thorns and vines around a black rose. Years of labor and training had left his hands calloused. As he wiped the sweat from his brow with a rough cloth, he took a moment to appreciate the serenity of the surrounding forest. The peaceful sounds of birds chirping and leaves rustling in the wind brought a sense of calm. He leaned against the handle of his axe, taking in a deep breath of the fresh forest air. Ruvyn felt a sense of contentment wash over him, momentarily forgetting the weight of his duties. It was a blessing to get to work out here, in the forest's tranquility. Not in the stuffy corridors of the border forts.

The choice to come with Inias had been easy. He had been returning to deliver the king a report after the death of his brother. Borderland forts were on high alert after that incident, hunting redcaps anywhere they were lurking. Serving by the prince's side was his chance to really make a name for himself, to further his career. He wanted to become an adventurer, to be the first to reach the other side of Harrows Forest. Not from the long river, anyone could do that. Ruvyn wanted to traverse the foreboding mists and face the beasts within it. He wasn't ready yet, but at eighteen years old and centuries ahead of him, he would make it one day.

Ruvyn knew that his aspirations of becoming an adventurer were not without challenges. The Harrows Forest was a place steeped in mystery and danger, with tales of curses and fearsome creatures that lurked within its depths. Many noble warriors had tried and failed. But he was determined, driven by a thirst for adventure and the desire to prove himself. He would be the first to reach the end and return. The Grovewoods were a minor clan living within the border forests, but he would be the one to carry their name into history.

People across the land already knew warriors like Ashryn and Inias. Her mother was a member of the high council and Inias was a prince. Those two had been born into fame, destined for greatness by their names alone. Ruvyn had clawed for every bit of respect he earned, every notch on his axe's, every felled goblin in the honor of protecting their kingdom. He had been far removed from the Hellion and Purist disputes. In the border forests, no one cared if you were demon blooded or not. They stood together in their shared duty of protecting the kingdom.

Another threat lurked within the very courts of the kingdom. Ailog and his ilk. Ruvyn had heard stories of the Purist's atrocities, just rumors, nothing he ever took seriously. Seeing those villagers, it all became too real. War was coming, or maybe it had already begun. This was the chance he'd been waiting for, a battle for the fate of the kingdom and he would stand on the right side, the one suffering under despotic rule.

As Ruvyn continued to focus on his woodchopping, Ashryn suddenly interrupted the peaceful sounds of the forest. She approached him with a hint of boredom clear on her face. Her piercing gaze met Ruvyn's as she approached with a confident stride. Her hazel eyes lingered on him as he brought the axe down, admiring the way his muscles tensed.

Ashryn donned casual battle gear, the kind that effortlessly blended style with functionality. She wore a sleeveless tunic made of deep crimson fabric that complemented her hair, cinched at the waist with a thick leather belt adorned with intricate designs. Her leggings were a darker shade of red, close-fitting but allowing for ease of movement. On her feet were sturdy leather boots, scuffed from endless walking.

"Now who's enjoying the view?" Ruvyn asked as she approached him, the muscles in her arms tight from years of battle. "You caught me," Ashryn confessed with a light shrug. As she leaned against a nearby tree, her hand resting casually on the hilt of her sword, a playful smirk tugged at the corner of her lips. "I see you're getting quite good at swinging that axe around, Ruvyn," she remarked, her hazel eyes sparkling, "Wanted to see if you were all talk."

Ruvyn chuckled at Ashryn's challenge, setting down his chopping axe with a grin. "All talk, eh? I guess you'll have to find out for yourself," he replied, his own amber eyes revealing a hint of amusement. He glanced down at his twin battle axes; their blades were polished to a shine that reflected the dappled sunlight filtering through the canopy above. They crafted the handles from sturdy oak and wrapped them in weathered leather for a firm grip.

Ashryn's lips curved into a confident smile as she unsheathed her sword with a fluid motion, the blade catching the sunlight and gleaming like molten fire. The weapon was a work of art, with intricate designs etched along its slim and elegant form. Deep crimson leather wrapped around the hilt, matching the color of her attire, and adding a touch of fierceness to her.

Ruvyn lifted both of his battle axes, feeling the weight of the weapons in his calloused hands. The axes were well-worn from years of use; the blades sharpened to a razor's edge. "Let's see if you can match the swing of these, darling," he challenged, twirling the axes in a skilled display of dexterity. The surrounding forest seemed to hold its breath in anticipation, the birds falling silent as the two warriors prepared to clash.

"Well, if you think you can keep up, handsome," Ashryn teased, her hazel eyes dancing with mischief. "You think I'm handsome?" Ruvyn asked, letting his guard slip. She took advantage of it and lunged forward, knocking his right axe out of the way, only for him to bring down the left and knock her aside.

Their blades clashed with a resounding clang, sending sparks. Ashryn's slender sword moved with a speed that complimented its elegance, weaving intricate patterns in the air as she parried. Ruvyn's dual axes were rugged and imposing, each swing delivering a powerful blow that pushed her back no matter how well she blocked or parried.

Despite the intensity of their duel, there was a playful grin on Ashryn's lips, a lightness in her movements that hinted at hidden amusement. As Ruvyn brought down his axe with a forceful strike, Ashryn spun to the side, her red hair trailing behind her like a fiery banner. Ruvyn's muscles strained with each swing of his axes, his focus unwavering as he sought to match Ashryn's speed. The surrounding forest seemed to echo with the clashing of their weapons, a symphony of steel and determination cutting through the tranquility of the woods.

This was the distraction she needed. The blood pumping through her veins; the warmth spreading over her, and most of all, the danger of clashing with a deadly foe. It fueled the fire within her, passion spiraling with every swing of her blade. She fought like a whirlwind of passion and fire, full of raw energy and intensity, like an all-consuming flame. The fire in her heart fueled each strike she made, filling them with savagery. Her movements were a mix of elegance and savage strikes. The red flames painted on her sword seemed to dance with each swing.

Ruvyn fought with a more calculated approach, using the sheer power of his twin battle axes to his advantage. His strikes were precise and forceful, each swinging to overpower his opponent with relentless strength. The weight of his weapons required skill and strength to wield, and he used them with expertise honed through years of battle. He loved the fire in her eyes, the way it blazed so fiercely. Her hair spun around her, creating a tornado of red and orange.

Their clash echoed through the forest, the sound of steel meeting steel reverberating amidst the trees. Ashryn's eyes blazed with determination, the fire within her matching the intensity of the fight. Ruvyn's amber eyes gleamed with a mix of focus and admiration for his opponent's unyielding spirit.

As their duel reached its climax, Ruvyn saw an opening and swiftly disarmed her, her sword clattering to the forest floor. He gave her a shove and pointed one of his axes at her as she lay on the ground. Breathless and disarmed, Ashryn lay on the forest floor, a grin tugging at the corners of her lips despite her defeat. She gazed up at Ruvyn, her hazel eyes glowing with a mixture of surprise and admiration.

"I win!" Ruvyn grinned, feeling the rush of adrenaline still coursing through his veins. As he extended a hand to help Ashryn up, he couldn't help but tease, "So, what's my prize for winning this little match?" There was no denying his skill. Adrenaline was still pumping through her veins as she stood to her feet and retrieved her sword.

Ashryn's hazel eyes sparkled with amusement as she brushed off the dirt from her rear, still grinning at Ruvyn's victorious display. "I must admit defeat this time," she conceded with a smile. "You fought well, better than I expected. I believe it's only fair that you claim your prize." Ruvyn chuckled at her gracious surrender, feeling a sense of accomplishment wash over him, "It was a bracing match," he said, "One wrong move and I'd be the one on my ass."

"You may have won the battle, but the war is far from over." With a playful wink, she added, "And as for your prize... well, I believe a warrior of your caliber deserves some rest after such a spirited duel. Rest *and* a meal. How does lunch sound?"

"Lunch sounds perfect." With a nod of agreement, Ruvyn offered his arm to Ashryn, who looped her own with it.

CHAPTER 13

The following day had a brutal heat to it, and she expected him to be in top form. No traveling, just more training. The pond around the cottage and the waterfall mist cooled the surrounding air. If he complained about the heat at all, she had promised to drag him into a field somewhere to train. She wore a light blue top that covered her chest and Inias couldn't help but find himself distracted by the raven tattoo spreading its wings above her stomach. He had chosen a light vest and a pair of loose pants to train in.

"Come on, let's see it," Keira demanded as she tapped her bare foot on the patio. His red eyes glowed, and hooked claws grew from his fingernails. "How do I look?" He joked, twirling around before she gave his head a light whack. "Dig deeper," she instructed sternly, crossing her arms, "Just like the dance. This form is only the beginning. The opening act."

Inias remembered the dance. It fed on aggression. He let his thoughts drift to the Magistrate, all he wished to do to that old man. His anger grew as he thought of all the innocents slaughtered in that little village. As his blood boiled over, his head itched. His already thick black mop of hair had grown thicker, falling in untamed locks around his face. He felt an aching in his gums, allowing his thoughts to spiral. His fangs grew longer and curved, peeking out from his lips.

Don't be afraid, Inias reminded himself as he let the change happen. "Surrender to it, trust it." Keira guided him as she watched his eyes shine brighter and shimmer. Her voice was distant, but present as he thought of his uncle, the sneering and laughing on the island. Every mocking word over his life. All his thoughts spiraled into rage and that rage was fueling him now. It wasn't the malevolent force his uncle had told him it was. That darkness warmed him. He felt safe as it welled up inside.

Inias could feel it surge through him. The power within him felt like a protective shield, empowering him rather than controlling him. Keira's voice cut through the haze of his rage, "Remember your anchor." He closed his eyes for a moment, centering himself. Ashryn flashed before his eyes, her arms bound to a tree. Inias recalled Keira fearlessly defending Vestin with her shield as the redcaps closed in on her. People like the Magistrate were a threat to Keira and Ashryn.

"It's not malice, it's strength," Keira said when his eyes opened again, "To protect the people we love."

Strength, Inias repeated, looking at how long and sharp his claws had become. His hair had grown, falling just above his rear in wild waves. He could feel his heart pounding, his eyes clearer as he scanned the waterfall. His eyes could make out every tiny insect and speck in the air.

"It's a hellion's true face," she told him, closing her eyes. Keira's thoughts drifted to her mother, to the people who took her brother. Inias watched as her body shook and pulsed. Her hair grew thicker but remained straight as it fell down her back. Her nails were long and razor sharp, not hooked like his. The horns upon her head grew from her hair, standing tall and curled.

Keira's transformation seemed a lot smoother than his and even like this she was a vision of elegant beauty. "See?" she said, twirling to show off her long hair. "Beautiful," Inias whistled, his eyes caught in her spinning. "You think so?" Keira asked, smiling softly as she fidgeted with the ends her hair. "What now?" Inias asked, looking back at the claws on his hand. "You promised me a world of pain."

“And I intend to deliver!” Keira promised, raising both her hands to guard her chest. “Now I show you how *real* hellions fight.”

CHAPTER 14

Hellions were ferocious, that's what he learned from his fight with Keira. Inias barely had a second to accept her challenge before she flung him off the patio, launching him into the dense forest below. In this raw confrontation, there were no swords or shields, only the brutal collision of bare fists and razor-sharp claws. The air was heavy with the metallic scent of blood, but their wounds were healing at an accelerated rate.

The searing pain surged through him, intensifying with each exchange of savage blows between them. Every impact echoed through the forest, the sounds of grunts and roars mingling with the rustling of leaves and the snapping of branches. They flung each other around with ferocious strength, crashing into trees and rocky outcroppings. Keira's untamed fury was a force to be reckoned with, her eyes gleaming with a primal fire that threatened to consume everything in its path.

The ground trembled beneath them as they grappled and thrashed, locked in a dance of savagery and resilience. Their bodies bore the marks of their brutal exchange, blood mixing with sweat as they clashed with a relentless fervor. Despite the bloodshed and pain, there was a strange sense of exhilaration in the air. A twisted sort of joy that coursed through their veins with every blow exchanged.

Keira's wild eyes blazed, her movements unpredictable and deadly. She was no longer striking him with elegant precision. He matched her blow for blow, getting to his feet every time she knocked him down. They two fought like animals defending their territory. Loving it all, their faces were wide with feral grins whenever their eyes met.

As they paused for a moment, chests heaving and sweat glistening in the sunlight, Keira flashed Inias a grin. "You're quite the dance partner," she said, licking his blood from her nails with a soft purr. Inias, slightly winded but grinning in return, answered, "You certainly know how to lead." He had always loved a good brawl, but he'd never felt a rush like this.

With a quicksilver movement, Keira lunged forward. Their bodies collided with a thunderous impact, the force of their blows reverberating through the dense foliage. Inias felt the primal rhythm of the fight coursing through his veins, a wild thrill rising within him with every clash and every strike. They were like a wild tornado of purple and black, tearing through the serene forest, leaving chaos and destruction in their wake.

As they flung each other around with reckless abandon, it was impossible to tell which was hunter or prey. Inias could feel the adrenaline pumping through his veins, his heart pounding in his chest like a war drum. The air crackled with tension as Keira and he engaged in their dance, their movements a blur of violence and blood. Each strike was a symphony of pain, the clash of their fists echoing like thunder through the forest.

Inias struggled to catch his breath as she hurled him into the air. He tumbled through the brush, crashing over bushes and rocks. Keira pressed their advantage, lunging towards him with a hiss that sent a chill down his spine. Inias rolled away, narrowly avoiding her pounce. He tasted blood in his mouth, a fierce look burning in his eyes as he gathered his strength to rise.

As Keira's fierce eyes locked onto Inias, a dangerous hint of desire flickered in her gaze. With a predator's grace, she circled him, sensing his exhaustion as she closed in for the final strike. In a swift

move, she shifted her weight and delivered a powerful kick to his chest, that sent Inias crashing to the ground. “Augh!” He cried out as he tumbled across the forest floor, only to stop when his body slammed into a tree.

As Inias lay on the ground, momentarily stunned, Keira closed in on him. With a feline grace, she swiftly pinned him down, with her razor-sharp nails lightly grazing his throat. Inias shivered and raised his hands, smiling at her. “That was exhilarating,” he said, the aching of his muscles finally catching up to him as he laid captive beneath her.

Keira remained quiet as she gazed down at him, admiring the way his eyes still flickered. She leaned down, bringing her face closer as a drop of blood fell from his cheek. He felt her tongue against his skin, causing him to shiver again. Her face was close enough that he felt the purr vibrating in her throat. His eyes fluttered shut when he felt her playfully nipping at his jaw. Before he could curl a grip on her hair and pull, she placed her hands on his chest and pushed herself away.

“Oh no,” Keira shook her head as her cheeks reddened, “We got a little carried away. In this state, desire, anger, it all blurs together.” Slowly her hair shortened, her horns shrank and her nails. The pain in his muscles grew worse as he felt himself returning to normal. “I didn’t mind,” He confessed and groaned as the pain grew. “You really wore me out.”

“Your body isn’t used to channeling so much power,” Keira explained, pulling a blue tonic from her bag. “This will help, but you’ll be pretty sore the next few days.”

Inias drank the bottle down and sighed as the pain faded. Even as he was wracked with pain, Inias drank the bottle down and sighed, feeling more alive than ever. Channeling all that pain and anger had been the most exhilarating experience of his life.

CHAPTER 15

Inias had given him command of the scouts after Ashryn's generous proposal. It was only a party of four, but it was a small step. Ruvyn's little troop would make themselves invaluable to the prince. It was their intelligence the mission relied on. Whatever that mission was, he was still uncertain, but his duty was to the prince. That was the task the king had given him himself. Wherever Inias went, he would follow.

Ruvyn knew that this mission was no small feat. As the leader of the scouts, he felt the weight of responsibility on his shoulders. Every decision he made could mean the difference between success and failure for the prince and their cause. But Ruvyn did not shy away from challenges; he thrived in the face of danger. Every obstacle was another chance to prove himself, to become stronger. He wasn't afraid of the challenge he faced, but excited.

As he prepared his scout troop for the mission ahead, he felt a thrilling sense of anticipation coursing through his veins. The weight of responsibility only fueled his determination to excel, to lead his men with precision and skill. The prince did not misplace his trust in his abilities. His years in the borderlands had prepared him for this. He knew how to sneak around, gain information on his enemy. Redcaps were always building their nests on the borders.

They were far removed from the purist and hellion feuds, and he wasn't sure where he stood on it. Demon were evil creatures, even the hellions knew that. The ones he'd traveled with didn't seem evil. They wanted to fight the injustices faced by their people. Where was the evil in that? Wouldn't it happen naturally that their people cleanse themselves of demon blood? Why couldn't the purists trust in their own prophecies? Regardless of prophecies, they could not allow people like the magistrate to exist with unchecked power.

Ruvyn tightened the straps on his leather armor, his jaw clenched with determination. He knew the importance of the mission ahead and felt the weight of responsibility like a tangible force pressing down on him. But he was no stranger to challenges; he welcomed them with a fierce resolve. As he checked his weapons and gear, his sharp eyes scanned the horizon, anticipating the dangers that lay ahead.

With a steely gaze, Ruvyn addressed his fellow scouts, his voice firm and commanding. "Listen up, folks. We have a vital role to play in this mission," He began, fixing the axes upon his back. The four who joined him were three men, each with varying shades of brown hair and a fierce-looking woman, eyes weathered with age.

"We may be few, but our task is crucial," Ruvyn continued, his tone unwavering. "The prince is counting on us to watch the city. I want to know every detail you can learn about their patrols. We need to know about the city. Ask around." Dusk Haven, now a shining beacon of purist ideals, was their target. To end the Magistrate, they would need to take the city.

The three men and the weathered woman nodded in understanding, their faces reflecting determination in the tasks ahead. "We move as shadows, unseen and unheard." Ruvyn continued, his voice resonating with authority. He had given these speeches before when conducting raids on redcap nests or goblin camps.

Two were going to sniff around the city and see what they would learn. He assigned the others to watch the hills around the city. He had sneaked around the farmland, hoping to ask a few chatty farmers about events in the city. Ruvyn crept around the hills, remaining low as he climbed up and over until he could spot figures in the distance working the fields. His eyes grew wide when he saw the chains, heard the crack of whips, and then saw the horns upon a chained worker's head. Hellions.

This is what the Magistrate had done? Was it not enough to kill them? He had to chain them like beasts and force them to labor. Ruvyn's heart pounded in his chest as he observed the treatment of the Hellions in the fields. Anger surged through his veins, fueling his resolve. With grim determination, he knew that their mission had just become even more vital than before. His grip on the grass tightened, his resolve hardening like tempered steel.

CHAPTER 16

He needed to see something, that's what Ashryn had woken him up to say the next day. Inias was still sore from his fight with Keira but felt he could ride. If it were anyone but Ashryn he would have thrown the pillow at them. Groaning, he rubbed his eyes and nodded. "Get the steeds ready," he said and slid from bed as she left and began running through his usual hygiene rituals. Inias wrote up a note and left it on the patio letting Keira know he had some important business to attend to.

When he and Styx stepped out of the cozy cottage, the golden rays of the morning sun enveloped his skin like a soft embrace. He donned a sleek, sleeveless cloak in deep black that contrasted starkly against his pristine white cotton shirt. The cloak gracefully cascaded down his frame, reaching just below his calves where his fitted black trousers met. As Ashryn turned to meet his gaze, she was adorned in a striking red leather vest layered over a billowy blue cotton top, the fabric cascading gently over her lean figure. Her vibrant red pants hugged her legs snugly, each pocket carefully concealing a blade.

Inias approached Fievel, placing a kiss upon his neck. The Elk seemed to purr as Inias mounted his back, Styx jumping up to sit on his lap. He adjusted the reins and Fievel began to move, his hooves hitting the ground at a rhythmic pace. Ashryn rode beside him upon her red mare. Her sharp eyes scanned their surroundings with precision.

As they rode through the lush forest, Inias couldn't shake the feeling of unease that had settled in the pit of his stomach. Ashryn was rarely one to disturb his sleep for something trivial. He glanced over at her, noting the determined set of her jaw and the focused intensity in her eyes. "Where are we headed?" he finally asked, breaking the silence between them.

Ashryn turned towards him, a small furrow appearing between her brows. "To the edge of the forest," she replied cryptically. "There's something I need you to see." The lush greenery seemed to close in around them, creating a sense of isolation that only heightened Inias's unease. He stole glances at Ashryn, trying to discern any clues from her demeanor, but her expression remained unreadable.

After a while, they reached the edge where the trees thinned out, giving way to a clearing that overlooked a vast expanse of rolling hills bathed in the sunlight. Far beyond the hills were the great walls of Dusk Haven stretching high. Ashryn brought her mare to a halt, and Inias followed suit. They dismounted, their steeds grazing peacefully nearby as they stood side by side.

Inias couldn't help but admire the breathtaking view before them. He turned to Ashryn, searching her face for any hint of what she wanted him to see. "What is it, Ashryn?" he asked softly, a mixture of curiosity and concern creeping into his voice. She took a deep breath, her gaze fixed on the distant horizon, before finally pointing to the fields outside the city. It was dangerous to bring him here, to let him see while the magistrate had his claws in her.

"They're just farms," Inias said with a shrug. He watched the figures toiling away and caught the hint of horns on their heads and collars around their necks. "Hellions..." He whispered. Ashryn nodded, resting a hand upon his shoulder. "This is their intention," She said, her voice soft, "Turn the people against them, makes them easy to exploit." He needed to see it and she needed him to avenge her family.

Inias shook his head when he saw it all, hundreds of them toiling away as overseers whipped their backs. Of course it was easy to demonize them to the world. What did the good pureblooded fae care for

the fates of hellions poisoning their world. “This is the world my uncle dreams of? This is his golden age?” He said leaning against Fievel and brushing Styx’s fur.

“People like the magistrate and his ilk use your uncle’s vision to justify it all,” Ashryn said, looking out over the fields, “The only golden age to them is the most profitable.” This was the purist’s true face, hiding behind ancient myths and golden age promises to build their own power. Changing his uncle wasn’t enough, it wouldn’t stop the powers surrounding him. They would continue to dig their fingers in, preying on his hatred. Their roots had grown too deep in the kingdom.

He spat on the ground and turned away throwing his fist against one of the towering trees. Leaves shook and fell around them while Inias took long deep breaths. “I *was* naïve,” Inias muttered, turning back to throw his leg over Fievel. All those years and he’d never cared to see it.

“You wanted to see the good in him,” Ashryn said as she mounted her mare, “So did your father and my...” *Grandmother*. She fought the lump rising in her throat, “Whatever good remains, if any, it’s not enough.”

Clutching the reins tightly, Inias spurred Fievel forward, his gaze fixed on the distant walls of Dusk Haven. The city loomed like a dark shadow against the horizon, a stark reminder of the corruption festering within its walls. They turned away and went back into the forest. Tomorrow they would see the Magistrate and finally get an answer for all he’d done. There was still a glimmer of hope that his uncle would rebuke the man, demand justice for loss of innocent life.

Looking out towards the fields at their people forced into servitude, that hope was beginning to fade.

CHAPTER 17

"We saw you," a deep velvety voice called out from the shadows of their camp. Ashryn shivered as a shadow moved across a tree. She saw the wide-brimmed hat and red eyes peering at her, and she gulped. Terror gripped her as she knew who watched her behind those eyes. The Magistrate shouldn't have been able to extend his magic past the Ravenmoon borders. *"I clung to you,"* the shadow explained, as if reading her thoughts. *"When you stepped beyond the wards, I gripped you tight and followed you in."*

Ashryn took a cautious step back, her fingers instinctively seeking the reassuring weight of her dagger at her side. "We were riding, got lost," she fibbed, her voice strained, her gaze unwaveringly locked on the sinister figure. The shadow chuckled, the sound reverberating through the dense forest. *"Do you believe I could not hear you, my little firebird?"* His taunting mockery ignited a flash of anger in her, her lips curling into a snarl. "What do you want?" She asked, hoping he would just get to the point.

"Just a cordial update," the shadow purred, its voice oozing with menace as if it could strip her with a mere glance. *"It's a pity about your infernal lineage. You could prove quite valuable to me."* Ashryn recoiled in revulsion, wrapping her arms protectively around herself. "Nothing of note," she replied, her voice wavering with a thread of fear, her eyes downcast to the forest floor. "I did as you asked. He'll never read the diary of Rhalyf."

The shadow purred again, *"Excellent, can't have him knowing all that,"* A shadowy hand was waving carelessly on the tree beside it. Rhalyf had seen his son's growing hatred for the hellions towards the end, but it was too late. *"The king won't allow me to kill him,"* The shadow broke the silence, catching Ashryn's attention, *"Not unless I feel threatened."*

Ashryn wasn't sure what he meant by that, exactly. She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms, waiting for him to explain. *"I was just thinking how unfit those dungeons are to house your dear grandmother,"* it continued. *"Inias is bound to visit me soon. I need someone with a fiery spirit. Someone who would terrify me into beseeching the king."* Her face twisted in horror at what he was asking her. Get close to him, mold him to their will. She could play along with that. "No, his life wasn't part of the deal." She spoke. Her voice was a mix of fear and defiance.

"Oh no no, it's not about him," it tried to assure her, waving another careless hand. *"Varen will never see me, and I need a reason to siege his forests. If you can help with that, I'll move your grandmother to a comfortable place outside the city."* Outside the city meant she could find her, rescue her. He would never allow her that chance. It was a trap, dangling her grandmother, hoping for an excuse to kill her. Then use her betrayal as an excuse to attack Keira and her family.

Ashryn felt a surge of cold determination wash over her as she locked eyes with the shadowy figure. She knew she had to play along for now, biding her time until the perfect moment presented itself to strike. With a forced calmness in her voice, she replied, "I understand your concerns, your honor. I can see the possibilities in your plan and how it could benefit us both. With Keira out of the way, Inias will be ours to mold."

The shadow's red eyes gleamed, *"Good, good,"* it purred ominously. *"A wise decision. Together, we can achieve great things. Your clan will be proud to see the world we build."* Those velvety words

stung, but she kept her anger buried deep within. *Just a little longer.* She told herself. *“When he arrives, let that hatred you have for me show, just a little. And remember, whatever happens to me, will be done to your dear grandmother tenfold. Is that clear?”*

Ashryn’s body shook as she lifted her eyes to him again, “Y-yes, your honor.” She said through gritted teeth, knowing at any moment that shadow could touch her, kill her with its venom. *“And as for your boyfriend, no more dallying. I want him to be ready by spring’s end. Is that clear?”*

“Yes, your honor,” Ashryn repeated, heaving a sigh of relief as the shadow faded away. It couldn’t linger long, eventually Varen would sense the foreign entity and dispatch knights to eliminate it. There was a sense of safety in that, but she refused to ever leave the forest again.

CHAPTER 18

Inias couldn't stall on Dusk Haven forever. Eventually, he'd have to meet with Ailog and settle the village dispute. So, the next morning he gathered a few of his troops and began the hours long journey. The walls were taller than he'd remembered, standing higher than even the magnificent palace at its center. When he had last stood before these gates, he remembered seeing the Skyfire family's crest, a spiral flame, proudly displayed upon the gates and every spire. Now a black banner hung in its place with a red serpentine snake emblazoned upon it, surrounded by bolts of lightning. His spies had told him as much, but they could never get past the gate.

There was no notice before his arrival. With the royal wolf crest pinned on his cloak, the city guards opened the gate into the city. With him were Ashryn, Elara, and Styx, walking by his side. As Inias and his companions walked through the gates of Dusk Haven, the city revealed itself in all its grandeur. The streets were bustling with activity, merchants calling out their wares and children playing games in the cobblestone alleyways. Bathed in the warm glow of the setting sun, the towering walls loomed protectively over the sprawling streets below. The buildings rose high, with intricate carvings adorning them, depicting scenes of ancient battles and mysterious creatures.

Smoke billowed from the chimneys of cozy taverns, tempting passersby with the scent of hearty meals and warm fires. In the distance, the silhouette of the palace rose majestically against the darkening sky, its spires reaching for the stars like fingers brushing against the heavens. Dusk Haven had once been a safe place for Hellions until the Skyfires conveniently changed their mind and began shipping them off. A sign displayed high above the city streets made their position very clear.

"No haven for devils."

Beneath the sign, a dead man hung by his wrists, blood dried over his body. Someone had broken the horns that once stood proudly upon his head and had cut out his eyes. Inias stared into those hollow depths until Elara pulled Fievel again to get his attention. Inias sat upon Fievel's back, as Elara shouted, "Make way for his royal highness, Prince Inias Nightfang!" People quickly cleared the street and fell to their knees, their faces a mix of fear and surprise. Some looked at him with revulsion, the hellion prince disgracing their city. He returned their dirty looks by baring his fangs and hissing. Many shuddered and looked away, going back to their shopping.

The street grew quieter once jubilant voices fell to whispers. "It's said the magistrate preys on the worst in people," Ashryn whispered as they approached the palace gates. The shock of his arrival was settling as they exited the market. Above, the spires of the palace pierced the sky, casting long shadows over the surrounding buildings. The palace itself stood as a beacon of power and opulence; its beauty undeniable even from a distance.

A scholar passing by the gates dropped his books when he beheld the prince and fell to his knees. "Y-your highness," he said, white robes stained with dirt and his long curly black beard brushed the cobblestone ground. The last rays of the sun bounced off his bald head as he lifted his eyes. He was old and wrinkled, human by the looks of it. His ears were not pointed and Inias couldn't sense a hint of magic behind his old gray eyes. "W-we were not expecting you so soon..." He fumbled the last book as he stood and reached down to grab it.

“I can see that,” Inias said, watching as the man struggled to contain his fear before the hellion. “So busy cleansing the city of devils. I wonder if *I’m* welcome.”

“Oh, I don’t believe you’re anything like *those* hellions, your highness.” The man said a little too quickly, “You’re a prince, descended from a noble lineage. A man of honor and compassion, nothing like those soulless beasts.” Inias eyes flared, and he was half tempted to reach for his sword when he heard the man’s words. The scholar shook once their eyes met, a hint of guilt present on the man’s face as he stepped away. “I-I-I shall find the Magistrate immediately.” For a moment Inias felt he could see all the man’s crimes and schemes weighing on him. “My lor-y-your *highness!*” He corrected himself as he bowed and scurried off as the guards opened the gates for him.

Inias closed his eyes and inhaled the musty air of the closing gates. “Since when is it a scholar’s duty to announce a visitor?” Elara demanded. With a swift turn, she yanked back her hood. “He’s a bootlicker, nothing more than the Magistrate’s pet human.” Ashryn said as she watched the guards. They had their hands placed on their swords, ready to draw them at any moment. There was something off about the way they stood, the way they avoided looking at them.

“My prince!” The gate’s opened and a fat bearded man dressed in proud red armor to meet them. Four similarly armored guards followed behind him. Inias dismounted the Elk as the Magistrate knelt before him. His once luxurious golden hair had become gray and thin, revealing his milky scalp. His hair was cut short, and they plated the Emberstone’s dragon seal in gold on his ears. “Your honor,” Inias answered, looking up to the closing palace gates.

“It’s a dark time for our city, but your visit is most appreciated.” The Magistrate began as he rose. Aside from the glistening green eyes, he looked nothing like his son. Sylvis looked as if divine hands had chiseled him. Ailog resembled a lump of old dough. The proud armor he wore barely concealed his plump figure. “The Hellions threatened to rebel,” He went on, turning his eyes away from them. There were tears glistening as he continued. “Th-they stole children in the night to be sacrificed to Talos.”

“The Cult of Talos. They were in the village?” Inias asked with a furrowed brow, his arms tense across his chest. As the purges unleashed their terror, a wave of fear swept through the Hellion communities, driving many to seek refuge with the cult. Their devotion to a horned Hellion deity, whom they hailed as the dark sovereign of the Hallow, sent shivers down the spines of all who dared to speak its name. They poured out the purist blood for him to slake his thirst. Children were pure, innocent.

Ashryn’s eyes blazed with fury as she stepped forward and pointed her sword towards the Magistrate’s chest. “You purged a village over a couple of radicals?!” she roared; her voice thick with anger. The guards behind Ailog tensed, ready to defend their leader as Ashryn continued, “There were no innocents among them?” Her grip tightened on the hilt of her sword. Ailog met her gaze with steely resolve. “It is my holy duty to purge this land of darkness,” he spoke with unwavering conviction. “That is why his majesty appointed me. If they do not denounce their Hellion ways, then they have no place in our land. *That is the law.*”

“*Your* law,” Inias said, pushing Ashryn’s sword away. “Your law puts them in chains.” He growled, resisting the urge to pull his own sword against the man.

“Those hellions are responsible for the burning of our people’s farmland, so we’ve put them to work. Unless you’d prefer a brutal execution.” Ailog answered, while his guard relaxed. “I have been given command of the city in a desperate hour. The king has entrusted me with its protection and my law keeps our people safe from those savages.” Styx growled, sensing Inias’ growing anger with every word

the Magistrate spoke. “And you may tell the Ravenmoons not to step foot outside their forest,” Ailog said, handing Elara a small scroll. She opened it up and handed it to Inias. The royal seal was stamped upon it and his uncle’s writing mirrored the Magistrate’s words. “If they venture beyond it, the king has given me permission to treat it as an invasion.”

CHAPTER 19

While they were visiting the Magistrate, Inias sent Ruvyn and his scouts to spread rumors through the forests south of Dusk Haven. From the dense forests around Bloodbone Bay to the towering gates of Morningstar Valley, whispers of Sage Thaddeus offering his services to the Magistrate would soon echo through land. Disguised as learned scholars, students of the revered Sage, they spread whispers and rumors. By associating the Sage's esteemed name with a tyrant like Ailog, they were certain to lure him out of hiding. All they had to do now was wait for him to make a move. Ruvyn and his troop remained hidden in the southern forests, ready to spy upon the Magistrates' every move and wait for this sage to reveal himself.

Inias had emerged from a refreshing shower beneath the shimmering waterfall as night fell and now glided through the crystal-clear pond surrounding the humble cottage. Thoughts of the Sage tugged at his mind. His father, a man of pride and independence, never cared for scholars or played the role of a humble student. If the rumors were true and the Sage was even half as skilled as whispered, Inias knew he would be a crucial ally. With danger looming on all sides—from the power-hungry magistrate to the crescents, from the threat of Ivaran to the zealots of the Talos Cult—Inias found himself isolated, his allies dwindling as foes encircled him.

Ivaran's actions against the Ravenmoon's had forever drawn a line between their two clans. The Purists would never seek a resolution with demons. Hellions could never be expected to reconcile with their oppressors. So long as people like the Magistrate could hold such power, peace was not a virtue they could afford. The blood of all he and his uncle had killed cried out for justice from their graves. The king knew what kind of man Ailog was, what he was capable of, and gave him authority to do as he liked with perceived enemies.

As Inias settled on a moss-covered rock beneath the cascading water, droplets sparkling in the moonlight, he pondered the uncertain future that lay ahead. The melody of the falls soothed his troubled thoughts until a faint sound of footsteps disrupted his solitude. Inias quickly drew up his knees to cover himself and growled. "Whatever it is, can wait!" He called out to the figure lurking on his patio deck. They had all day to bring concerns and ask questions. It was rude to disturb one's bath.

The figure stepped into the moonlight, revealing Ashryn in a red floral sundress. "But you look so lonely out there," she said, leaning against the rail. "With those sad, broody eyes." There was a hint of playfulness in her eyes as she watched him from across the water. "Besides, it's not every day I catch you soaking in a moonlit pond like some mystical water spirit."

Inias felt a rush of embarrassment at being caught off guard by Ashryn. He quickly averted his gaze, feeling his cheeks flush with color under the moonlit glow. "I-I'm not lonely," he stammered, trying to hide his discomfort as he shifted beneath the water. "Just needed a moment to clear my head, that's all." Ashryn chuckled softly, her laughter echoing in the tranquil night air. "Oh, I see how it is. Clearing your head, huh? Must be some serious matters on your mind then," she teased gently, her smile warm and inviting. "You know exactly what's on my mind!" He let his anger show, hoping it would distract him from the vulnerable position he found himself in.

Ashryn hopped over the fence and stood on the stone at the pond's edge. She smirked, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "Oh, do I now? Pray tell, oh brooding water spirit, what troubles weigh so

heavily upon your royal brow this night?" she teased, her playful banter causing Inias to relax slightly despite his initial embarrassment. He swam over to the rock he left his shorts on and hid behind the water to cover himself properly. "My royal brow?" Inias asked as he returned to his rock, keeping one knee up to rest his chin upon. Her lighthearted teasing had brought a smile to his face, allowing him to relax.

"Oh, yes, your royal highness," Ashryn replied with a curtsy, her eyes full of amusement. "For whom else but the brooding water spirit could command such attention under the moonlight?" She crossed her arms, leaning against the railing with a grin. "I'm a selkie now?" He joked and kicked his leg beneath the water. Ashryn laughed, the sound echoing through the night as she settled onto a nearby rock, dangling her bare feet in the water. "More like a siren, luring wayward souls to their doom."

Inias flashed his red eyes and looked down at his reflection in the water. "Don't think I'll be luring anyone with these sad, brooding eyes," he said, lifting them to meet her across the water. There was something about the way she watched him, hazel studying his every move closely. "They got my attention." She said, slipping into the cool water. As she surfaced, her dress floated away across the water. Beneath it, he could see her underwear covering her, but he still looked away as she swam around the pond. "So, then, I must be leading you to your doom?"

As Ashryn glided through the water, Inias couldn't help but admire her graceful movements. The moonlight painted her skin and fiery hair with a mesmerizing glow, turning droplets into shimmering pearls. He cleared his throat, trying to push away the lingering tension in his shoulders. "You've led me in and out of doom, remember?" She asked him. Of course, he remembered, it seemed like forever ago, but he would never forget it. "I remember," he replied, his voice cracking slightly.

She'd never blamed him for her capture, only thanked him for coming to rescue her. Ashryn swam closer, her touch sending shivers down his spine as she placed her hand on his shoulder. "And I'll follow you again," she whispered, gently squeezing his shoulder. "And again. Because I believe in you. Because I trust you to guide us through." He was caught in her gaze and found the cliff wall against his back. Trapped. That's how he felt between her and the wall. Even as her hand slid up to cup his cheek, he felt like a mouse cornered by a cat.

Inias felt a mixture of warmth and unease from Ashryn's touch. It felt nice to be touched and admired. A pleasant change from the dirty looks he was used to. He shifted his eyes away, trying to avoid the loving gaze she had pinned on him. "You shouldn't put so much faith in me," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. Ashryn tilted her head, her voice softening. "But I do, Inias," she whispered, her voice carrying a hint of conviction. "I see the strength in you, even when you doubt yourself. We're in this together, remember?" His eyes widened as he felt her arms close around his neck, hugging him tight.

Inias heard faint whispers when he returned her embrace. "A sprinkle of affection and watch how quickly he melts in your hands." He gasped and pushed her away, looking around for an eavesdropper. "Are you okay?" She asked him, giving his shoulders a little shake. "I heard someone..."

"There's no one here, just us!" Ashryn tried to reassure him, but he pushed her away and kicked off the cliff to swim deeper in. "You're not in the mood, I get it." She said as she watched his eyes dart from one direction to the other. "Wait, I didn't say that." Inias turned to find her ahead of him, climbing the patio stairs. There was something following behind her as she left, Inias could almost feel a sense of relief in her wake.

CHAPTER 20

Ashryn left that cottage in tears. She hadn't bothered to grab her sundress or her sandals by the door. Before Inias changed his mind and chased after her, she wanted to be out of there. He'd been swept up in the moment, both half naked in a moonlit pond. After all that had happened, anyone would have been lost in it. She didn't care if people saw her like this as she walked around the camp through the dark to find her tent.

As she navigated the camp under the eerie glow of the moon, the shadows of the trees seemed to dance around her, whispering secrets only the night could hear. The air was heavy with a sense of unease, mirroring the turmoil in Ashryn's heart. Her long, flowing red hair cascaded down her back in waves, a fiery contrast against the darkness surrounding her. The soft earth beneath her bare feet provided a stark reminder of her vulnerability, each step a painful echo of shattered trust.

As she reached her tent, a wave of both relief and despair washed over her. She pushed the flap aside and stepped inside, seeking solace in the solitude of her makeshift sanctuary. The camp lay quiet around her, a stark contrast to the tempest raging within her soul. She knew that the events of that night would haunt her, the memory of Inias' touch forever tainted by her betrayal. As she lay down on her threadbare cot, her tears mingled with the shadows.

What would he think of her now? It wasn't her he had eyes for, it was Keira. Everyone saw it. The way they held each other and sparred so passionately. She didn't want to get between that. The Ravenmoons were the last great hellion clan and Inias was prince, a potential heir to the throne. Their union would breathe new hope into the hellions.

The camp outside seemed to hold its breath, the normally bustling sounds muffled by the night's heavy silence. The rustle of leaves, the distant hoot of an owl, all seemed to conspire against her. The very air crackled with tension, a palpable manifestation of her inner turmoil. Her long crimson hair, a vivid scarlet against the muted darkness, lay tangled and disheveled around her, a fiery reflection of the chaos within her soul. Each strand seemed to whisper accusations, echoing the doubts that gnawed at her from within.

As Ashryn lay in her tent, the weight of her emotions pressed down on her like a heavy cloak, suffocating her. The soft glow of the moon filtered through the fabric of her tent, casting eerie shadows that danced across the walls, a silent reminder of the darkness that now pervaded her heart. Was it truly a hellions burden to carry this darkness? To live a life filled with misery, twisted desire, and loss?

Her long, flowing red hair, once a symbol of her fiery spirit, now seemed like a shroud of deception. Each strand whispered sinister promises, urging her to play her part in a twisted game orchestrated by forces beyond her control. Inias, her close friend, was unknowingly entangled in this web of manipulation, his trust in her exploited.

A rustling of leaves stole her thoughts, and she scented the air. She could smell the sweet eastern pine scent approaching her tent. A smile began to tug at her lips as he neared. Even in such a desperate situation she had a friend who could make her smile. "I was sensing a hint of sorrow from over here," His friendly voice widened her smile, "Has something extinguished those fires?" he asked as she quickly threw a cloak around herself.

“Something like that,” Ashryn wiped her tears and pulled the flap open on her tent allowing him to enter. In the dark she could see the loose fitting green night sweater he wore and the gray trousers covering his legs. “Who am I chopping?” Ruvyn asked lifting one of his axes, causing Ashryn to gasp and shove it away. He left it on the ground and turned back to her.

“No one, I...” Ashryn wasn’t sure how to explain it without giving away everything. “There’s something I have to do and...it might hurt someone.”

Ruvyn crossed his legs on the ground and looked up at her, “People get hurt, it happens. Won’t they understand?” he asked, a glimmer of optimism in his smile. “Maybe not, in this case,” She answered.

“I’m sure you know what you’re doing,” He said, reaching out to take her hand, “You’re a hero, remember?”

Ashryn blinked, never thinking of herself as a hero. No one had ever used that word to describe her. Brave or fierce, but never a hero. “What gives you that idea?” she asked, sliding her hand from his with narrowed eyes. “You made an oath to avenge those hellions. Stood with all of us vowing to fight the magistrate.” He told her, placing his hand atop hers, “Heroes stand up for the people who can’t. So whatever it is, I know you’ll make the right choice.”

Ashryn had spent so much time reminding Inias that she believed in him, it was nice for someone to have the same faith in her. Slowly she slid her arms around Ruvyn’s neck, pulling him up into a hug. “Thank you.” She whispered, brushing her nose against his cheek. “I *really* needed to hear that.”

CHAPTER 21

“You let him leave?” A voice interrupted his peaceful morning as he watched the workers toiling in his fields. Ailog turned to find his son, Sylvis, closing the balcony doors behind him. The Magistrate looked back at the workers chained in iron. “So, *you’ve* finally arrived.” He answered his son, motioning to the seat beside him. The boy groaned but sat, watching as the new slaves were being put to work. *Hellions*, all of them. “Good to see you too, father,” Sylvis said, grabbing a piece of cake on the table between them.

“I couldn't kill the king's nephew,” Ailog answered, stuffing a smaller cake into his mouth, “Not yet.” They couldn't allow Inias to live, as the hellion prince would forever serve as a beacon of hope. That hope would breed unending conflict, the demon hordes unleashed upon them all.

Sylvis looked out at the field, his eyes narrowing with contempt. “And what of them?” he asked, crossing his legs dismissively. “*No sanctuary for devils*. Except the ones from whom you profit,” he remarked, his voice dripping with bitterness. “My father, the hypocrite.”

The magistrate's hand came crashing down on his son's face, its impact sending Sylvis careening from the chair in a tangle of limbs. Clutching his throbbing jaw, he gazed up at his father with a mix of defiance and fear, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. The force of the blow reignited the painful memories of past beatings, causing the web of scars crisscrossing his back to pulse with phantom pain. That one blow brought him back, as if he were just a boy again cowering at his father's feet. “F-forgive me,” he stammered, his voice quivering as he struggled to rise unsteadily to his feet.

“You've grown too bold for your own good,” Ailog's voice was bitter, looking with pride at the bruise he'd left upon the boy's cheek. Sylvis sat once again beside his father, leaning away. “Should I show them mercy? They who killed your mother, your unborn sister. Have you forgotten how they cut her open, bled her dry, and burned her from the inside? A sacrifice to their hellish god.”

With a forced calmness, Sylvis spoke, his voice laced with a quiet determination. “I will never forget, father. I will never forget the atrocities they have committed against us.”

“And you, my child,” Ailog's voice softened as he placed a comforting hand on his son's shoulder, “bear the only tool capable of finally ending their scourge.” Peering into his son's eyes, he continued with intensity, “Once they're purged, it will be you who reigns as king over the golden age. You will lead our people back to Ambriel.” Gently brushing aside Sylvis' hair to cup his bruised cheek, he declared, “You are heaven sent, but the gods show no mercy to hellions. Sentimentality and weakness have no place in their world.”

Sylvis cast a wary glance at his father, his heart heavy with apprehension. Ailog's unwavering determination and fervor for revenge both inspired and petrified him. A new golden age, the return to the promised land. It all laid on his shoulders. Devilsbane, their clan's prized spear, passed down to him from his great uncle. A tool to deliver righteous judgement to those who cursed their land.

They had torn his family apart, captured his mother, and unleashed their wrath upon the innocent children of Dusk Haven. Sylvis gazed upon the fields where hellions labored relentlessly, their gaunt forms bending under the weight of their burdens. “No mercy lingers within their hearts,” he snarled through clenched teeth, eyes blazing with anger. “Why should we show them any grace in return? They

are nothing but savage creatures, a corrupt breed disgracing the name Fae.” His voice dripped with loathing as he spoke, the bitterness of his words cutting through the air.

“It is with a heavy heart that I entrust this burden to you,” Ailog continued, his voice as comforting as a gentle breeze on a summer day. “I have embarked on this path to secure the prosperity of our realm, our lineage. The throne shall be yours once we have vanquished the Hellion Prince.”

Sylvis clenched his fists, the weight of his destiny pressing down on him like an insurmountable mountain. His father’s words echoed in his mind, the image of the devilish creatures haunting his every thought. “I won’t fail us, father,” he declared. “I will wield Devilsbane and cleanse our land with fire and fury.”

Ailog’s eyes gleamed with pride as he beheld his son, now a warrior poised on the edge of destiny. “You carry a mighty burden, my son,” he murmured, his hand tightening reassuringly on Sylvis’ shoulder. “But I have faith in you. Together, we will bring justice to those who have wronged us.”

CHAPTER 22

Inias awoke to a tumultuous storm the next morning. The sky crackled with lightning, and a fierce bolt fell, illuminating the cottage in a blinding flash as it struck the waterfall. Styx covered beneath his blanket, the thunderous roar shaking the surrounding walls. Inias whispered, "The cottage is warded," as the mesmerizing dance of light playing across the window transfixed him with each successive strike. The waterfall seemed to pulse with an ethereal glow, repelling every bolt and casting a gentle glow over their pond.

"We're safe in here. I hope..." He said once he'd finished dressing himself. Styx peeked out and whined when Inias opened the bedroom door. "I can carry you." Inias offered, opening his arms. The fox hesitated for a moment before bravely leaping into Inias' arms. Feeling the tiny heart pounding against his chest, Inias braced himself and stepped out onto the patio as another thunderous roar filled the sky, gazing at the rain lashing on the water's surface.

Styx only slipped from his arms when Inias sat down, resting his head on Inias' leg. Inias presented the plate of meat chunks left for Styx on his leg. Styx ate carefully, while Inias smiled at the plate of fruit set out for him. As he took a bite of an apple, Inias blinked, catching the scent of dandelions wafting in. He turned to see Keira pulling the cloth shut as she entered. "I came earlier to check the wards," she said, kicking off her boots and hanging her jacket on a hook. "See? We're perfectly safe!" Inias reached down and ruffled up Styx's head. He received a few licks, but the fox went back to eating.

"You didn't tell us you were going to see the Magistrate," Keira asked, crossing her arms. "You didn't tell me you were coming to visit." Inias shifted away, sensing the anger in her eyes. "It had nothing to do with you. Don't worry." He waved a careless hand and went back to his apple. Her inky black eyes flared purple and Inias gulped, "*Idiot!*" She slapped the apple out of his hand and gave him a hard shake. "Whatever you did, whatever you said, he *will* use it against us!" She hollered before Inias pressed his hand onto Styx's head to keep him from biting her.

Inias blinked and ran his fingers through his hair as she plopped down beside him. The lightning struck again, and the sky roared. He recalled his meeting with Ailog, how Ashryn had threatened him. "And what's this we've been hearing about the Sage?" Keira narrowed her eyes at him and Inias kept his hand on Styx's head as the fox began growling. "Awful, isn't it?" Inias answered, looking at the falling rain. "Aubron spoke so highly of him...do you...do you think there are any good people in this world?" He shut his eyes and turned away, hoping he hadn't overplayed it.

"Of course there are Inias," Keira rested her hand on his shoulder and offered him a gentle smile. "So, how long has *Ruvyn* been a student?" She smacked him across the head and growled. "One of our knights caught him following a wagon train!"

"I need his help!" Inias rubbed his head and groaned, "Had to draw him out somehow..." he said, sliding away before she could smack him again. "That's not the point. *Everything* you do affects us, my clan, my *family!* He's looking for any excuse to bring the army in. He'll twist your words, beg the king to give the order. The same way he justified the village massacre."

"He said they were killing the city's children," Inias told her, recalling the cult of Talos. Keira shook her head and sighed, correcting him. "They killed two children," she said, looking away. "When the

village elders discovered it, they turned the cultists over to the Magistrate. He convinced the city and the king that the village was crawling with them and sent his soldiers to occupy it. When the Hellions resisted, he sent the army to wipe them out.”

Inias turned his head to her, surprised. The way the Magistrate spoke of it, he’d thought cultists were sneaking in, stealing dozens of children to be sacrificed. He’d threatened to destroy the Ravenmoon’s if they stepped foot outside their forests. What would he tell the King after Ashryn pointed a blade at his heart, ready to strike him down? “You can’t leave this place,” Inias told her. “The Magistrate will do the same to you if you step outside the forest.”

“We’re *prisoners* now?!” Keira raised her voice, earning a warning growl from Styx. “And you’re okay with that?” Inias held the fox tightly and brushed his fur to calm him. “Never!” He answered her, setting Styx down on the sofa again, whispering a spell to let him sleep. As the fox curled up and snored, Inias turned to Keira, “The city’s too well defended. Even your knights couldn’t break through.” Inias recalled the towering walls, the red armored knights outside the gates. “I don’t know how many of my warriors would go along, either.”

Keira shook her head. “We can’t hide behind these wards forever.”

“I was hoping we could lure out the Sage and ask him.”

“You’re putting all your faith in a *mou*-.” She cupped her lips and gasped. “A moose?” Inias asked, blinking. Keira shook her head and snatched a handful of grapes from the bowl. He took her wrist before she could stuff her face. “Who am I putting my faith in?” He demanded and yelped when she bit his hand. Sighing, she set the grapes down and turned to him. “The Sage is a mouse, Thaddeus Whiskertail.”

Inias couldn’t help the laugh bubbling out when he heard it. *Whiskertail*. “You’re not serious,” he said, clearing his throat when he saw her unmoving gaze. “Do you know where he is?”

“When you started spreading rumors, all the hellions began hunting him,” she explained, giving him another light whack on the head. “The wagon train was harboring hellion refugees, rallying to strike the sage down outside the city.” Inias wasn’t thinking of the danger he left the poor man, mouse, in. “My father took him in. He wants to see you after the scarlet night.”

“The Scarlet Night?” Inias blinked, taking one grape into his mouth. “The Hellion’s Night. Above the forest, the sky turns red as angels streak across it. My father plans to offer a sacrifice and hope they hear us.” Keira explained to him by pulling one of the books from the stack still left on the table. The cover was painted red with little dots, spirals in and streaks of light. She opened the book and passed it to him. Inias took the brittle leather in his hands and gently placed it upon his lap.

“Fallen from their world, they found solace in the skies of Harrowsvale,” Inias read aloud as Keira inched closer to him, peering over his shoulder. “Their wings lost, they were carried by the prayers and dreams of all the lost and forgotten. The Fae saw the seven angels, lifted by a mighty wind as they streaked across. Forsaken from their home, they traveled aimlessly, chaos following in their wake. It was on that night those seven stars guided them out of the wild.” It was a cute story; one he’d never heard. No different, however, than the myths he’d been taught as a boy.

The book went on to explain it’s coming every two centuries, and the Hellions were among the few who continued to celebrate it. The association of fallen angels and a blood red sky weren’t popular with the growing Purist elite who worked to stamp it out. The king had kept many things from him,

forbade him from learning them. Inias was never told of the massacres, the slow purge of their people. The rising power of men like the Magistrate. Or maybe he hadn't cared to see it. It was easy to look away while he was strutting around Nightfang castle. Safe behind those stone walls, protected from the worst abuses by his name alone.

“You have to promise me something,” Keira broke the silence, resting a hand upon his. “No more scheming behind our backs. My clan can't trust it when you're keeping secrets from us.” In meeting the Magistrate, he had cast suspicions on the Ravenmoon's. He needed them. They were the last clan strong enough to defy the purists' growing power. The only ones who would stand beside him. “I promise.” Inias took her hand in his with a gentle squeeze and she threw her arm around his shoulders. “Sorry for slapping you around.”

CHAPTER 23

She spent all day checking the wards around their forest. Their spells were nothing compared to the power of nature, should it wish to shatter their defenses. It wasn't her duty to attend the wards during a storm, but it was the only excuse for her late return. Anything to avoid returning home, to give another report to her father. She had slipped out in the early hours of the morning to avoid their fussy servants.

Keira returned to the manor later in the night, climbing out of her carriage to greet the servants. They lifted an umbrella over her head and led her to the door. "You mustn't go out in such a storm milady," One of them said as she was led in, and the umbrellas put away. They were always so fussy. She'd had to sneak out of the manor just to get out. Her father didn't like her going off to meet with Inias alone. He had only allowed it on the agreement she acted as a spy for him. Spying on her friend when she'd just demanded transparency, it left a bad taste in her mouth.

When they reached for her coat, she shoved the women away and growled. "Leave me be," She said in a more forceful tone than she intended, "It's been a long day, I wish to be alone." Her voice softened as she stepped away from the two bowing women. Taking her coat, she threw it to one of them. The servant caught the coat deftly, a look of surprise flashing across her face. Keira's sudden outburst was out of character, but the servant knew better than to question her lady. With a quick bow, the servants quickly retreated, leaving Keira standing alone in the foyer.

The echoes of the storm outside seemed to amplify the silence within the manor. As Keira made her way through the grand hallway, the dimly lit chandeliers above her casting a soft golden glow, she couldn't help but admire the beauty of her family's home. The walls were adorned with intricate tapestries depicting scenes of battles and triumphs, a reminder of the powerful lineage she belonged to. The marble floors gleamed underfoot, a testament to the dedication of the diligent servants who tirelessly kept the manor spotless.

Passing by the imposing staircase that led to the upper floors, Keira couldn't resist running her fingers along the polished banister, feeling the smoothness beneath her touch. The air was tinged with the scent of old books and wood polish, a comforting smell that enveloped her like a warm embrace. Portraits of her ancestors lined the walls, their stern gazes watching over her every move, a constant reminder of the expectations that weighed heavily on her shoulders.

As she made her way to her chambers, the heavy oak door loomed before her, intricately carved with patterns of intertwining vines and flowers. Pushing it open, Keira stepped into the room that was her sanctuary. The plush velvet curtains were drawn shut, casting the room in a soft dusk light. A crackling fire burned in the hearth, casting dancing shadows across the room and warming her to the core.

A grand bookshelf dominated one corner of the room, filled with volumes of history, fantasy, and many of her ancestors' personal grimoires. The scent of old parchment and leather-bound books enveloped the room, a fragrance that never failed to soothe her restless mind. In the center of the room, a sturdy oak desk stood proudly, littered with papers and her personal diary left unguarded again. A golden quill and inkwell sat ready for her next entry.

Near the hearth, the pair of gleaming knives stood like silent sentinels, their blades shimmering with a deadly elegance that mirrored the dangers lurking in the shadows. Each rune etched on the knives whispered of power and sacrifice, a reminder of the fine line she walked between duty and rebellion.

As the storm raged outside, Keira sank into the plush velvet chair by the fire. The howling winds remained a relentless symphony of chaos. Keira sat by the crackling fire in her chamber, the flickering flames casting eerie shadows that danced across the walls like twisted spirits. Her thoughts drifted back to the secrets she was forced to keep, the lies she was forced to tell, all in the name of duty and loyalty. Who was she meant to be most loyal to? Her father? The man who had watched for centuries as his kind were slowly stripped of their freedom. When they needed him most, he chose the king. He had reaped the benefits and now his children would pay the price.

The king had taken her mother, accused her of treason, of aiding cultists. She had hidden two children from capture, children of Talos' high priestess. Her father should have ripped the man apart. One's duty was first to their clan and second to their king, that was the old way. Only now that the king had turned on him did he make a stand. When the hellions were at their most desperate, he had risen as their beacon of hope. It was then he orchestrated the secret roads for refugees to flee safely. The Hellion King, some called him.

And then there was Inias whose resolve seemed to strengthen with each passing day. Despite his occasional thoughtlessness, she knew that his heart was in the right place. Inias would choose her, of that she was certain. Since his father's death something had changed in him. That tragedy had shattered his once insufferable ego and revealed a resilience no one had seen. She had brought it out, had pushed him when he'd hit his lowest point. Together they would redeem their clans and build a new world, one where hellions no longer lived in fear.

Though the storm raged she stood from her chair and rummaged through her closet for another cloak. She didn't want another night of reports to her father. Instead of a cloak she chose a long black jacket, woven to repel rain. It's what she should have worn earlier, she'd been in a rush to evade everyone in the manor. Throwing it around her shoulders she walked to the window and flung it open.

Tonight, she wanted to be with her friend. One night to forget about all the scheming, the magistrate, the king, and the coming conflict. She wanted to feel his arms around her, safely wrapped in his warmth.

CHAPTER 24

The Magistrate grinned at the messenger knelt before him. He sat upon the throne that Caelan Skyfire once inhabited, and with the seal ring offered by the king, it had passed to him. Sliding the ring onto his fatty finger, he purred, admiring the silver dragon wrapped around. Ivaran crafted it as a special gift and given him the title of Lord of Dusk Haven and High Prefect, entrusting him with command over all Magistrates in the kingdom.

Ivaran honored him with jewels and various treasures, rare wines, and dancing women to entertain him. He licked his lips as he beheld them, picked from the lower born nobility, all so young and delicate. Waving them away, they exited his small throne room as his eyes drifted to the gold laid out before him. The king named him a pillar of the kingdom, upholding justice in the battle against darkness.

“In all the kingdom, there is one man who stands as the greatest threat to the demon horde,” the messenger went on, head bowed as he relayed the king’s words. “He is a beacon of light in these troubled times. One we may all follow into a brighter future.” The messenger stood, pulling the mask and hood from his face to reveal his tanned skin and deep brown eyes. Ailog rose from his throne and met the messenger with a warm embrace.

“His majesty does me a great honor.” Ailog said, keeping his hands on the boy’s shoulders as he slid away. “I fear I’m not worthy of such praise.” He said with gentle eyes, contrasting the sugary smile across his lips. “I must, however, not betray the king’s faith. I humbly accept this promotion with the oath that I continue to lead our people into a better world, so they may no longer live in fear.”

Ailog released him and summoned a servant. A young woman dressed in a red silk robe entered the throne room and bowed. “Ava! Bring the king’s messenger to the guest house.” he said, clapping the boy on the shoulder with a friendly squeeze. “I will have him at my side at the banquet tonight, where we will toast to the king together!” There was a cheery excitement in his voice, earning a bright smile from the messenger and the servant.

“I’m most honored, Lord Ailog.” The messenger said with a deep bow and grinning cheeks. “I’ve long been an admirer of yours. I hope to hear tales of your deeds over dinner.” Ailog’s lips twisted into a brighter smile as the boy praised him. “What is your name?” He asked, hooking his arm around the youth’s shoulders. “Felix Nightfang, milord, third cousin to the king.” Felix answered, turning to reveal the royal wolf plated on his shoulder.

“A scion of the royal house!” Ailog proclaimed, clapping him on the back with a laugh, “I should have known, you have the noble look befitting a Nightfang. Well, my boy, we shall feast into the night together and share stories.”

A flash of blonde hair entered the room as Felix bowed and expressed his gratitude. Ailog looked at his son as he entered the throne room, eyeing the three of them. “You must meet my son, Sylvis!” Lord Emberstone waved his son over, who hesitated but soon followed to meet Felix. He held Devilsbane in his hand, and the boy’s brown eyes lit up as he beheld the mighty spear. “Lord Sylvis, it’s an honor.”

“The honor’s all mine, and you are?” Sylvis answered with a smile, lightly twirling the spear as he offered a hand. “Felix Nightfang, cousin to the king.” The messenger answered, standing proudly in

the presence of the mighty warrior whose name had been praised through the end of winter. “The King has entrusted me with protecting this city and honored me as Lord and High Prefect.”

Sylvis looked at the young royal, barely over fourteen, and brown eyes full of longing. He resembled Ivaran and Cyran more than Inias ever had. Though he held the same raven black hair, it hung in gentle curls around his face, not the thick wild mop surrounding the Hellion prince’s fair skin. “Congratulations father, the king has made a wise choice.” He bowed low before his father and took his hand to place a kiss on the seal ring.

Ava, who stood quietly, took light steps towards them, head hung lower than all the nobility. “Shall I prepare the guest house my Lord Ailog?” she said with a smile, sure to not dare look into the eyes of her lord and master. Ailog reached out gently brushing her soft brown skin with his fingers as he admired her, “Yes, my dear girl, ensure it’s perfect, no luxury is too great for the king’s man.” His fingers drifted into her hair, brushing it behind her pointed ear.

“Y-yes, my lord!” Ava answered, pulling her face away from his touch, casting her eyes on the red carpet. Without uttering another word, she bowed and hurriedly left the room. Felix bowed to the two and followed the woman.

Ailog watched beside his son as the young servant left the room. “A fine woman,” he purred, turning to his golden-haired son. “She’s of excellent breeding and knows her place. A fine woman indeed.”

Sylvis fought the gag, forcing its way up his throat. His father had lived for centuries, and that girl was younger than Sylvis, aged seventeen years. “It’s about time you settled down, don’t you think?” Ailog went on, “What do you make of Ava?”

“I know nothing about her,” Sylvis turned away, resting Devilsbane against the wall. “What is there to know? She’s exquisite and submissive, as any dutiful wife should be. The purity of the Nightingale clan rivals that of the King.” Ailog sat upon his throne as he spoke and Sylvis took a seat beside him. “I’m not even twenty. I have centuries to find a wife.” He answered, hoping to divert the talk to anything else.

“If we are to present you to the king as a suitable heir, you must find a wife capable of continuing the line.” Ailog reminded his son, there was more to gaining the court’s approval than prowess. “She seems fertile. You will ask her to accompany you to the banquet this evening,” He ordered in a more direct, forceful tone. “You can’t be serious!” Sylvis pleaded, standing at his feet, fingers curled into fists. “While I charm the king’s messenger, you shall sweep that girl off her feet. Is that clear?” Ailog stood, finishing his words with a snarl and a raised hand.

Sylvis met the king’s snarl with a glare, but sighed and opened his fists, bowing to his father. “As you wish, father. It is only by your wisdom we have made it so far.” His father smiled and brought a hand to Sylvis’ cheek. “You may not understand, but all I do, every step, is for the good of us. It is good to question, to learn, but you must *never* defy me. Trust that I will and have always held your best interests in my heart.”

CHAPTER 25

All day, Ashryn had been avoiding him. Despite the storm, Ruvyn delivered his usual morning report once Keira was gone. Ashryn had been present among them. At dawn, she commanded the strengthening of their magical shields to ward off the rain. He had never seen her, somehow; she evaded his sight all day as they worked together. The runes they used were like those around the cottage, but with slight modifications to extend their coverage. It successfully blocked most of the storm, permitting them to dry off.

Nothing new from the scouts besides the people's growing discontent with the magistrate. The city's resources had been largely allocated to bolstering the army. Despite their shared hatred for the magistrate, they were not allies. The Hellions were consistently demonized by the Skyfires and Ailog. Their roots of hate ran too deep.

He spent the rest of the day in bed with Styx, reading the grimoires Keira had left for him. The use of dark magic. According to one grimoire, hellions were a breed capable of harnessing dark magic without being consumed by it. Their blood already carried the darkness within. This was a kind of magic that only demons and hellions could truly excel at. The books contained a variety of hexes, and he was excited to experiment with some of them.

One held a spell to absorb and turn against. To turn one's power against them. By combining a rune to attract and another to repel, he might have discovered how to ward off Devilsbane. With a grin, Inias closed the grimoire and visualized it in his mind. He remembered the devil's dance, where two blades were used. One for defense, the other for offense. If only that blond brute would appear, he could put it to the test.

He was unable to sleep as night descended. He remained trapped beneath the blanket due to the coldness in the air. Throughout the day, Styx stayed asleep, possibly to forget the storm. Inias was restless, his thoughts racing. The fight would continuously replay in his mind. One sword could absorb while the other could reflect it. The only issue was figuring out the correct way to connect the two blades.

The sound of footsteps in the cottage finally lured him away. Inias felt a sense of peace as the air filled with the fragrance of dandelions. Upon hearing her movements, he sat up as she moved the ivy out of the way. In a hushed tone, she murmured "hey," trying not to rouse Styx. "Is it alright if I stay?" She asked, waiting for his nod before she sat beside him. Only a pair of shorts covered her legs. His gaze fixed on her for a moment, but Inias swiftly looked away and noticed the loose blue sweater she had on.

"Are you okay?" Inias asked, relaxing back against the pillow while she pulled the bear's fur blanket around herself. Keira shook her head and snuggled up to him, facing away. "I can't talk about it," she muttered into the pillow as his arm came around her, "What's keeping you up?"

Inias let his head rest near her shoulder, relaxing against her. "Sylvis," He said, "I think I know-." A finger pressed against his lips, and he caught her head shaking. "Not tonight," she said and turned back to the pillow. "No war talks."

Inias refrained from prying, regardless of her reasons. "Alright," he said as Styx leaned against his back. With a gradual turn, Keira rotated her body, her dark eyes meeting his red stare. As Inias looked into Keira's eyes, a sense of calm washed over him. Keira's presence calmed his restless mind, reminding

him of the moments of peace and warmth that could be found amidst the chaos. A tender silence enveloped them, the only sound being the gentle patter of rain outside. The storm had ended, the once pounding rain falling into a gentle drizzle. In that moment, the weight of impending war seemed to fade away, leaving only the warmth of their shared breaths mingling in the cool night air.

Their shared demon blood bound them in a way that transcended words. As Keira settled in closer, Inias couldn't help but notice the delicate curve of her horns, the vibrant hues of her hair blending seamlessly with the shadows of the room. Her inky black eyes held a depth that seemed to draw him in, a mysterious allure that he had never fully appreciated until now. He felt a strange flutter in his chest, a warmth that had nothing to do with the blanket wrapped around them.

Inias, with his fangs glinting in the dim light, exuded an aura of danger that both intrigued and comforted her. His scarred cheek told tales of battles fought and survived, a testament to his resilience. She gazed into his blood-red eyes, a reminder of the primal nature that lurked beneath all the brooding. Keira closed her eyes, savoring the warmth of his touch.

He leaned in as her hand came to his neck, fingers lightly grazed his jaw, sending a shiver down his spine. And in that fleeting moment, as the world outside faded into obscurity, their lips met in a soft kiss that said all they had left unspoken in that moment. And as they drifted off to sleep, their breathing synchronized in the hushed rhythm of the night, the storm outside finally subsided, leaving behind a peaceful stillness that enveloped them in its embrace.

CHAPTER 26

Keira could have laid there all day if she wasn't concerned her father would come looking. The last thing she needed was for her father to see her in bed with him. There would be a guard posted at her doors and beneath her windows to keep her in. Once he realized she hadn't returned home, the entire guard would be on the lookout. His attention made leaving even more difficult. When he woke, she felt his nose brushing against her neck, sending shivers down her spine.

Staying would also mean talking about last night, their shared kiss, what it meant. "I can't," she muttered and pulled herself away from him. "Believe me, you don't want him charging out here!" After a quick apple and a goodbye kiss, Keira left the cottage and made her way home.

The front lawn of the massive ruby manor sprawled out like a grand tapestry, dappled with hues of emerald and viridian. Lush grass carpeted the expanse, meticulously manicured to perfection, while colorful blooms danced in the gentle breeze, releasing a sweet fragrance that lingered in the air. Towering oak trees stood guard like ancient sentinels, their canopies providing a welcome respite from the summer sun. At one end of the lawn, a quaint stone fountain gurgled merrily, its waters cascading down in a mesmerizing display. Delicate marble statues adorned the garden, frozen in time in elegant poses that spoke of grace and beauty. Soft rays of sunlight filtered through the foliage, casting a warm, golden glow.

She could evade her father, the servants, but never Vestin, her brother. He sat outside on the front lawn of the manor, casting a knowing smile at her with a book in his hands. "Gonna tell me why I had to cover for you?" He asked her with a raised brow, his massive frame barely contained beneath the light shirt and trousers he wore. They both had the same inky black eyes and blue hair, but his hair lacked the purple shades and he had neatly cut it since his return.

"I spent the night out," Keira answered with a shrug, taking the seat beside him. "What's the big deal?"

Vestin hummed and returned to his book, a smirk creeping on his lips as he sniffed the air. "With Inias?" he asked, eyes gleaming with amusement as her cheeks reddened. "Did you two finally-."

"It's none of your business!" She interrupted him, growing frustrated with that grin on his face. Vestin chuckled, a glint in his eyes as he closed his book and leaned back against the chair, "Oh, but Keira, when it involves the prince, it becomes my business as well. He's a friend, you know."

Keira rolled her eyes and crossed her arms defiantly. "You don't get to be nosy just because your friends," she told him, giving him a shove to knock him off his chair. Vestin let out a hearty laugh as he toppled backward off his chair, landing ungracefully on the grass with a thud. "Ouch, sis, you've got a fierce shove for such a delicate flower," he teased, brushing off the grass from his clothes with a grin. "Just tell me," He went on, pulling his chair up to sit on it. "Should I give him the talk? You know, hurt my sister and I'll rip out your spine?"

It was her turn to let out a laugh. "No need," she said with a shake of her head. "I can dismember him on my own, but sweet of you, brother."

"Dismembering who?" Varen stepped outside dressed in a light purple robe to meet his children. "Oh, just a few unfortunate souls," she joked, leaving her seat to greet her father with a warm hug. His

arm came around her, lightly stroking her hair. He raised an eyebrow and chuckled, “They have it coming?” Keira hummed and lightly tapped her chin. “Sometimes I wonder.”

Vestin shot a grin at Keira before turning his attention to their father. “Ah, father, you know how it is with these suitors, always pushing boundaries,” he quipped.

Varen’s chuckle rumbled through the air as he embraced his children. “I’ve trained you well. I know any suitor will think twice before crossing you,” he said as the servants began laying out their breakfast on the table.

As they laid out the breakfast feast, the table became a colorful array of delicacies fit for royalty. There were platters of freshly baked pastries, still warm and inviting with a golden hue. The sweet aroma of berries and cream lingered in the air. Bowls of ripe fruits shone like precious gems under the morning sunlight, their juices eagerly pooling at the base, as if vying for attention. The table groaned under the weight of culinary treasures, each dish a masterpiece.

Varen, Keira, and Vestin could only gaze in awe at the banquet spread before them. Vestin raised an eyebrow at the breakfast spread, gazing upon it with hungry eyes. “Looks like we’re in for a treat this morning,” he said, grabbing the first pastry. Keira chuckled, her gaze dancing over the fruits before her. “The chefs have outdone themselves today,” she remarked, eagerly snatching a few grapes.

“The angels come tonight,” Varen said as he picked at the sausage on his plate. “We have a long day ahead of us, a festival to prepare for.” He said as the servants came to fill their wine. Keira smiled to herself; she would get to see her first scarlet night. Tonight, she and Inias would stand together with their people. Only once every two centuries did the angels fly over, filling them with hope and strength. They needed it now more than ever.

“We can’t remain separated,” Vestin said, his voice more serious than it had been. “After the festival, we leave with Inias to fortify our southern wards.” That was why their father had allowed Inias and his troop to stay. It wasn’t much, but the Magistrate was waiting for any opportunity to strike them. With the king’s nephew between them, Ailog would hesitate to attack.

Varen set his fork down and cleaned his lips. “I’m not entrusting my children to that brat,” he said, looking between the two of them. “Your children can handle themselves,” Keira said, turning her chair to face her father. “How long are you going to make us hide behind these wards?” Her eyes burned with a fiery intensity as her arms crossed over her chest.

Vestin took his fork and pointed it at his father, “We need to fight, before he becomes too powerful and our people too few.” Varen looked to his son, his heir, as he spoke. All he had done, the sacrifices he made, were to keep them from suffering the same fate as so many hellions. They couldn’t have ever stood up to the king, he would have annihilated them. That’s what he told himself, every time the king and his followers shed his people’s blood. So long as he played the good hellion, unlike the savage breed, his children could live safe and free. His own naivety had led them down this path.

“We’re going,” Keira said, reaching out to take her father’s hand gently. “You always told us to follow our hearts and they’re leading us to battle. Mother’s blood cries for justice.” Her father’s eyes glistened with unshed tears and Vestin looked at her. “Well, I suppose...” Varen said, standing to his feet, “If it’s in your hearts, there’s nothing I can do.” He could lock them up, whisk them away to a faraway place where no one had ever heard of hellions. If he did, they would never forgive him. They would look back with the same guilt he felt all these years as he stood by and watched. “We’ll be together,” Keira said, leaning over to take her brother’s hand and then her fathers, “With all our clan.”

CHAPTER 27

Among his twenty-five followers, seven refused to attend a Hellion festival. Ruvyn, Elara, and Ashryn had all agreed to accompany him. The ones who joined him clad themselves in rugged animal skins, with a few even adorning their heads with twisted horns and enchanting their eyes with otherworldly glows. This last trial allowed Inias to sift out those among his group who would not stand against the king. Whatever their motives may have been, he could not have them as his protectors any longer.

Inias turned to those seven who refused and flared his eyes. “If any of you wish to join the Magistrate, you may,” he told them, hoisting himself upon Fievel’s back. “But all of you, be gone before I return.” It was their one and only warning. He would’ve killed them to avoid future trouble, but it didn’t feel right. Keira had agreed to send a party of knights to his camp to ensure they left. No more secrets, that’s what he’d promised. Inias may not have trusted Lord Varen, but he would share his plans with Keira.

Ivaran would likely have learned of Inias’ actions by now. There was no hiding his feelings towards the Magistrate, now was the time to cut those loyal to the purists loose. Eighteen remained. He was lucky to have that many. They had seen the Magistrate’s evil and agreed to stand in solidarity with their fellow fae.

“It’s not enough,” Elara whispered beside Inias, concern heavy in her voice as she glanced back at the dwindling troop. “The Magistrate has an army.”

Ruvyn rode up on his gray stallion, his face set in a grim expression, as Ashryn galloped out ahead on her sleek black mare. “He’s a damn usurper,” Ruvyn growled, his voice edged with bitterness. “Capitalizing on the Skyfire’s betrayal to snatch their city. We’ve been asking around — some folks aren’t too pleased with his rule.”

There were likely some in the city who despised Ailog, even among his soldiers. It still wasn’t enough to turn the tide. He would need to gather as many hellions as possible before his uncle or the magistrate discovered it.

“What do they say of him?” Elara asked, looking around Inias to Ruvyn. “There are whispers among the people,” Ruvyn continued as he met Elara’s gaze, “They see him for what he truly is - a bitter, licentious man hiding behind false heroism.”

Inias turned to Ruvyn, sensing the urgency in his words. “Would they be willing to turn?”

“Some maybe, but the Hellion stigma is strongest in Dusk Haven,” Ruvyn shook his head solemnly. “If he puts enough strain on the people, they’ll do our work for us!” Ashryn offered, turning her head.

“It has to be one of us, a *Hellion*,” Inias said, petting Styx as the wolf lay curled up in front of him, flashing one of his fangs. If they could deliver a critical blow to the Purist cause, other hellions would rally to join them. “We can’t touch him while he’s safe in the city,” Elara added, looking at the torchlights gathering in the forest glade ahead of them.

“So, we lure him out, the man’s a dog,” Ashryn said quietly as they approached the growing crowd. “Throw a bone and he’ll chase it.”

It seemed to be their only option; there wasn’t time to wait for another to present itself.

As the group approached the forest clearing where the Ravenmoon clan was hosting the festival, the air was alive with excitement. The sound of drums and flutes filled the air, blending harmoniously with the laughter and chatter of the fae gathered for the celebration. Colorful lanterns hung from the trees, casting a warm, inviting glow over the glade. Exotic fruits, savory meats, and delicate pastries adorned the long tables, creating a feast fit for kings that the fae gathered for the celebration enjoyed. The scent of roasted meats and sweet wine wafted through the air, tantalizing the senses.

When Keira had told him of a sacrifice, he expected some solemn religious ceremony while they waited for the stars to pass. A great purple flame sat at the center of the glade where creatures of all kinds had gathered to dance. Many had horns and otherworldly eyes, but others had goats’ hooves and tails. Satyr’s, nymphs, spriggen’s, and various goblins had all come to celebrate.

“Are they all Hellions?” Inias asked as he slipped off Fievel to greet Keira and her father. “No, but they’ve experienced the purist’s injustices, just like us,” someone said from behind him. Inias grinned and turned to find Vestin wearing the coat of a large bear. “Hey!” He said, “Where have you been hiding?”

As Inias’ troop disappeared into the crowd, Keira wrapped him in a hug. “He’s the heir, he stays with father.” Keira answered and squeaked when her brother’s enormous arms came around them both. “Not for long,” Vestin said, casting a glance at Lord Varen. “I’m going back with them tonight.”

“Wait, do I get a say in this?” Inias asked, crossing his arms over the open leather vest he wore. He fixed a demon mask upon his mask, little horns peeking out in the front and a long-pointed nose hanging over his own. “We didn’t think you’d mind,” Vestin said as Keira returned in a long blue skirt resting just above her ankles. A purple sash covered her chest adorned with glitter and upon her head sat a floral crown of black and red roses. An inked raven spread its wings above her bare stomach, shimmering in the moonlight. “It’s our best chance, *right dad?*” she said, turning to her father, who nodded begrudgingly.

“Like old times!” Inias said, clapping Vestin on the back. “And *just* like old times I’d enjoy a dance, Ruvyn?” Ashryn approached them as Ruvyn turned with a wild grin when he beheld her fire red gown. The horns on her head were those of the demon Ifrit. He took Ashryn’s hand and spun her around as Keira claimed Inias’ arm.

CHAPTER 28

The stars shimmered through the vibrant red sky above, casting a surreal glow over the darkened expanse. Its crimson hues painted the heavens, mesmerizing all who dared to look up. As their gaze lifted, an ethereal light seemed to ignite in his eyes. Amid the spectacle, Hellions stood nearby, their eyes ablaze with enchanting colors as they looked to the sky above. The stars seemed to tug at him, at something buried and bound deep within. His claws extended freely, and he felt his shoulders lighten.

“Wow,” Inias whispered, his eyes reflecting the crimson hue as he handed the bottle to Keira. She took a deep drink and placed it down gently. “I hoped we’d see it together,” she murmured, taking a step forward. The full moon emerged as a radiant red sphere, illuminating the glade with a crimson light. “Darkness surrounds us, but only a hellion can appreciate the twisted beauty of it. It’s within the darkness that our light truly shines.”

Inias reached out and took her hand. “I never shined through the darkness, only hid within it.” A heady blend of potent alcohol and swirling, hypnotic smoke enveloped Inias, setting his blood ablaze. A primal surge of energy pulsed through him, sharpening his senses to a keen edge. The once graceful dance in the clearing disintegrated into a chaotic whirlwind of revelry, with bodies bouncing and howling in a frenzied frenzy. Inias and Keira found themselves swept up in the chaos, drawn into the boisterous mob of intoxicated revelers.

Pulsating with euphoria and passion, Inias and Keira embraced the chaos that enveloped them. The thrum of drums echoed through the clearing, their beats intertwining with the wild laughter and exultant shouts that filled the air. Bodies twirled and collided in a tangled mass of limbs, each movement a celebration of freedom. The crowd danced around the fire and began hopping through the purple flames that engulfed the three sacrificial deer.

Inias took her hand as they hopped through the fire, shouting into the air. Their laughter rang out joyfully as they spun and twirled once again, their eyes alight with thrill. The flames of the fire cast an amethyst glow over the scene, flickering and dancing in time with the pounding beats of the drums. The world around them blurred into a kaleidoscope of colors and sensations, each moment a testament to the raw, unfiltered joy of the moment.

They hadn’t seen it, but maenads had joined the dancing crowd. Drawn by the primal call of the celebration, they joined the dance with unrestrained revelry. Wreathed in grape vines and ivy, their movements were a mesmerizing blend of grace and unbridled passion, enhancing the intoxicating mix of sensations that filled the glade. Their twirling figures intertwined with the others, creating a dance of unrestrained passion that pulsed with a primal energy.

A boy with goat’s horns and an ivy crown, wielding a pinecone tipped staff, twirled with Elara, linked arm in arm. Ashryn and Ruvyn soon joined the youth each switching partners as they twirled around.

The Scarlet Night welcomed all to join, even those without demon’s blood. Those who openly embraced the freedom of dancing limbs were bathed in ecstasy. Amidst the whirl of colors and sounds, a sense of unity and freedom enveloped the gathering like a warm embrace. The boundaries between the demon blooded and pure-blooded blurred as all who embraced the spirit of the night became one in their

shared revelry. The music of the drums echoed through the trees, carrying the essence of the night sky's crimson glow into the hearts of all who danced beneath its watchful gaze.

Slowly the dancing ended as the drums pounded, signaling the coming stars. The air crackled with anticipation as the first shooting star streaked across the crimson expanse, its brilliant light trailing behind like a fiery comet. One by one, the seven stars flew across the heavens, their vibrant colors casting a bright light over them all. They all began to cheer and disperse from the flames.

Keira pulled Inias towards a tree to sit. As he laid back against the sturdy trunk, she rested back against his chest, gazing up at the sky. More stars began streaking across, not as bright, but every bit as beautiful. Everyone had gone off with a partner or friend to lie out and observe the meteor shower.

As the flutes' soothing melodies carried through the night air, Inias and Keira remained entwined under the protective branches of the mighty oak tree. Their hearts beat in unison with the pulsating rhythm of the night, their bodies still tingling with the euphoria of the wild celebration. Stars continued to fly across the heavens like ribbons of celestial fire. The laughter and cheering calmed. The forest was quiet, aside from the melody of flutes.

Styx ran from the thinning crowd to meet the two of them. "Enjoying yourself?" Keira asked as she and Inias greeted him with light strokes. Styx nodded and leapt over her legs to rest himself against Inias. He leaned in and brushed a kiss upon the fox's head and hugged him. One arm was around Keira's waist and the other remained around Styx, scratching behind his ear.

Keira slid her hand over Inias' and laced their fingers. She lifted her eyes to meet him and pulled his mask off with a grin as she placed it over her own face. Inias pulled his hand from hers and brushed some of her hair caught in the mask. He ran his finger along one of the tiny horns peeking out from her blue locks and shook his head. "Four horns don't look right." Pulling the mask off, he set it aside and turned back to her.

"Think they saw us?" Keira asked, the stars reflected in her inky black eyes. "I think they saw you," Inias whispered, as Styx drifted off to sleep beside them. "*Me?*" Keira raised her eyebrow in amusement. Inias chuckled softly, his fingers lightly grazing her cheek. "You were the brightest star of them all."

CHAPTER 29

As Ruvyn watched Ashryn dance amidst the swirling flames, his heart soared with admiration for her free spirit. The vibrant hues of red and orange danced around her, casting an enchanting glow on her flushed cheeks and fiery locks. The crackling of the roaring purple bonfire provided a hypnotic backdrop to her wild celebration, accentuated by the bright red sky above and the twinkling stars peeking through the crimson.

Ruvyn couldn't help but feel a sense of joy watching Ashryn revel in the moment, her hazel eyes filled with joy. She moved with a fluidity that mirrored the flickering flames, embodying the untamed beauty of the fiery display surrounding her. With a grin on his face, Ruvyn joined Ashryn in the frenzied dance by the enchanting purple flames that illuminated the sky in a riot of red and orange hues. As they twirled together, their silhouettes highlighted against the backdrop of the blazing bonfire, they seemed to be caught in a moment of pure joy and frenzy.

As Ruvyn and Ashryn twirled and leaped around the enchanting purple flames, their spirits intertwined in a mesmerizing dance of joy and celebration. With each step, they seemed to mirror the fiery hues that surrounded them - her fiery locks mingling with the crackling orange and red flames, his laughter echoing the vibrant energy of the bonfire.

They danced with a wild abandon, their movements not constrained or graceful. Ruvyn couldn't help but feel a surge of exhilaration as he matched Ashryn's fiery energy, his heart pounding in sync with the roaring flames. The sheer joy on her face was infectious, and he found himself caught up in the moment, spinning and leaping alongside her with unbridled glee. With each spirited movement, they seemed to be caught in a moment of pure euphoria, their laughter mingling with the crackling of the bonfire.

Ruvyn had never experienced a Hellion festival before. Most authorities outlawed them even within the borderlands. He never knew the freedom in it. From the moment he surrendered to the dance, a wave of euphoria rushed over him. It freed him from the insecurity he felt dancing around others. No one cared how silly he looked among the wild crowd of dancers. They were all lost in the night's frenzy, bathing in the freedom it offered them.

It was a sight to behold, Ruvyn and Ashryn spinning and leaping fervently around the bright purple flames. Ruvyn and Ashryn let the crackling of the bonfire hypnotically guide their movements as they allowed themselves to be carried away by the fiery energy surrounding them. Ashryn's fiery locks whipped around her flushed cheeks, illuminated by the vibrant red and orange hues of the flames. Her hazel eyes sparkled with pure joy, mirroring the flickering light that danced around her.

Ruvyn couldn't contain his exhilaration as he matched Ashryn step for step, his heart pounding in time with the roaring flames. The red sky above and the twinkling stars peeking through the crimson added a surreal backdrop to their wild celebration.

Their eyes met amidst the swirling flames and that's when he saw the glow in her eyes, "You're a hellion," he said, reaching out to cup her cheek. "Does that bother you?" She asked him with hopeful eyes. Ruvyn shook his head and grinned, "Not at all." In that moment, her eyes shone brighter, and she

threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. With a moan, he returned her kiss until the rustling of leaves brought his attention away.

They saw the maenads join the dance around the purple flames and found Elara dancing arm in arm with Bacchus. “We need him. Come on!” Ashryn gripped his fawn skin tunic and tugged him to the two dancers. Bacchus flashed them both a grin and quickly looped his arm with Ruvyn before either of them could speak. Lost in the twirling dance, he laughed as Elara hooked her arm with Ashryn, who was also giggling as they spun around.

Bacchus’s presence added a spark to the already intoxicating atmosphere, his laughter mingling with the crackling of the bonfire. Ruvyn felt a surge of adrenaline as he twirled alongside the god of revelry, his heart pounding with exhilaration. When their eyes met, he found himself lost in Bacchus’ gaze, those sultry purple hues awakening the wine in his veins. The god was a vision of beauty, causing his heart to flutter as their lips met. Ruvyn slid his fingers through his lush brown hair, lost in the taste of his wine-soaked lips.

They pulled apart as Ashryn approached, and Bacchus brought his hands to the back of each of their heads. The two kissed, slowly at first, but as Bacchus pulled away, it deepened. Her fingers gripped his tunic as his fingers slid through her fiery hair. She broke the kiss and pulled him from Bacchus and his maenads into the shadows of the forest.

Ashryn awoke beside him in the early hours of the morning, their legs tangled. A large cloak had covered them, gifted by a kind stranger before they passed out. She remembered the night, but before she could recall the bliss, she heard a familiar purr ruining her perfect morning. Growling, she grabbed her clothes and slipped them on as everyone around her slept. “How did you get through?” she asked as she made her way into the shadows where the creature dwelled.

“You should keep a closer eye on your scouts. I’m always lurking around the borders, remember that,” It spoke with a light chuckle, *“You’re keeping the captain quite close, aren’t you? Should I be jealous?”*

Ashryn shook her head, fighting the puke sneaking up her throat. *“It’s nice to see you so happy. You’ve earned it. You’ve done wonderfully. I’m most pleased.”* His words offered no comfort as she watched the shadowy hand stretching over the grass towards her.

CHAPTER 30

The banquet was a grand display, rivaling the grandeur of a royal wedding. Ailog presided over the feast, surrounded by his most trusted generals and advisors. He sat with a proud hand on Felix's shoulder, his smile shining brightly at the young Nightfang. Sylvis sat at the right hand of his father. The boisterous laughter and joyful cheers emanating from the splendid table elicited smiles and glances from all corners of the room.

Meanwhile, the Prefect indulged in a gluttonous feast, eagerly devouring cakes as servants hurriedly cleared the abundance of dishes that surrounded him. He effusively praised the king's messenger, exalting the greatness that awaited him. Such lavish praise was a familiar occurrence for Sylvis whenever his father sought to manipulate him into usefulness.

Ava sat beside the lordling, smiling softly in her shimmering yellow gown. The Prefect had gifted it to her to express his gratitude for accompanying his son. It clung tightly against her thin frame, ensuring Sylvis' lingering gaze through the night. She had woven her hair into an elegant braid falling down her back. Ruby stones and starling feathers adorned it, glistening purple and blue under the chandeliers' light. Upon her head sat a floral crown woven with red roses, lavender, and yellow daffodils. Ailog had dressed her up as a spring goddess, a princess offered to him.

Ailog had taken great care to dress his son as well. A dark gold tunic had been left for him, to bring out the green in his eyes. It was his choice to weave beads into his own hair, something his father had protested many times. One braid hung over his cheek adorned with green and red jeweled beads. Women and hellions wore hair beads, it was unbecoming of a Lord. Thankfully he hadn't spotted the dragon tattoo upon his shoulder, always covered.

She wasn't an unpleasant dinner guest, but Sylvis didn't know what to say to her. He wasn't shy, but uncomfortable. Growing increasingly repulsed by his father's lascivious stares directed at Ava, Sylvis observed a subtle shift in the banquet hall's atmosphere as the night wore on. His father's boisterous demeanor escalated, his laughter drowning out the surrounding conversations as he relished the attention and admiration generated by his ostentatious display. Casting a weary gaze towards his father, Sylvis recognized a man not tethered by duty, but one intoxicated by the allure of power.

His father wanted Ava displayed like a beautiful centerpiece, something he made clear with all the attention directed her way. "If he won't have her, I will." The man purred, causing the young girl to shudder. Sylvis shot to his feet, knocking his chair back. "Something wrong, boy?" Ailog snarled at his son, looking between him and his date as if to remind him of his duty. He forced him into this date and spent the night encouraging all his attendants to ogle her. In that moment, he wished to drive his spear through his father's chest.

"Sorry father..." Sylvis ground out, fighting the growl threatening to escape. He pushed his hair back and turned to Ava. "All this noise is a bother; will you join me for a walk?" Sylvis offered his hand to her. As Ava took his hand, a sense of relief washed over her. She welcomed the opportunity to escape the banquet hall, even if just for a short while. Together, they slipped out through a side door, leaving the echoes of Ailog's laughter and the whispered hushes of the courtiers behind them.

Once they were past the door, he took his spear from the guard he'd entrusted it with and dragged her with him. "That's not for me, is it, milord?" Ava asked, her voice shaking as Sylvis pulled her through the castle gardens. "Afraid not," He answered quickly, escorting her outside the castle grounds into the training field. "Unless you'd like to be put out of your misery tonight. I'd be happy to oblige." They stopped, and he stepped away from her, huffing. "No thank you, milord." she answered, shaking her head.

"Call me Sylvis," he said as lightning crackled around the crimson blade of his spear. "O-okay..." she said, her voice a mix of shock and fear as he cried out in a mighty roar, rippling waves of red bolts around him. Covering herself, she fell to her knees. She remained untouched as Sylvis unleashed his power. Once his fury calmed, he breathed heavily and threw his spear into the ground. He needed to scream, to unleash all the anger that had been boiling since he arrived.

"A-are you okay?" Ava asked, cautiously approaching him. His bright green tunic shimmered as she reached out to touch it, revealing a ward around him. "I hate him," Sylvis whispered, tugging himself away from her. "He's all I have left, and I hate him." He looked over at her, resting his head against the polearm. The lightning had destroyed the surrounding grass, smoke rose from charred earth and tiny flames withered away. "What about your friends?" She asked him, resting her hand against the spear near his face.

"They're dead," Sylvis answered, looking down at the grass. "They betrayed the king." Rurik and Vayne had been the only friends he'd had. They'd earned their fate's, but he still felt a pit of emptiness without them. The halls of Nightfang castle were lonely without their laughter to keep him company. Even the vibrant walls of Skyfire's palace offered no company besides his scheming father. "That's right, I remember," Ava said. "Inias Nightfang killed Vayne."

Inias. The name always brought a growl out of him when he heard it. Inias caused all of this. If he hadn't chosen to run off, his father wouldn't have sent for him. The Hellion prince had chosen his side. He would betray the kingdom for the sake of those who would taint it.

"About your father," Ava said, breaking the silence, "If I may speak freely, there are many who wouldn't miss him if he were gone."

His eyes sprung open. "Gone? What are you saying?" Sylvis asked, gripping his spear as he stepped away from her. "I see the way he treats you." She whispered, eyeing the spear as she stepped back with hands raised. "Kill my father? Is that what you're saying?" He demanded, yanking the weapon free. She was a servant, to even suggest such a thing was treason. There was a part of him entertaining the idea. His father had taken a city and, as his heir, Sylvis would reap everything. "No," He shook off the thought and relaxed his arm.

Ava heaved a sigh when she saw the blade pointing away from her. Sylvis lifted a finger and glared, "*Never* speak of this again."

CHAPTER 31

Inias woke with blurry eyes. The morning sun shed its light upon the glade. His back ached from being pressed against that tree all night. Keira rested beside him, curled into Styx. All he could see was a mass of purple and black, but their snoring was all he needed to hear. He pulled himself up and stumbled aimlessly across the grass. Throughout his walk he stumbled over legs, stepped on sleeping nymphs, and nearly collapsed into a pile of glass bottles.

The previous night came to him in flashes. He couldn't forget the red sky, but the dancing, that was all a blur. Inias groaned and rubbed his eyes. Slowly, his vision cleared, but his head continued to spin. It was a murmuring of voices he'd been following in a half drunken stupor. A moment ago, he had recognized one of them, but he found himself lost in a daze, mindlessly following the sound.

"You've done wonderfully. I'm most pleased." A deep velvety voice reached his ears, causing them to twitch. "I've even said of you to my court, perhaps there are some good among them. You serve your people well." It went on. Inias looked to his right where the voice had come from but saw nothing. Only empty air, strewn bottles, and one snoring goblin. "And my grandmother?" A softer voice spoke, one he recognized instantly. *Ashryn*.

They were close. He couldn't scent them, but his connection with Styx heightened his hearing. Glamour? Inias wondered as he focused on their voices again. "Perfectly comfortable. Once we've crushed the prince and his allies, you'll both be free to go."

Inias blinked and pulled the dagger from his boot. "Crushed *who*?" He called out to them. A silence fell before a shadow revealed itself against the tree, standing beside a shocked Ashryn. "Inias..." she whispered, bringing a hand to her sword hilt. The shadow had a wide-brimmed hat and red eyes. *Watcher*. Its hand slid over the tree's surface towards Ashryn, but he pulled a purple crystal from his belt and threw it. As the crystal broke against the tree, he saw the shadow's form ripple and thrash until it faded away.

"No!" Ashryn cried, a blue aura surrounding her hand as she held it against the trees. "*No, no, no...you can't...*"

Inias crossed the clearing and aimed his dagger at her throat. "Whose was it?" He demanded. Someone was speaking through the shadow, just as Rurik had done. There were too many to choose from, Ailog, Ivaran, perhaps even Varen. Any of them could have left a traitor in his midst. The last person he suspected. She had been so passionate about avenging the village.

Tears fell from her cheeks as she turned to him. "She's *dead*, they're going to kill her," Ashryn sobbed, gripping the tree. "They swore we could leave the Hallow, but now...now that you've seen it."

"Your grandmother?" Inias asked, keeping the point of his blade close to her skin. His arm shook as he considered his options. Their night in the pond. He remembered that whispering voice, the same velvety tone the shadow had held. "*That's* why you've been so flirty. I open my bed and you gut me while I sleep?" He accused her, pressing the point into her neck.

Ashryn hissed and gripped his wrist, twirling him around. His dagger fell, and she had his arm pinned behind his back. As he was shoved, the rough bark scraped his cheek. He squirmed and drew his

claws, but her grip held him firm. “*Never!*” she said, twisting his arm tighter. Inias let out a pained yelp and thrashed to no avail. “Then why?!” He growled, spitting at the ground.

“Ivaran discovered we were hellions and arrested my clan,” Ashryn explained, struggling to hold him still. “We had hidden it for centuries, but someone betrayed us to the king. The king killed all of them, except my grandmother. Ailog promised to spare her at least if I did what he said.” His struggle ceased while he took in her words. She was a hellion; her grandmother had sat upon the high court among the most esteemed elders, and no one knew. “I was playing along,” Ashryn said, “Hoping I could save her and kill Ailog.”

Inias relaxed and took long breaths. “You never told me...” He whispered, realizing all this time there had been another Hellion hiding in court. No wonder Lady Redwood had been so kind. She understood him more than he realized, Ashryn as well. “We swore an oath of secrecy,” she explained, releasing him. He rubbed his shoulder and groaned, stepping away from the tree.

“It doesn’t matter anymore.” Ashryn wiped her cheek of tears and sniffled. “All that’s left is...” She couldn’t finish as the tears began falling again. Her grandmother, cousins, siblings, were gone. She was all that remained of her clan, her family. “I’m sorry,” Inias whispered, reaching out to her. “No,” Shaking her head, she retreated from him. “I’ve betrayed your trust.”

Inias would have done the same if his uncle had taken Keira or Styx. “We can set things right,” he said, taking her hand in his. “There’s a still a chance. If we can't rescue her, we'll avenge her. All of them.” Inias took the dagger from the ground and cut his palm. “I swear it.” He had once believed Ashryn had died because of him. Keira had made him see that there was a still a chance. “We’re in this together, remember?” He echoed her words from the pond, offering his hand to her.

Ashryn met his eyes with steely determination, her voice unwavering. “We’ll give them hell,” she vowed, a blazing fire rekindled within her soul.

CHAPTER 32

When they returned the mass of unconscious figures were stirring and cleaning the glade of their trash. Someone had produced a cauldron of coffee and passed it out to everyone as they woke. Inias gathered Keira, Varen, Vestin and the rest of his troop so Ashryn could explain things. “That’s it!” Keira had interrupted, “I sensed something amiss when I caught you two, it was your gaze.”

Ashryn nodded and flashed her hazel eyes at them, “It brings out desire and passion.” Inias blushed and nervously fiddled with his hair. “Moving on...” He cleared his throat and urged her to continue. When she told them of the Redwood’s massacre a silence fell over them. Another Hellion clan gone, wiped carelessly from the world.

“I’m no better...” Keira spoke softly looking up at Inias, then to her father. “I’ve been spying for him.”

“*What?*” Inias snapped, “You too?!”

“What did you expect?” Varen spoke up, resting a hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “You were struggling to pick a side. We couldn’t trust you.”

“But I believed in you!” Keira said, stepping away from her father. “I knew you’d come through. And everything that happened...it was real.” A blush tinted her cheeks as she reached out, hoping he wouldn’t be upset. “I understand,” Inias muttered, taking her hand.

Varen looked at Ashryn and frowned, “I’m sorry for your losses,” he said as a servant brushed past them, scooping wine bottles into a bag. “Sorry...we really left a mess,” The girl muttered, keeping her head low as they parted and let her pass. “So sorry Ashryn, we’ll burn his palace to the ground and spike his head upon the gates.” The girl continued, cautiously reaching out to grab a bottle between Lord Varen’s feet.

“We burn *Dusk Haven* to the ground.” Vestin spoke up, crossing his massive arms. “Burn the city!” Someone cried, overhearing them. The cry echoed across the clearing and Keira shook her head. “Just like the Magistrate!” She cried out, the crowd falling into hushed tones. “Why should we show *him* mercy?” Some of them whispered.

“I never said we’d show *him* mercy!” She corrected them and climbed onto her brother’s back. Hoisted upon one of his shoulders, she looked over the crowd. “We can’t justify burning the *entire city* because of him. That’s how he justified the village attack, how he justifies *everything*.” Keira turned to Ashryn and offered a gentle smile. “I promise your family will have justice, but not like that. It’s not what they would want.”

Ashryn looked up to her and nodded. She wanted to watch the palace burn, to see him spiked as a warning to all the other purists. If they made the city suffer, it would never mend the wounds. The zealots would feel justified in their wrath and begin more ruthless purges. The people of the city would be made into martyrs to further their cause. “I know,” she said and reached out to catch Keira as she slid from Vestin’s back.

The crowd had grown quiet, whispering among themselves. Some were still ready to torch Dusk Haven, but most had come to support Keira. “We’re not like them,” An older woman said, offering Ashryn a sympathetic smile. “We *can’t* be the monsters they think we.”

“We’re not the monsters we think they are,” Inias said grinning as he leapt up onto Vestin’s back. “*Hey!*” Vestin cried out, reaching back to push him off. Inias evaded his hands and hopped up onto his shoulders. Both of his long legs hooked around his friend’s neck, and he gripped his silky blue hair. “They’re so afraid of us, they’ve forgotten their own demons,” He went on as Vestin groaned up at him. “*Off!*” Vestin said and threw Inias to the ground.

Inias yelped when his chest slammed into the grass. His head spun when it hit the ground and he moaned, rubbing his temples. “You’re tall enough to make your point!” Vestin said as he pulled Inias to his feet. “*Hey...*” Keira whimpered beside Inias, “Not that short.”

“Well, what *are* we going to do, prince?” Varen asked, a challenged hinted in his eyes. “Do you have a plan, or is this more boasting?”

“For *heaven’s sake* leave the plans to me! Haven’t you all botched this enough?!” A voice called out from the crowd. They all turned to each other, shrugging and whispering. “Down *here!*” It spoke again and Inias looked down to find a little white mouse standing beneath them. He was no taller than the blades of grass and wore a little blue rube around himself. As he looked closer, Inias saw the tiny spectacles upon his face giving him a sense of wisdom.

“Thaddeus...” Inias said, falling to his knee, trying to fight the laughter bubbling from his lips. “Thaddeus Whiskertail?” He cleared his throat and bowed his head slightly. “Well go on, *laugh,*” Thaddeus answered him, “It’s a silly name, I knew that when I chose it!”

A rustle in the grass startled Thaddeus, who gave a squeal. “Get that fox away from me!” he yelped, scurrying up Inias’ arm to seek refuge in his hair. Styx stood behind Inias, licking his lips. “He hounded me all night, missed half the revelry dodging him!” Inias extended a hand to placate Styx, “*Styx!* He’s not food! We need his help.” Styx whined at his words, lowering his head with an apologetic whimper. Peeking from Inias’ dark locks, Thaddeus remarked, “Well, I suppose I’ll let it slide. We were all a bit tipsy last night.”

“Pleasure to make your acquaintances,” Thaddeus addressed them with a nod, including the prince. “Even *you*. Though your little escapade left me in a desperate place, it was quite clever. Few have dared to pull off such a stunt. With a touch of guidance, you could become a magnificent strategist.”

CHAPTER 33

“Over the last six months I’ve been traveling the Vale,” Thaddeus explained to them as they climbed the winding stairs into the Ravenmoon’s attic. “North to south, east to west.” As they approached a large wooden door at the top he shimmied down and slipped beneath the door. Inias, Keira, Varen, and Ashryn were the only four permitted to join in the meeting. They heard something click and the door swung open, Thaddeus sitting upon his key.

As Inias passed Thaddeus leapt onto the boy’s shoulder, “I *warned* you,” the mouse said, turning to Varen, who was quietly shutting the door behind them. “It was two centuries back, during the last Scarlet Night. Ivaran broke that fateful eve when they stole his beloved mate away.”

“Aunt Gwen?” Inias asked, kneeling before the map. “I’m afraid so. Talos’ high priestess stole her away. She was pregnant with their first and only child. Aubron had warned him of the priestess’ madness, but he chose restraint.” Thaddeus scampered down Inias’ outstretched arm, his tiny paws skittering across the map until they reached the shaded depths of Ravenmoon forest.

“No one could have predicted *this*,” Varen defended, his voice firm. “Two centuries ago, the thought of Fae turning against their kin was unthinkable, even for us Hellions!”

“But you let it go on,” Keira challenged her father, her voice quivering with suppressed anger, her eyes welling up with tears as she stood beside Inias and Ashryn. “You accuse Inias of standing by, but we’re the ones suffering because *you* wouldn’t stand for our people when they needed you most. How long did it take *you* to see the king for what he is?”

“All I did was for our clan,” Varen glared, pointing his finger at her. “You are but a child, incapable of understanding the sacrifices that had to be made in order to shield us.”

“That’s the same hollow shit my grandmother used to spout,” Ashryn stepped between Varen and Keira, narrowing her eyes. “I could sense it in her eyes – the guilt she bore; it aged her before her time. You all chose to turn a blind eye, allowing the lower born hellions to bear the brunt of suffering rather than risking yourselves against the king’s tyranny.”

Inias stood at his feet and turned to Varen as well. “*Just* as I told you!” Thaddeus chirped from the floor before Inias could add his thoughts. “Your children would bear the consequences, and now it is left to them to right your wrongs.” Varen barred his teeth at the mouse, eyes glowing with a silvery light. Thaddeus lowered his bifocals and glared right back, whispering something. Varen’s eyes became red and burned, smoke pouring as he snapped them shut howling in pain.

“Perhaps it’s best if I leave.” Varen growled, and for the first time Inias caught his voice crack. Blood dripped from his closed eyes as the mouse repositioned his glasses. “I believe that would be best, yes.” The mouse growled right back as Varen stumbled around the room. Keira grabbed him and guided him towards the door. As it was shut, they heard him shouting for a servant or guard to guide him to his room. “He’ll heal,” Thaddeus muttered.

With a shake of his head, Thaddeus turned to the three young hellions and clicked his tongue. When they turned, he motioned for them to sit. The three took spots around the map, Inias between them. The mouse climbed upon a small wooden box and struggled to push a candle across her. “Can one of you

light this?" he asked, climbing down the box and onto the map. Ashryn nodded and blew on the candle. A spark of flame left her mouth, bringing the wick to life. The flickering flame illuminated the dark edges of the map, revealing the vibrant colors he had painted. "Wow...it's really beautiful." Keira grinned, dark eyes sparkling with curiosity as she leaned over the paper.

"I'm guessing you came up with a plan in those six months?" Inias asked, tracing the delicately drawn towers of Nightfang castle. "I'm afraid, given the situation, your only option is to take as many as you can and flee north. The surrounding powers, for now, are too great to overcome."

"Give up? Run away?" Ashryn countered him, slamming her hand against the parchment. "After all, they've done." Inias shook his head and growled, "That's suicide. The magistrate would catch us all."

Thaddeus shook his head and sighed, "Indeed, which is why we need someone to remove him." Inias spread his fingers over the city of Dusk Haven, just outside of it where a set of fields was painted. "Ailog's land, right?" Inias asked. "Correct," Thaddeus nodded, running over the map towards his hand. "He's been collecting slaves from his campaigns. Most hellions."

"All those big strong workers just sitting out here," Keira tapped her chin with a purr, "He's been building our army for us." Thaddeus nodded and tapped his foot about a tiny speck above the painted farmland. "Two hundred twenty...seven. On top of your fifty knights remaining, and the maenads."

"Will they fight for us again?" Inias asked Keira, who seemed to still be pondering. "We won't give them a choice," she answered. Bacchus was the forest guardian. This was their home and if a foreign army came to invade, they would defend it with their lives. It was likely the one reason Ivaran and Ailog had yet to send an army. "The king commands a host of thirty thousand, a few hundred will not be enough to repel him," Thaddeus spoke, outlining the path they would take out of the Hallow, "Hence our need to retreat."

Ashryn ran her finger over the painted forest. "We're going to lose the forest, aren't we?" she asked in a whisper. "Lure him here, let the maenads rip him and his army to pieces." The mouse answered her, holding a red wand in his hand. With a wave of it, the city of Dusk Haven seemed to stir as tiny, inked figures emerged in the tiny streets brandishing blades. "I've set a viper loose within Ailog's court. My most gifted student, a prodigy. Once she's completed her goal, the city will tear *itself* apart."

CHAPTER 34

With her dark skin and black cloak, Ava blended seamlessly in the shadows of the palace. Her tiny frame made it easy to slip into dark corners. The young spriggan kept a concealment spell around her, as patrols would sniff her out whenever she snuck around. The magistrate couldn't see past her submissive mask. All he saw was a young girl too weak to oppose him. Since her arrival at the end of winter, she had kept her head down obeying every order with enthusiasm. It was an honor to serve under such an esteemed lord and she played her role as the loyal servant perfectly.

The Nightingale's had been among the few to remember their Hellion brethren when the purge began. Fearing they'd be discovered harboring enemies of the kingdom; her mother had sent her to study under the Sage. If anything happened, it would be up to her to carry their legacy. At first, that burdened her, but with Thaddeus' gentle guidance she had come to accept it. At a young age she had gained the attention of scholars from across the Vale for her keen intellect. It was then the Sage agreed to take her, fearing the growing elite would mold her into another tool.

Thaddeus had laid the plan out perfectly. In her hands were two forged letters. One penned to Lord Varen and the other to Inias. Two generals were the key, without their support Lord Ailog's control of the city would fall apart. In the letters they had forged plans for the two to defect to the Hellion's side. After the massacre, many of their soldiers were disgusted by Ailog's ruthless slaughter of innocent villagers. With his enemy massing north of him, Ailog wouldn't risk betrayal in his circle, defying him would be their only chance at survival.

Sylvis' arrival hadn't been expected so soon, but she was thankful. Watching the way his father manipulated him, the more the young lordling seemed desperate to free himself. Beneath the years of careful grooming, he seemed to be a boy who only wished to do good. The thought of manipulating him further concerned her, it wasn't fair to him. Not after all he'd been through. When she left the city, he would only have Ivaran left to turn to. For the good of everyone, she would have to put her feelings aside. Ava had faith that one day the lordling would meet them again as a friend.

Slipping past the dragon tapestry hung upon the ruby wall, she pushed against it. A section of the wall gave way revealing a hidden passage. Grinning, she slipped past the opening and pulled the wall shut behind her. Dim candles lit the narrow hallway as she passed, turning a corner to find an old wooden door. She pulled a key from within her cloak and unlocked the door to find two burly men waiting inside the small room. "Apologies, sirs." She said with a smile, offering a low bow.

"Ailog sent his pet to speak with us?" One of them, face withered from years of experience. His eyes were dark, revealing an emptiness in him. The other was heavyset with thinning blond hair falling over his massive shoulders. "I'm afraid so, he's busy planning your trial."

"Trial? What for?!" The elder spoke up, turning to his companion, "What have you done now?!" Ava threw the two letters down, "He found messengers carrying these north. Betraying your kind, your lord. It's disgraceful. You've broken his heart, his trust." A smile tugged at her lips as she spoke, the two men began peering over the letters. "He'll never believe this, girl." The elder said, bringing a hand to the large broadsword at his side.

Ava pulled a knife from within her cloak and leapt onto the table between them, pointing it straight for the man's throat. "You know what *I* believe," She spoke in her sweet little voice, "I believe he's paranoid, and you? You're replaceable. It's already too late, he's been informed of your *treason*." Even if they told him, he'd feel less threatened by a small girl than he would be by two influential generals.

The men began to tremble, feeling the gravity of her words. "Why do this?" The larger of them spoke, his voice shaking. He let out a squeal as a black viper brushed his leg. It's midnight black coils began wrapping themselves around his legs. "*She's with them...*" The elder growled, slowly lifting his hand from the sword hilt. "The only one who can oppose Ailog is Sylvis, ally yourself with him. The Magistrate is a usurper, so your armies will remain loyal to *you*. Hide yourselves, in four days Sylvis will inherit the city." Her amber hues began to shimmer catching the man beneath her in their gaze. His terror faded into a dreamy smile, "A-as you wish."

CHAPTER 35

Sylvis' new bedroom was something straight out of a king's palace. The white marble floors gleamed under the soft glow of crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. A massive four-poster bed dominated the room, its carved wooden frame draped with rich velvet curtains. Plush cushions and silk sheets promised a comfortable night's sleep, but Sylvis found little solace in the luxury surrounding him. Golden candle holders flickered with dancing flames, casting a warm glow across the room, and illuminating the shelves.

The doubts and fears that plagued his mind crept up on Sylvis despite the lavish furnishings and grandeur of his surroundings, which were fit for a prince. He knew that his destiny lay on a different path, one filled with uncertainty and sacrifice. And as he gazed out of the ornate window overlooking the sprawling city below, he knew that the choices he made would shape the fate of his people for generations to come.

"There are many who wouldn't miss him if he were gone." Those words danced in his thoughts all morning. He hated them. Hated the longing he felt in his chest when he heard them. Maybe once upon a time his father had been a man of duty and honor. Power and control had beguiled him and turned him into a fat, lazy and licentious maggot. He had turned against his own creed to exploit the labor of prisoners.

Every time her words crossed his mind, the thoughts stirred. What did he need with the old man? It was Sylvis who wielded Devilsbane. The spear had chosen him to lead their family once he came of age. "He's my father," Sylvis whispered as he paced the white marble floors of his new bedroom. Killing your own to claim power, that's how hellions behaved. The golden age, the promise of a better future. Sons who slay their fathers could not build it. Heaven would turn against their clan.

The truth had always been there, the words he never let himself think or say aloud. It's not you, it's the spear he cares about. Without it, you're useless. His father had grown to love one thing: power. If he could claim it for himself, he would. That's what made him a worthy son. The world his father had described. Sylvis wanted so desperately to believe in it. To think that somewhere at the end of it all, their people could finally rest in peace. He had been born into a centuries-long spiral of chaos, and his father always soothed him with stories of hope.

The hellions had taken his mother; they had ripped their family and the kingdom apart. They were the source of all their people's sadness. He had sworn to wipe their scourge from the vale. He was the savior that would lead their people home and if he wasn't, he would at the very least lead them to a better future. That had been his father's dream, but now he wore it like a shroud to hide the selfish ambition growing beneath.

His father, once a figure of respect and guidance, now loomed over him like a malevolent shadow, tainted by greed and cruelty. The echoes of his father's manipulative words, the twisted love for power, and the hollow promises of salvation all reverberated in his heart.

The bedroom offered no hope of solace, so he threw on a light shirt and made his way down the hall. His father had ordered that he always have guards, but three guards were still undergoing intense

healing when they tried to enforce it. He did not want anyone to follow or spy on him, and his father picked his battles in this rare instance.

Sylvis tiptoed past his father's room in vain, "Ah! There you are!" He heard the man call out, "Come! You must see this!" Sylvis groaned and opened the door to find his father peering at a collection of jeweled bracelets. He traced one of them as Sylvis approached to look. They were all magnificent, arranged neatly in a glass case upon his dresser.

"More gifts from the king?" Sylvis asked in a bored tone as Ailog drooled over his treasures. Why did he think Sylvis would care about his jewelry? "It's a collection! I've nearly completed it! What do you think?" There was a smile on his father's face. Sylvis couldn't help but return at that moment. Looking closer, he noted the markings on each of them. One held a spiral flame he recognized, the Skyfires. Another held a phoenix and his gaze lingered as he tried to recall it.

"The Redwoods!" Ailog exclaimed, sensing his son's confusion. "King Onas Nightfang gifted each clan one of these for their loyalty. Endolyne had this one. Soon I'll have the Ravenmoons." There were eight there, precious heirlooms from the clans he slaughtered.

Sylvis blinked. It was almost charming, the way his father had smiled over his collection. Now that he realized what it was, his stomach turned. This was not the charming hobby of an old man; it was a madman's trophy case. "How nice for you," he said quietly, doing all he could to keep his tone level.

"I know!" Ailog opened the case and stepped aside, "You should have one."

Sylvis stepped back and swallowed. "I'm afraid I'm not, uh...*worthy* of such...nice things." He stammered, fighting back his anger as he stumbled out of the room. Sylvis gave him no chance to answer as he slammed the door and half sprinted back to his room. He slammed the door shut behind him and took deep breaths.

The blood his father shed; he wore it like a crown. He built his power upon the bodies of fallen clans.

A crackle of lightning echoed across the room and Sylvis looked to find the blade of his spear had glowed. Even from a distance, Devilsbane had felt his spike in anger and drew power from it. Sylvis crossed the room and took the spear in his hand, running his finger over the blade. What a simple thing it would be to free himself of this burden. Devilsbane seemed to purr beneath his fingers as his thoughts turned.

CHAPTER 36

Keira and Vestin rode aimlessly around the forest carrying bottles of wine they would occasionally spill out over the ground. It was hopeless. Their knights had searched every inch for Bacchus' court for months and found nothing. The maenads never answered their questions, and they would not use force in fear of Bacchus' wrath. He had been there at the Scarlet Night, but they had all been too drunk and lost to recognize him.

"Maybe we're being too nice about it," Keira suggested, stuffing another empty bottle into her saddlebag. They couldn't waste their time pouring out libations, hoping he would decide to show himself. "Do you want to anger a god?" Vestin warned her, pulling his horse to block her path. Keira threw him a wicked smile and turned away from him, riding down the hill towards the statue of the forest guardian below.

Vestin really didn't like that wild look in her eyes and quickly chased after her. "Keira!" He cried out as she drew her dagger, "No!" Vestin shouted in horror as she shattered the stone idol of Bacchus. The head shattered beneath her blade, and she swung herself off the horse with both her daggers drawn. He expected Inias to do something this mad, not his sister. She was always so calm and calculated. "Are you mad?!" He roared, throwing himself from his steed.

"Just a little," Keira shrugged, pointing to the broken head on the ground. "That's his thing, right?" She took one bottle from beneath the statue and popped it open. With a grin, she tipped the bottle back, chugging it down. "Want some?" She turned the bottle to her brother, who stepped back with his hands raised. "No!" He snapped at her, "I want no part in this! You hear that Bacchus? I'm not part of this, I rebuke it!"

"Kissass..." Keira muttered, throwing the bottle into the statue with a satisfying crash. Vestin shrieked in fear and threw his arm in front of his sister. "What?" She looked up to see the faces of several maenads glaring at them through the trees. "You got his attention. Now what?" Vestin whispered to his sister as they backed away. "I-I don't know," She hesitated, swallowing deep when she saw the maenads surrounding them, blocking their escape.

"*Thank you!*" A gentle voice called out from the growing crowd of maenads. Keira and Vestin relaxed when they saw the smile upon the face of an ivy crowned youth. His brown hair lay in thick curls around his ruddy cheeks. "What a horrible depiction." He spoke again as he approached them, standing several feet above even Vestin. They had never noticed how tall he stood, or maybe he had never revealed it to them.

Keira took a slow step back, looking at the broken statue. "You didn't like it?" She asked him. "Not at all. But what was I going to say?" Bacchus turned to the siblings, the horns atop his head beginning to shimmer. "Your great great...something grandfather was so happy when it was finished, I couldn't crush his heart."

"That's sweet," Keira smiled, offering a low bow to the forest guardian. Vestin gulped, still shaking with all the maenads staring hungrily at them. "Y-yeah, you're a great god...hail to you milord," He stuttered, mirroring his sister's bow.

“Kissass,” Bacchus muttered to Vestin before turning his attention to Keira. Anger flickered in his eyes as he spoke, “And *you*, if I were interested in fighting a war, I’d have remained with my family,” He told her in a warning tone, “Nothing but fighting with them. In my heart I sought an escape and out of the vine flowed wine so sweet, the darkness in my soul was washed away.”

Keira struggled to contain her anger. “What do you think we leave these offerings for?” She asked him, “For your protection. That’s the duty of a forest guardian, the duty *you* chose.”

Bacchus’ eyes flared and Vestin stepped out in front of his sister, waiting for the god to strike. “We’ve been under a lot of stress, milord.” Vestin tried to calm him, but Bacchus only rolled his eyes. “You’re the heir Lord Varen chose?” Bacchus asked, effortlessly throwing him aside. The deity spoke with the voice of one who’d lived countless ages and had grown apathetic with it all. Vestin fell to the ground and Keira shot Bacchus with a glare.

“See that? That’s the look of a leader, ready to challenge me for your honor,” Bacchus shot her a smug grin. “I’ll spare you the humiliating defeat.”

Keira helped her brother up, trying to contain her anger. “You’re giving up, is that it?”

“I’m uncertain how much you know of me, Lord and Lady Ravenmoon, but I once had a wife,” Bacchus spoke as the two exchanged confused glances at each other, “My half-brother killed her, my father forced me to reconcile with him and forbade me from retrieving her in the underworld.”

As he went the two of them looked even more confused, “I don’t get it,” Vestin said, “Sorry about your wife?”

Bacchus shook his head and carelessly waved his hand at the boy. “I haven’t spoken to him since. Recently, my other brother delivered a letter. Father has agreed to return Ariadne to me if I come home to the Ethereal Vale. He has even sworn upon Hades’ River to allow me my space there. So no, I cannot fight your wars. I want to return home and see my wife.” With that, he turned away, but Keira reached out, grabbing his arm. “Wait! Just this one battle, *please?*” She begged, lowering her head. He stopped and yanked his hand out of her grasp.

“My family and I, we’ll honor you as our patron,” Keira went on, not allowing him to leave as she gripped his sleeve. “And every year we’ll have a big festival,” Vestin continued for her, resting a hand on his sister’s shoulder.

Bacchus smiled, lightly stroking his chin. “I enjoy festivals,” He purred, grinning at the two siblings. “Will there be theater?”

“Whatever you want!” Keira smiled and offered a hand to him. “A new statue too! We’ll even paint it!”

“One last battle,” Bacchus returned her smile and took her hand.

CHAPTER 37

The king had wiped Ashryn's entire clan from the vale like mere shadows in a storm. They had taken her grandmother hostage, a sweet old woman, and locked her away to rot in a dungeon. Ruvyn could feel the searing heat of anger rising within him, consuming his heart, and clouding his thoughts. The once revered king, now a sinister puppeteer, pulling the strings of their destruction with cold, calculated cruelty. He had forced her to betray her friends, pimped her out to his nephew, and forced her to live with the shame of it all.

Ruvyn encountered evil in many forms, but it usually wore grey or green skin, bloody caps, and iron talons. Never did he imagine it seated on a throne, promising a gilded age where all could live without fear. The borderland forests were a brutal frontier, but they had formed a bond in their shared goal. In the kingdom's heart, they broke their oaths and forsook their souls in the quest for greater power. They had become a pack of ravenous wolves, tearing into each other with insatiable hunger.

The scent of pine and smoke mingled in the air, filling his lungs. His comrades moved around him, sharpening blades, checking armor, and preparing for the imminent clash with the Magistrate's forces. The memory of her grandmother, locked away in a dungeon and left to suffer at the hands of their ruthless enemy, fueled the fire within Ruvyn's chest. She had always been a beacon of kindness and wisdom, a guiding light in the darkness of their world.

When he beheld the tears shimmering in her hazel eyes, Ruvyn tried to make his way through the crowd. They were already gone. He'd only learned the reason for Ashryn's tears when a girl collecting bottles relayed the heartbreaking truth to him. Those tears, he could feel the guilt in them, the loss. Inias convinced her it wasn't hopeless. There was still a chance. They still had time, but not the three weeks it would take to enact their plan.

As dusk descended upon the forest fort, Ruvyn found himself deep in thought. He stepped away from the crowd and into the brush to remove any distractions. There was no hope for Endolyne if they waited for the battle. The city walls were impenetrable, but hellions would not stay within them. She was too old for the labor of the fields. He had spent weeks trailing the forests and sneaking around outside the walls, looking for any weak points. They would keep a member of the high court away from prying eyes, potential spies.

During his scouting, he had found a small fort a couple of miles south of the city. The fortress had minimal guards, but it took little to keep one old woman detained. As the soft glow of the campfire danced against the tree trunks, Ruvyn's mind raced with possibilities. He knew the risks involved in attempting to rescue Ashryn's grandmother. But one of them deserved a happy ending after all this. The Ravenmoon's forest would burn, and they would all be forced to leave their beloved kingdom for the unknown forests of the north. Many were leaving their family and friends behind.

Feeling a sense of urgency weighing heavily on his shoulders, Ruvyn knew he had to act swiftly. There was no reason to assume she was dead, at the very least perhaps Ashryn could have some closure. They would find her body and give her a proper burial.

Taking a deep breath, Ruvyn knew he had to find Ashryn, to share his plan, and offer her a glimmer of hope amidst the darkness that surrounded them. With determination etched in his features, he

adjusted his armor and set out on the long journey across the fortified camp towards Ashryn's tent. The winding path was dimly lit by torches that cast a flickering glow over the bustling activity of soldiers preparing for battle. Ruvyn navigated through the maze of tents and makeshift structures, his heart beating with determination.

Upon reaching Ashryn's tent, Ruvyn found her staring off into the distance, her expression a mixture of sorrow and resolve. He gently placed a hand on her shoulder, offering a silent gesture of support. "Sorry we haven't talked," Ashryn's voice was barely above a whisper.

Ruvyn's gaze met Ashryn's. "No apologies needed. We will have time to talk, but first, I need you to hear me out," he said with a sense of urgency in his voice. Ashryn turned to look at him, curiosity in her eyes. "Oh really? Do tell," she replied, her voice tinged with a hint of skepticism.

"I've been scouting around, and I think I found where they might be keeping your grandmother. It's a small fortress a few miles outside the city, not heavily guarded. I think we could pull off a rescue mission." Ruvyn explained, going on about his reasons for thinking she'd be there.

It took a moment for Ashryn to process Ruvyn's words, her gaze shifting from him to the flickering fire. The possibility of rescuing her grandmother from the clutches of the Magistrate seemed too good to be true. Hope fluttered within her chest, fragile yet persistent. "How can we be sure she's still alive? And even if she is, it's a dangerous gamble," Ashryn replied, her voice tinged with apprehension. "Not one we can afford to take."

Ruvyn understood her doubts, but he shook his head. "I know it's a long shot. But we can't just sit back and do nothing. We owe it to your grandmother to try," he said, his eyes reflecting the flickering firelight. A wicked smile spread on his lips, and he stepped forward, lightly brushing her hair aside as he reached out. "You can't waste that beautiful sword dueling with me," He continued, reaching down to trace the hilt of her blade. "I thought you liked danger, or are *you* all talk?"

His words brought a smile to her lips. "Is that a challenge?" Ashryn asked, the warmth of the campfire casting a soft glow on her features. "This isn't some duel we're talking about. We could both die out there. The magistrate could decide to siege the forest if he finds out."

"And I know you're not one to back down from a challenge," Ruvyn told her, lifting his hand to take hers, "Together, we can make this happen." Something in his eyes inspired her. She couldn't imagine losing or failing when he had that bright smile. As Ruvyn gazed into Ashryn's eyes, a warmth spread through her, mixing with the flickering firelight to create a sense of determination within her. She felt a surge of adrenaline at the thought of embarking on this risky mission, knowing that she had Ruvyn by her side, his unwavering confidence in her abilities bolstering her own resolve.

"I can't imagine losing when you look at me like that," Ashryn clutched Ruvyn's hand firmly, a smirk playing on her lips. "We go tonight," she declared, a fire burning bright in her eyes.

CHAPTER 38

Their situation could not have become any stranger. He had spent the day following a fussy mouse as they reconstructed his entire camp. Among the crowd at the festival, they had gathered a host of a little over one hundred and thirty. Thaddeus spent the day scolding Inias on his sloppy defenses. He was concerned with an attack from Varen and split his small troop. It was unlikely Varen would attack him at all, leaving him in a vulnerable position over nothing. The mouse explained that he should have focused all his defenses on repelling the magistrate.

Thaddeus put the newest recruits to work on fortifying their defenses. Thaddeus ordered the newest recruits to cut down trees and started erecting gigantic walls of sturdy wood. “The fort is a trap,” The Sage explained, sitting upon Inias shoulder as they passed Styx pulling a wagon of fresh weapons. “We feign a retreat and let him take it. Then with flaming arrows, we set it alight.” Inias could smell barrels of oil being carried around and placed in key locations to be dumped. The entire forest would burn, allowing slaves and refugees to escape around it.

It had been centuries since Bacchus last walked the estate, and their connection with him was uncertain. If Keira could sway Bacchus, he would stay in the forest, laying the trap for Ailog. A three-pronged attack upon the Magistrate and his forces. According to Thaddeus, only two concerned them. Luring out Ailog and freeing his slaves. His mysterious viper would apparently orchestrate the third within Ailog’s court. Inias didn’t like the secrets, but Aubron and his father had trusted the mouse. Even Varen urged them to heed his counsel despite his burned eyes.

The coming battles would destroy two great pillars of The Hallow. The Ravenmoon estate standing as a beacon of hope to the Hellions and Dusk Haven, a bastion of purist sentiment. It would shatter their people, but hopefully, in time, they would return to setting things right.

As dusk settled over the camp, Keira burst into the cottage with a wild smile on her lips. Vestin followed behind her with a solemn look. “Did you win his support?” Thaddeus chirped from beside Inias on the back of the patio sofa.

“Yes, well, just for this battle,” Keira answered, explaining about Bacchus wife, father and the family drama. “One of us is getting a happy ending. That’s a win, right?” Inias walked over to the floor into her open arms. She threw them around his neck and wrapped them around her waist, pulling her in close. “We’re all getting a happy ending,” Keira reminded him, and pecked a kiss on her lips. “With Bacchus’ support, the Magistrate’s fate is all but certain. ‘He who with a mocking laugh. Hunts his prey, snares and drags him to his death.’”

The three of them looked at him, confused, but he simply waved a careless hand. “Just some old poetry,” He said.

Vestin shook his head as he leaned against the wall, “He didn’t even look at me,” He muttered, “You challenged him, gave him a reason to fight. He saw you as the heir.” Keira ran to her brother and shook her head. “He’s a loony drunk. Who cares what he thinks?” She told him.

“After the festival, I was ready to punish the whole city,” Vestin went on as both Thaddeus and Inias turned to face him. “You were the one who calmed everyone down, stopped us from making a huge mistake.”

“We’re all angry! You think I *don’t* want to burn the city down? Of course I do!” There was a pleading look in her eyes. She didn’t want to her see brother just give up. “You’re a great leader, too! Father will teach you; he’ll make you the best leader our clan has ever had!” They still had their father to guide them after the battle. He wasn’t the man he used to be. Not after seeing everything his sins had wrought.

CHAPTER 39

It proved surprisingly easy to slip past the city undetected. Ashryn and Ruvyn donned shadowy cloaks that concealed their forms as whispers in the night. They kept their plan secret, knowing everyone would object. To hide her from prying eyes and compel Ashryn to obey, the magistrate moved Lady Redwood's captivity three miles beyond the city's edge. Despite her revealed deceptions, Lady Redwood had commanded the respect and admiration of the high court for half a century as a venerable elder. They could not wash away her legacy of wisdom and strength so easily.

Ashryn couldn't help but imagine the chaos that had unfolded in the capital once the Redwoods were discovered. Centuries ago, the priests had declared their clan cleansed. Her grandmother had given a generous donation to the temple to ensure that declaration. Neither she nor kinsmen had shown any demonic traits. Her distinctive multicolored hair had always been a source of adoration in the court, so no one questioned it. Even the king once claimed her presence lit up the throne room with a genuine smile.

The fortress where her grandmother was imprisoned stood alone, like a sentinel of stone and wood amidst the forest. Surrounded by towering wooden walls, weathered by years of neglect and harsh elements, the fortress exuded an aura of confinement and foreboding. The fort itself was a stark contrast to the opulent palaces and grandiose estates of the city. All the windows were small and barred, offering only glimpses within.

Ruvyn and his scouts assumed it was a half abandoned or soon to be abandoned fort on their southern front. It wasn't until Ashryn had told him of her grandmother, how Ailog had moved her out of the city, that he even remembered.

As they slipped through the dark forest, the moonlight casting eerie shadows on their cloaked figures; they kept their eyes keenly trained on the fortress ahead. The rustling of leaves beneath their careful footsteps masked their approach, blending with the distant howls of the night creatures. Amidst the dense foliage, they caught glimpses of the fortress walls looming in the distance, the flickering torchlights of the guards casting long, menacing shadows. The sentries paced back and forth, their bright red armor clanking softly, gazes sharp and vigilant.

Only four to guard such a highly esteemed member of the court. It all seemed too easy. "It's a trap," Ashryn whispered, her breath tickling Ruvyn's ivory cheek. "And? We can take them," Ruvyn grinned, eyeing his first target. The look in his eyes reminded her of Inias before the redcap ambush. His amber gaze reflected the confidence and excitement she'd grown to miss in the prince. They wouldn't lose. Fate had given the Hellions a second chance.

As they crept closer to the fortress walls, the shadows seemed to dance around them. They moved with the silent grace of a predator, splitting apart as they drew their weapons. Their eyes met in the darkness, then in a burst of speed, the two rushed out from the shadows. Once they passed the treeline something gripped at their wrists, forcing them to the ground. Their weapons fell to the ground as chains dragged them from up within a tree, pulling them up.

With her hands bound above her, she couldn't summon any flames as the iron sucked her magic dry. Ashryn's heart pounded in her chest as the iron chains bit into her skin, rendering her powerless

against the unseen force that held her captive. The tree limbs creaked and groaned as they hoisted them into the air, with their toes barely grazing the roots below them.

She looked at Ruvyn on the tree beside her. He struggled weakly against his chains and groaned. From the gate, the four men began chuckling as they approached with weapons drawn. “She really fell for it,” One of them laughed, the other three joining him. Another man snickered, saying, “Captain, hellions can’t help it. They’ve got little brains.”

“Aye! True enough, Garrik. We can’t hold it against her.” They were all old and weathered, breath wreaking of stale whiskey.

An icy chill swept over Ashryn as she dangled helplessly from the tree, her eyes narrowing at the guards approaching. “How old are these chains?” Ruvyn spoke up, rattling them to catch the guards’ attention. “Not even spellbound, just iron,” He went on rattling them a little harder. “You know, in the borderlands we’re injected with iron from birth. Torturous process, but without it, I couldn’t do this.” With one more shake of his bounds, the chains tore free as if they were nothing but brittle glass.

Ruvyn landed gracefully on his feet with a confident smirk. The guards’ laughter faltered as they stared in disbelief at the sudden turn. Ashryn watched in awe as her companion effortlessly freed himself. His hatchets laying on the ground flew into his hands. The guards shook as he twirled the weapons in his hands. One of them backed away and Ashryn hooked her legs around his neck and twisted, snapping it. He threw one hatchet at the chains, and they shattered.

Flames spiraled around her, causing one guard to shriek. Ruvyn stepped back to retrieve his weapon and watched. The flames left her and surrounded the guards, who cried out, begged for mercy. A cyclone of flames closed in around them, leaving nothing but a pile of ash. Ruvyn whistled and ran after her as she rushed towards the gate.

Ashryn’s flames swirled again and lashed like a whip at the rotted wood of the walls blasting through its minimal warding. He could barely keep up with her, and as he slipped through the wall, he heard her shriek from within the tiny structure. Purple smoke poured out and as he approached Ashryn, she had a scarf over her mouth.

Ruvyn held his breath and tore a piece of his shirt, bringing it to his mouth. In the silence, he heard a strange giggling sound. Following Ashryn’s gaze through the fog, he glimpsed white hair and a wide, cackling grin. They had drugged her. He ducked down and scooped her up, rushing outside to lay her on the grass. Ashryn held her mouth as she began sobbing.

There was nothing of the wise, gentle woman she once knew. She reached out from the ground, unable to stand as her giggling persisted. “More,” Endolyne tugged at her granddaughter’s pants, “Please Ashryn dear, let me have just a little more.” Tears welled up in the old woman’s ears as she tugged harder.

It had never been a trap. Ailog wanted her to see this. To see her grandmother reduced to such a pathetic state. All that hope melted away. Ruvyn knelt beside Endolyne and looked up at Ashryn, shaking his head. They couldn’t bring her back, not in this state. She lost herself. The smoke forever stole away the woman she was.

“I’m sorry,” Ruvyn reached out for one of his hatchets, but Ashryn stepped on it. “No!” she cried, flames flickering at her fingertips. Flames began spreading around them and Ruvyn slowly stepped away. “We can’t let her live like this,” he said, raising his hands as he stepped away from the growing fire. She stood in the center of the flames, her eyes burning into his.

Endolyne screamed for more, slamming her fist into Ashryn's calf. The flames simmered as she watched her grandmother. The woman continued slamming her weak fist against her leg. "After all I've done for you!" She shouted and tried snapping her teeth.

"I'm so sorry, Ashryn," Ruvyn said as he pressed his foot against the woman's shoulder, keeping her pressed to the ground. Ashryn watched as her grandmother thrashed and tugged at his ankle. "You've stolen her, haven't you?" Endolyne snarled at him, trying to bite his leg. "She deserves better than this," Ruvyn said, looking at her grandmother's snarling face.

Ashryn wiped her tears and nodded slowly. "I know..." she said, allowing Ruvyn to take the axe. He knelt on Endolyne's shoulder and pressed his hand against her forehead to keep her still. "I swear to you, he'll suffer for this," he whispered to them as Ashryn looked away. With one swift chop, he brought the axe down, bringing an end to the old woman's screaming.

CHAPTER 40

Keira woke him with a gasp, the vibrant morning sunlight streaming through the thatched walls, casting a radiant glow over the room. Inias groaned and blinked his eyes open, the other still buried in his pillow. Her fingers glided through his hair like a whisper of wind. “Did something sneak in there?” Inias half-growled, closing his eye again.

“Those are real...” Keira muttered, as if she hadn’t been listening at all. He sat up and ruffled his hair. “Is it a parasite?” Inias asked, recalling how tiny insects would nest in hair. She reached into her bag by the bed and produced a small mirror. “Look,” she said, and as Inias studied his reflection, he noticed subtle hints of red mingling with his jet-black locks. It wasn’t the fiery crimson of Ashryn’s hair, but a rich blood-red that added a striking contrast to his dark mane.

Inias took a lock of his hair and pulled it forward, eyes widening as he realized it wasn’t some mirror illusion. “I’ve never seen it grow so late,” Keira said, reaching out to inspect each highlight. Multicolored hair was once a symbol of pride amongst the hellions. It developed as they grew, changing colors until it settled around their preteens. Hellions considered those with the trait especially gifted. They were often the most respected among hellions because of their stunning beauty.

“I get it! You were suppressing your nature so strongly it cast a glamour,” Keira realized as she slid her fingers through his hair, still in awe, “I thought it odd yours was solid black. You’re too strong.” Inias blinked at the lock of red hair still grasped between his fingers. Only his hair? That’s all he could suppress. Or had the shame in the way he looked already been so deeply fed to him before his hair was noticeable? He would’ve been too young to understand then.

Inias knew whatever his hair or eyes looked like it didn’t make him a monster. In this hellion forest, he had found nothing but beauty and excitement. He wasn’t so afraid to look at himself anymore. “How does it look?” he asked, closing her little mirror. “I love it! The black was so boring,” she said, her fingers still buried in his hair as if she were looking for more colors, “You look amazing!” Inias couldn’t help but blush when he caught that look in her eyes, the same she had when they’d been thrashing each other in the forest.

As her hands came to cup his cheeks, Thaddeus’ voice echoed from the patio. “Sorry to rush you lovers, but there’s an urgent matter!” He said as if he were speaking through a horn. Keira groaned and rolled off the bed. “That’s going to get annoying,” she said, as if she could see every morning interrupted by him.

Inias slid his boots on and chuckled, “If it does, I’ll set Styx on him.”

The two left the bedroom to find Ashryn and Ruvyn sitting on the sofa. They barely saw Thaddeus perched on the sofa back, waving them over. “Now, my dear, tell them everything,” Thaddeus said softly to Ashryn. From the look on her face, it would not be a cheerful story.

Inias and Keira perched on the gate facing the waterfall as they listened. He gripped the wood tight as she went on, with every word his claws dug in a little deeper. The Magistrate couldn’t even gift her the mercy of a swift death. He set her up as bait to break Ashryn’s resolve. Pumped that little room full of mind-numbing mist until Endolyne became nothing more than a giggling lump.

“Ailog isn’t so cautious anymore,” Thaddeus said, breaking the silence once Ashryn had finished her story. “His power has beguiled him. He thinks himself a god, indestructible. Even cut the army’s pay in half for their protests to the slaughter.” One important rule to maintaining power, especially for a new ruler, was to keep the army on your side. *Always*. Even Inias knew that much from watching his uncle and father. Once you made an enemy of them, the walls would come crashing down. In his fear of losing power, Ailog had broken that rule and left his gates open for rebellion.

“Good,” Inias said, a smile growing on his lips, “You said the city would tear itself apart. Win or lose, he won’t be in power for very long.”

The others smiled as well, even Ashryn, as she wiped her tears. “If we don’t kill him, they will!” she said with a wild grin on her face. If only they could take the city for themselves, but on the rare chance the people accepted them, they would never hold it against Ivaran’s army. They were to travel northeast towards the Freefolk Forest, where a small community of hellions had gathered.

“I suspect Sylvis will inherit the city,” Thaddeus said, lightly tapping his white furred chin, “Without him the people will suffer as power passes from hand to hand in an unending struggle. If we face him, he must survive. They will need a stable leader. I suppose he’s better than nothing.”

Inias blinked, having forgotten Sylvis’ involvement in all this. What would he do when they killed his father, vow vengeance and hunt them down? For the rest of their lives, they would look over their shoulders for him, always on the run. Regardless of the outcome, they couldn’t allow Ailog to survive. It would only breed more suffering. Sylvis had fought to protect Keira once. He wasn’t the monster his father was.

“Maybe he’ll come with us,” Keira said hopefully. Thaddeus shook his head and sighed, “I’m afraid his convictions are rooted too deeply. Maybe someday. We can hope and pray Heaven shows him his errors, but for now, we need him to keep Dusk Haven in one piece.”

CHAPTER 41

“My lord, you *must* reconsider,” Sylvis heard a pleading voice emanating from his father’s office, the sound muffled as it reached his ears. He knew better than to try tiptoeing again. Instead, he remained out of sight and listened.

“If they won’t obey, then why should we pay them?!” His father’s voice boomed, “Let them suffer—I guarantee you; poverty has a way of reminding people where their true loyalties lie.” There was a sigh, then a shuffling of feet. “It does, my lord, it certainly does.”

Sylvis quickly turned away when he caught one of his father’s advisors rushing out of the room. “*Hopeless*, it’s all hopeless,” the man muttered as he walked several feet behind Sylvis. The young lordling hoped he wouldn’t notice him. Whatever horrible crimes his father committed, he wanted to remain blissfully ignorant. The more he learned, the more he grew to hate the man.

As the advisor passed by Sylvis, his wavy blonde hair and wild green eyes caught the man’s attention. Startled, he stopped in his tracks and squinted at the young lordling. With a grumpy expression, he growled, “Spying on your father, are we?” He asked.

Sylvis rolled his eyes and waved the advisor away, “What I do is none of your business,” He said brushing past him hoping the conversation would end there. Sylvis wasn’t in the mood to be questioned by one of his father’s goons.

The advisor scoffed at Sylvis’ dismissive attitude. “None of my business, is it?” he muttered, his voice laced with irritation. “Well, you certainly have your father’s *charm*, don’t you?” His eyes narrowed. “Did you hear it? Your father’s gone mad, cut the army’s pay in half. If were you, I’d return to Knivae before they vow to end your clan.” The anger would spiral. They would see Sylvis and the rest of their family as allies to a despot. Devilsbane made him the biggest obstacle, left the biggest target on his back.

Sylvis clenched his jaw, the weight of the advisor’s words settling in. Despite his desire to remain ignorant of his father’s actions, the gravity of the situation was impossible to ignore. He nodded curtly at the advisor, acknowledging the warning before turning away, his mind racing with thoughts of what lay ahead for both him and the Emberstone clan. Cutting the army’s pay over some complaints.

Sylvis would have raised it to buy them off, found another place for those soldiers to serve. If they couldn’t handle the brutal savagery of the front lines, there were many other duties an army needed attending to. How could his father not see the danger he had put them in? They could storm the palace any day. Even Devilsbane wasn’t powerful enough to hold off thousands of angry soldiers.

As he reached his room, Sylvis slammed the door shut and let out a frustrated growl. His fist slammed into the wall. Chunks of marble to the floor. This wasn’t about loyalty or honor anymore. His father had left them in a desperate situation.

Sylvis swung the door open again and left the room. The tapestries adorning the walls now depicted the glory of the Emberstone family, their crest—a serpentine dragon encircled by bolts of lightning—serving as a constant reminder of their power and lineage. The proud image seemed to mock him now, a stark contrast to the grim reality of his father’s choices.

As Sylvis stormed through the corridors of the palace, his mood matched the dark clouds gathering outside. The grand halls that once echoed with the whispers of power and intrigue now seemed to loom over him like silent sentinels, bearing witness to his growing frustration.

Sylvis pushed open the heavy doors that led to the barracks, the sound reverberating through the corridor like a thunderclap. The soldiers within turned to look at him, their expressions a mix of surprise and wariness. He made his way through the rows of bunks and training grounds, his grumpy demeanor only intensifying as he scanned the faces of the men and women who served under his father's command. Once at the general's door, he flung it open to find a man with dark hair and blue eyes staring back at him.

"Where's General Hector?" Sylvis asked the man, shutting the door to his office behind him. The stench of booze breath lingered in the air, and he had to cover his nose. "They deserted milord. Him and general Tamil," the man answered, "Once his lordship discovered their treason, they ran away. To hell with them, joining those hellions!" He slurred, then brought the bottle to his lips.

Sylvis growled and swung his spear, shattering the bottle before he could have a taste. He scowled at the drunken man, the shards of glass now littering the desk. Cheap whiskey soaked the papers, making the smell of the room worse. Hector and Tamil may have had concerns with his father's leadership, but it was foolish to think they'd up and ally with those heathens. The two were firm in their belief of cleansing the land.

"I'm sorry milord," The man fell to his knees, hands raised high as Sylvis pointed the spear at him, "It's all I know, I swear it! Mercy, *please*." Sylvis had heard that same groveling whine from his own lips. He looked at how pathetic and weak the drunken man looked, shaking when he was just a moment ago confidently drinking his liquor, cursing their most loyal generals. Sylvis doubted this man had ever seen a battlefield in his life.

All those times he groveled in fear of his father. Sylvis wasn't weak. He wasn't pathetic. The power of their clan was with *him*, not Ailog. If he didn't claim that power now, the Emberstone clan would meet the same fate as the Redwoods.

CHAPTER 42

Inias changed his crest from the wolf of his clan to a black fox. He didn't feel right bearing the symbol of a clan that had oppressed beings like him for centuries. It was a bold move, one that would forever draw a line between him and his uncle. There was no hiding his intentions from the uncle or the Magistrate. He walked proudly with the black fox crest adorning his long black coat; he felt a sense of liberation and empowerment. It was a symbol of his defiance against the injustices that had plagued his people for generations.

Many soldiers adopted the crest throughout the day. Those that wore the royal wolf were the first to change. Some of the clanless adopted the Ravenmoon raven, while others opted for the new Nightfang fox. It was heartwarming to see the number of soldiers embracing the change and proudly displaying the black fox crest on their armor and banners. Inias couldn't help but feel a sense of camaraderie and unity among his people as the symbol of the Nightfang fox spread throughout the war camp.

The prince knew that this little act of rebellion against the dynasty was a step towards a brighter future for the Hellions and all those who had suffered under Ivaran's oppression. The shift from the royal wolf to the fierce black fox represented courage, resilience, and a new beginning for his people. As he walked through the camp, Inias could see the spark of hope in the eyes of his soldiers. Many had been waiting decades, even centuries, to make a stand. Ravenmoon forest echoed with the sounds of clanking armor and billowing banners proudly displayed.

The battle was two days away, and they finally completed their fort. They cut down beautiful trees in droves to build a fortress that they were simply going to burn down. It all seemed like a waste, but a necessary one. Within the fort, the flames would spread, trapping the enemy. Inias and Keira were going to lead a troop to free the slaves once Ailog was distracted.

Sylvis was the only obstacle Inias was worried about. His strategy was a mere theory, but he didn't have the time to test it. Ruvyn forged him a new blade, mirroring the diamond-edged one he wielded. Among his many skills, Ruvyn was a master blacksmith. The Grovewoods only possessed lower healing magic, so they took on crafts and worked to enhance their physical prowess. A mage had helped him empower the runes upon the axes, giving them some magical qualities.

"We make our own weapons," Ruvyn had explained as Inias admired his craftsmanship, "Dad always said, 'if a man can't make his own weapons, he shouldn't have them.'" Training was brutal in the borderlands, Inias knew that. They held very rigid traditions and enforced a strict military law. There were no servants to serve their meals or forge their weapons.

Inias ran his finger along the runes etched into the black metal. "You gonna name them?" Ruvyn asked, distracting the young prince. "Don't think so," He answered, slipping it into a sheath on his back. "You have to!" Ruvyn said. "All great heroes name their weapons. Named my axes Goblin Reaper and Banshee's Wail."

"I like it!" The prince grinned and drew both blades from his back. He hummed in thought, considering a name that could rival Devilsbane. "Shadowthorn and Nightspark. What do you think?" Inias asked, swinging both blades before he slid them back.

Ruvyn raised an eyebrow and smirked. “Shadowthorn and Nightspark? Sounds like something a drunken bard would come up with.” He chuckled, “But hey, I can already picture the bards’ singing songs of the mighty blades. How they broke chains and freed slaves!”

Inias couldn’t help but chuckle. “Well, we wouldn’t want the bards to run out of material now, would we?” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “Shadowthorn and Nightspark have a certain ring to them, don’t you think? I’m a thorn in their side and with the spark of our rebellion, we will lead our people through the darkness.”

“Your people,” Ruvyn said, shaking his head, “I’m not a hellion.”

“Hellion or not, you’re one of us,” Inias said, reaching out to rest a hand on his shoulder. Ruvyn grinned, his amber eyes sparkling. “One of you, huh?” he asked, still wearing the Grovewood crest. “Does that mean I have to wear that fancy black fox too?”

Shaking his head, Inias stepped away. “You represent your clan out there,” He said, looking out to the group of soldiers singing by the fire, “That’s why you’re here, right? To bring them glory. I know the bards will sing your name beside mine.” As they watched the soldiers gather around the fire, Ruvyn’s grin widened. “I can almost hear the bards already,” he mused, nudging Inias playfully. “Ruvyn Grovewood. The man who forged his own destiny and stood tall in the face of adversity.”

“I promise, day after tomorrow we’ll unleash a battle they will sing about for ages to come,” Inias said confidently, his eyes filled with anticipation.

CHAPTER 43

Cries of anguish ripped through the camp, their haunting echoes drawing a curious crowd. One man's back glistened with fresh blood, cascading down like a scarlet waterfall as he hung limp over a rough-hewn board, while two burly men mercilessly lashed him. Inias and Keira surged forward, a spark of fury in their eyes as they forcefully pushed the guards aside. With a swift stroke, Inias severed the cruel binds that held their victim captive, yet the elderly man regarded them with a shadow of resistance, subtly shaking his head in refusal.

"What's wrong with you two?!" Keira's voice cut through the tense air like a blade, her eyes blazing with wrath. The two guards stood frozen, their faces a mask of bewilderment. "We were following the Sage's orders, milady," one of them stammered, his voice tinged with uncertainty. "The man was adamant, claiming he'd rather defy the Nightfang brat than comply. Everyone heard his screaming. We tried to calm him, but he wouldn't stop."

"Did I order *you* to stop?!" Thaddeus' voice echoed from upon one of the men's shoulders, "Make an example of this man!" Inias growled at the mouse as Keira lifted her daggers towards the two men. They looked helplessly between the mouse and the two hellions ready to gut them. "If he's not happy, then send him away." Inias ordered, pointing one of his swords at the mouse. "Your highness you don't understand-." Thaddeus began before he found the blade at his throat, "He's had enough, get the old man some water and send him on his way. I must speak with our prince and lady."

It didn't matter what he said. Both Inias and Keira planned to cage the mouse as soon as they were in the spacious meeting tent. The war tent stood tall and imposing at the center of the spacious makeshift forest fort, its dark canvas flapping in the breeze like a living thing.

As Inias and Keira entered, the scent of sweat, steel, and parchment wafted through the air, mingling with the sharp tang of burning braziers. The interior was dimly lit, illuminated by flickering torches that cast long shadows across the rows of rough wooden benches. In the center of the tent, a large table dominated the space, its surface cluttered with maps, scrolls, and intricate figurines representing troops and fortifications. Candle stubs burned low, their wax pooling on the weathered wood, casting a warm glow over the faces of the prince and lady.

Thaddeus scurried across the ground and sat on a tiny crudely carved chair; his brow furrowed in deep concentration as he studied the map spread upon the small table in front of him. "It's a ruse," the mouse explained, looking up at the two as they took their seats. "Once he's beaten, he defects to Ailog, promises to open our wards, and let his army in. We needed to lure him out somehow."

Inias clenched his jaw, his knuckles white as he gripped the arm of his chair. Keira's eyes narrowed, a coldness flickering in their depths. "And you used *torture* as your method of luring him out?" she asked, her voice edged with anger. "He volunteered, milady," Thaddeus said softly, hoping it would calm the two down. "He was among those who massacred the village. It's weighed heavily on him since." That explained why no one else had come to the man's defense.

"It's a clever move. We'll award him the highest honor." Inias grinned, reaching over to grab a scroll covered in blood. Upon sniffing it, he realized it was the same man. "His surrender plea?" Keira asked as Inias opened it up. Written upon it was a long apology for betrayal and then a long stream of

praises for Ailog. "I realize now," Inias read from the parchment, "that we must wipe these demons from the Vale, and it is you, my lord, whom the gods have chosen. Only by your hand will our kingdom be saved."

"Ailog loves nothing more than groveling praise," Thaddeus explained as he stood up and paced, "This letter will ensure *he's* the one marching on us."

Inias leaned over and narrowed his eyes at the mouse, "There are no secrets between us," He scolded the Sage, "Share whatever schemes you're brewing with *us* before you give any orders." Keira nodded beside him. She had made Inias promise to remain open with her, and she expected the same from Thaddeus.

"My apologies," Thaddeus answered, bowing low before them. As the tension in the war tent slowly dissipated, Thaddeus straightened up and cleared his throat, a sheepish grin tugging at his whiskers. "Well then, now that we're all on the same page, shall we discuss the next steps in our grand plan?" he asked.

"Like your viper in the city?" Inias asked, ready to make him spill every detail before he risked his life. "Yes, a similar ploy," Thaddeus answered quickly. "She has forged two letters from Ailog's top generals, and he's accused them of treason. Once he's left the city, they and their loyal warriors will take it." More clever tricks. Thaddeus could see the minds of his opponents and twist them to his own ends. No wonder his father placed so much faith in the little mouse.

CHAPTER 44

Ailog's laughter echoed through the grand throne room, like thunder rolling in from a distant storm. His emerald eyes gleamed with delight as he rolled up the blood-stained scroll, the parchment crinkling with each precise fold. "Heaven has gifted us with a grand opportunity," He proclaimed, holding the scroll aloft with a triumphant flourish. "The Hellion's shadow looms over us, their dark forces mustering hidden within the depths of their forest. A lost man, bearing the scars of his torment, has emerged from the darkness seeking redemption."

The assembled advisors exchanged uneasy glances, their expressions heavy with doubt and dread, as they knew the truth that Ailog refused to acknowledge - conflicting allegiances and whispered promises of power had fractured their once-mighty army, tearing it asunder. Yet, in the presence of their lord, dissent was a dangerous flame to kindle. After the treachery of Hector and Tamil, any dissenting voice was swiftly silenced, branded as an act of treason. The city, once a beacon of light and unity, now stood on the precipice of chaos and ruin.

Ava stood in the room's corner; her head low as she listened to everything. She couldn't help the smirk creeping at her lips after he'd read the scroll. There had been no communication between her and the Sage since she arrived. He hadn't given her the entire plan, only instructed her to forge the letters and push Sylvis when he arrived. After his years of tutoring, however, Ava knew when to spot one of his tricks. One thought, a planted seed, echoed in his head. It was a thought he'd already had but would never admit to considering.

"Tomorrow, I will lead the army to the Ravenmoon's fortress and finally bring an end to this scourge!" Ailog demanded, rising from his seat with a proud smile across his face. The advisors simply nodded and offered quiet support to their lord as he descended from the dais. "Did I not promise a golden age in our time?" He went on, strutting across the floor to his son, who stood with his arms crossed, barely hiding the scowl on his face. "You did, father," Sylvis echoed the words of the advisors looking between him and Ailog.

The Prefect clapped a hand on his son's shoulder and beamed a smile. "While I'm engaging the enemy, I will rely on you to guard the city." He said as something of relief or hope flickered the eyes of all the men gathered. Sylvis watched as a few huddled together, their lips moving silently. He took his spear and offered his father a low bow, "As you wish, father," Sylvis answered in as submissive a tone as the others, "May the gods grant you a swift victory."

"We will deliver *divine retribution* to those devils," Ailog promised as he proudly strode towards the doors, flanked by his personal guard. Ava followed behind him, made his personal attendant for revealing the general's treachery. As the doors of the grand throne room closed behind Ailog, the facade of obedience he had just displayed melted away, revealing the seething resentment, and burning ambition that churned within his heart.

His father had always seen him as a mere pawn in his plans, a tool to be manipulated and discarded at will. It was clear now. The only golden age he sought was one where he held all the power, and his son played the willing puppet king.

The advisors cast their gazes at the spear in his hand and a couple of them quickly hushed as his eyes met theirs. They would follow him if he betrayed his father. He couldn't reveal his intentions to them just yet. If it reached his father, he would lose his chance to claim the city. Once he dealt with the man, he would make amends with the two generals and work on rebuilding their army. With Dusk Haven as a powerful base, Inias would never rival his power. After tomorrow, if he survived, he'd become nothing more than a wandering prince to a broken people.

CHAPTER 45

“He took the bait,” Inias murmured under his breath, his voice barely above a whisper, as he and their small army observed the Magistrate’s thousands-strong force making their way across the undulating hills towards the Ravenmoon forest. Ailog’s men stood out starkly against the landscape, adorned in gleaming red armor that sparkled in the setting sun’s light, their march punctuated by the clanking of metal. The carriage in which the man perched stood out like a gaudy monstrosity, carrying him aloft above his soldiers like a grotesque king surveying his domain. He sat within a giant dragon carriage, painted red bolts coming out of its mouth.

As they drew closer to the dark shadows of the forest, Keira couldn’t help but remark, “Surprised it doesn’t collapse under all that weight,” earning a round of subdued chuckling from their comrades. “His ego adds another thirty pounds,” Inias added on as they moved towards the city. The plan seemed too perfect, but Inias pushed that thought deep into shadows of his mind. Last time something felt too easy, he walked into a trap.

Styx stepped up beside Inias, throwing him a wink. “All clear?” Inias asked, brushing his fur as he knelt to meet the fox. The two caught each other’s eyes and remained locked. Keira watched as they appeared to stare at each other for several minutes.

Inias felt the pads of Styx’s paw press against his chest, and he reached out, letting his hand do the same. He brushed his fingers through his raven black fur, curling a gentle grip as images flashed in his mind. Styx was sent to scout the fields and Inias saw them through his memories. The hellion slaves being herded back to their little cabins after a day of forced labor. They had left a small troop to guard them, likely assuming the hellions wouldn’t split their already small force.

Once the images faded, Inias stood, and someone passed him a couple strips of bacon. In a flash of speed Styx grabbed them from Inias hand. “Good work buddy,” He said, reaching down to pet the fox as he chewed, “Ready for a fight?” Styx nodded and licked his lips.

The last of Ailog’s force disappeared into the trees and they broke into a run as they crossed the fields. A shroud of shadow surrounded them, keeping them hidden as darkness crept over the hills. The moon’s light showed off their eyes, causing them to glow as they neared the empty fields. With a silent command, they split into smaller groups, each moving stealthily towards the cabins where the hellion slaves were being held captive. Styx moved like a shadow at Inias’ side, his keen senses alert for any sign of danger.

Inias, Vestin, Keira, and Styx remained together as they crossed the field. They remained ahead of the others, waiting for any wards around the cabins. Inias drew a sword and slashed through the air. His blade hit an invisible wall. Growling, he slashed several more times, but to no avail. Vestin clapped a hand on his shoulder and smiled, “Allow me, your highness,” He spoke as he flexed his massive arms. His knuckles cracked, and they watched with wide eyes as he delivered a punch to the wards, then another. The spelled steel upon his knuckles shimmered as the wards came down like shattered glass.

Their troops had moved to key positions, encircling the small encampment, charging in with mighty howls as the wards came crashing down. “Hellions!” Someone cried out in terror as the horde of hellions came charging down the hills upon them. The guards scrambled to pull their weapons, two of

them running towards the city walls. Many of them began calling out backup, ringing bells, but no answer came from within the city. "Captain! Generals Tamil and Hector have revolted, they're taking the city!" A man cried before Inias decapitated him with his claws. The captain fared no better, lifted by his skull in Vestin's mighty grip. He cried out as the Hellion squeezed his head. A mix of blood and brain coated Vestin's fingers as the captain's skull shattered.

In the chaos, screams and clashes of metal filled the air as Inias, and his companions pushed the guards back. Vestin's fists pounded through the ranks of Ailog's guards, his sheer strength creating a path for the others to follow. Keira's daggers flew with deadly accuracy, finding their marks in the enemy lines.

Styx darted through the battle, his lightning speed and sharp teeth leaving a trail of blood and corpses in his wake. They seemed to turn the tide of battle in their favor as they pushed closer and closer to the cabins where the hellions were held captive. "We must hold out!" One defender shouted, trying to rally the others, "We can't let these devils overwhelm us! For Dusk Haven!" It had little effect, as many of them dropped their weapons and ran for the fields, cursing the city.

From within the cabins, the slaves stirred when they heard all the fighting outside. Suddenly, someone flung open a door and threw iron chains around an overseer's neck. A large hellion with mighty horns strangled the man beneath the chains holding him captive. They finally reached the cabins. The hellions inside caught sight of their would-be saviors and a spark of hope ignited in their eyes. Keira broke through their lines, and the Knight's Shade was first to shatter chains and burning cabins.

The ground shook beneath the thundering charge of the liberated hellions. They wasted no time in helping their liberators break the remaining lines. The few dozen who remained had no option but to die or flee as their attackers pushed them on all sides. Some ran only to be pursued and cut down.

A flash of red cut through the darkness, and Styx's yelp rang out over the battle. "Styx!" Inias cried, running as a bolt of lightning came crashing down on the little fox. Keira ran ahead of him and threw herself in front of Styx. She cried out as the bolt struck her, sending her flying across the field. Vestin caught her and fell to the ground.

Inias ran across the field only to be stopped by another bolt raining down on him. He rolled beneath it and stood again, pointing a sword at Sylvis as he approached. The other hellions gathered around him. In his father's absence, the remaining troops were busy taking the palace. Seeing the situation he was in, Sylvis pointed his spear at Inias. "The rest of you are free," He said to the slaves, balling their fists, "I'm after him."

Vestin came charging at Sylvis, but Inias extended an arm to stop him. "Lead them back," Inias commanded him, taking a step towards Sylvis. They couldn't let him die, that's what Thaddeus had told them. The mob would tear him to pieces. They exchanged glances and turned to Inias, who nodded. "I won't be far behind." He promised. Whatever happened, he would trust Vestin and Keira to lead them. His life was the least he could give to see his people freed.

Keira rose, throwing a tonic bottle to the ground. "I'm not going!" she said, glaring at Sylvis. Styx whimpered as she poured another bottle down his throat. "Not after that cheap shot!"

Vestin heaved a sigh and ran to his sister's side as Styx began growling. "All four of us," Vestin said, but Keira pressed a hand to his chest. "Someone has to lead them north," she said as Sylvis tapped his foot impatiently. Vestin wrapped her in a hug and nodded. He let out a loud whistle and called for

everyone to follow him north. The crowd looked to Inias but turned and followed behind Vestin. “We’ll catch up!” Keira promised as she drew her daggers.

“This takes me back,” Sylvis purred as he looked between the three closing in on him.

CHAPTER 46

As they marched through the forest, Ailog delighted in the sound of fleeing hellions. His army chased them through its shadowed depths. They left the wards wide open, allowing Ailog's two thousand strong army to come charging in. Most of the city's army had refused to join, a crime he would deal with upon his return. The bulk had already deserted, headed for Knivae to join the royal army. There was nothing he could do to stop that; the king was happy to accept more. He could at least play it off as a gift for all his majesty's kindness.

Ailog had not come this far, taken a city, only to be stopped by a mere thousand soldiers. crimson dragon had gifted them his power and with Sylvis on his side, they would never dream of betraying him. With his enemy fleeing in terror before him, he imagined the statues they would build, the poems they would tell of his glorious campaign. With this victory his fame would soar and with Sylvis by his side, they could even take Knivae, overthrow the king. His mind raced with possibilities as his lips grew into a triumphant smile.

Towering wooden walls rose before him, the gates wide open as they fled out into the forest. "Not so fierce now, are you?" He chuckled as his soldiers poured into the empty camp. "My lord!" someone cried, hurrying to meet his carriage pulled by two mighty white horses. "Maenads have struck our rear!" the soldier said, falling to his knees. There was fear in the man's eyes as he trembled. He had seen the wild women spring out and mercilessly tear through his fellow soldiers.

Ailog growled, and his heart pounded. "A trap," he said as the doors to the fort closed behind them. A low whistle crept through the fort as flaming arrows rained down. As the flaming arrows pierced the air and ignited the oil-soaked structures within the fort, chaos erupted. The once triumphant atmosphere quickly turned into a scene of panic and desperation.

His heart raced as he realized the dire situation they were in. Those devils set a clever trap, and now his army found themselves trapped within a fiery inferno. The soldiers scrambled, trying to escape the consuming flames that surrounded them. "We must fight our way out!" The Prefect shouted, trying to rally his troops as the heat intensified and the smoke choked the air. With determination, he led the charge towards the gates.

He looked on with horror as his carriage raced through the fort. Soldiers screamed, as even their armor couldn't protect them from the flames. A southerly wind blew, carrying the flames straight to his army and the surrounding forest. They sealed the gates shut and howls echoed from atop the walls. From every side, hellions leapt out from the flames, striking his army. Several spearmen rallied around him, swiftly cutting down any that came near.

"Protect your lord!" Ailog cried out as more soldiers rallied around him. He held his two mighty hammers tight as they crackled with red lightning. His bolts were small and feeble compared to Devilsbane's destructive force. The flames opened, and he saw Ashryn rushing at him. "Prepare to meet your grandmother, girl." He snarled and hurled one of his hammers at her. The fiery red of her hair shimmered and turned blue. Her face shifted as she caught the hammer and the hazel of her eyes changed to silver. The face of Varen met his as he brought the hammer down onto the dragon chariot.

Ailog hollered as his war chariot shattered, sending him to the ground. He cried out as a blast of flames struck him from the back. His hammer caught the flames as he struggled to stand in the chaos. Varen struck him in the face with his staff and brought the hammer down into his gut. Ailog cried out and slammed his hammer into the ground, sounding a shockwave to knock Varen down. "Give it up, your honor," Varen growled as he simply glided through the air, "You've lost."

The flames burned whatever wards remained around the fort, allowing his men to break free only to run straight into the maenad ambush. Ashryn pulled the surrounding flames in a vicious spiral as the lord's guard rushed to his side. They found themselves caught in a swirling tornado of flames and burned up, with ashes falling around them.

Varen was closing in on his left and Ashryn on his right. The hammer flew from Varen's hand into Ailog's, and he threw the other at Ashryn. She shoved the hammer aside with a swirl of fire and threw a tendril straight for Ailog's throat. Flames caught his neck and pulled him to the ground. "This is for my grandmother." The flames held him firm as she lifted him into the air and slammed him into the ground. Cries and grunts echoed from his lips as she thrashed him around. Ailog flew through a burning building, crumbling to the ground. Pain wracked his body, as if someone had shattered every bone. Amber eyes glared down at him, the Grovewood boy.

Ruvyn gazed down at the horrified look in the magistrate's emerald eyes. As he brought his axe down, a bolt of lightning sent him flying through the wall. Before anyone else could get their shot at him, he ran outside, fumbling as he threw his leg over one of his startled horses. Ruvyn chased after him, but the horse ran in a rush of speed out the gate.

"Protect our lord!" one man cried when they saw Ailog running through the gates. They began calling for a retreat, following their lord out of the gate. Hellions and maenads chased them through the burning wood. The ambush had decimated his glorious army of thousands, many laying in ashes.

Ashryn ran, but Varen grabbed her shoulder. "You must join our people," He instructed her, knowing the slaves would make their way north soon. "Not until he's dead," she said, swirling flames around her fists. Varen shook his head and pulled her back again before she could run.

"I will face him; you must protect our people from the flames." He said and looked up as a raven cawed over the empty burning fort. "They're coming now."

Ashryn had sworn to slay Ailog, but there were duties that stood before oaths of vengeance. The survival of the hellions depended on her and others. She nodded and lifted an unconscious Ruvyn in her arms as fiery wings spread from her back, carrying her high above the trees.

CHAPTER 47

Flashes of red lightning and dark shadowy tendrils flew as the four clashed. Sylvis was a relentless force, and none of them could seem to break him. His constant flurry of strikes kept them on the defense. Even Styx wasn't swift enough to slip past his spear. The little fox constantly had to duck and dodge at every turn. Inias' blades could only block his lightning. They wouldn't absorb the magic. Keira danced around his spear, trying to set him between Inias and her. Every time he pushed her back and sent a wave of lightning at Inias.

Sylvis was unyielding, his movements almost as swift as the lightning that crackled around him. In a sudden moment of desperation, he lunged forward with his spear, aiming for Keira. The blade pierced through the air, narrowly missing her as she stumbled back, her heart pounding in her chest. Inias leapt out, shoving Sylvis' spear aside as Styx ran across the grass to bite his leg. Sylvis threw out his foot, kicking the fox away before shoving his fist into Inias' gut, sending him to the ground.

Keira lunged towards Sylvis; her daggers aimed for his throat. He swung his spear, but she leapt over it and kicked him in the mouth. She landed and rolled to her feet as Sylvis tumbled over the ground. Gripping his jaw, he stood to his feet only to be caught in the back by Inias' elbow, sending him down again. Sylvis swung his leg, tripping the prince and then knocked a lunging Styx away with the pole of his spear.

Suddenly, Sylvis made a feint towards Styx, aiming to distract the fox and leave himself open to attack. Inias saw the ploy and charged forward, his swords flashing in the air as he clashed with Sylvis, pushing him back with each powerful blow. Keira seized the opportunity and lunged towards Sylvis from behind, her daggers poised to strike. But just as she was about to land the fatal blow, Sylvis whirled around with a swiftness that caught her off guard. His spear sliced through the air, grazing her side, and leaving a searing pain in its wake. Keira stumbled back, a gasp escaping her lips as she clutched at the wound, blood trickling down her side.

Inias, seeing Keira, struck, roared in fury, and launched himself at Sylvis with renewed strength. His swords danced in the air, their diamond edges glinting menacingly as he drove Sylvis back, relentless in his pursuit of justice. Styx, sensing the shift in momentum, darted in and bit Sylvis on the thigh. Stumbling back, he desperately lifted his spear to block Inias' swords and shove him aside.

Dripping blood, Keira whimpered and saw her wound wasn't properly healing. Falling to her knees, blood spilled out from her mouth as she watched the three of them continue to struggle against each other. "Innie..." she groaned, her arms aching as she struggled to hold herself up.

As he and Sylvis clashed, Inias could see Keira falling to the ground and roared. Glaring into Sylvis' eyes, his own glowed. The lordling watched in surprise and horror as Inias' hair grew. Every strike from his blades felt harder, faster. Every blow pushed him back. There was nothing of Inias in those fiery hues. Only the eyes of a beast baring down on his prey.

The two swords fell to the ground as Inias gripped the end of his spear and flung him into the city walls. It crumbled against his back, broken pieces of stone falling around him. Inias and Styx ran to Keira, laying in a pool of blood but still moving.

An echoing of laughter pulled his eyes away to find the body of Varen thrown beside his daughter. "Excellent," Ailog purred as he approached them, with his few dozen men remaining, "They can die together." Sylvis pulled himself up, stumbling over chunks of stone. "You survived," he said, not hiding any hint of disappointment. "Of course, my boy, no hellion trap can hold me." With his two hammers crackling, the prefect chuckled at the two dying hellions.

"Dad..." Keira whimpered, reaching out for her father's cheek as Inias rose. Varen cracked his eyes, seeing the pool of blood around his daughter. "My girl..." He mumbled; body wracked with pain as his eyes glowed. Inias looked from the magistrate to Keira. Color was returning to her cheeks as her father faded away into little shards of light.

Varen's magic was pouring into Keira, healing her wounds, restoring her. It was all he could do. He, Endolyne, and all the Hellion elders had profited from the oppression of their fellow hellions. Ravenmoon forest had once been home to several hellion clans. One by one, he claimed their land as the king removed them. Keira and Vestin resolved to fight for what remained. There was little he could do to make things right but to ensure they survived. He only hoped his death would calm the troubled spirits he forsook.

"No..." Keira tried to shove her father away as tears streamed down her face. "You can't go. I need you! Vestin needs you." Her strength began to return, but she couldn't pull herself away from his grasp. Their forest and home burned. All she had left was her father, brother, and clan. He held her cheek firmly and smiled. "The world will be a safer place in your hands." Varen whispered and brushed a kiss on his daughter's cheek. With one last breath, his form faded into many shimmering lights to be carried away by the wind.

They all watched Varen's sacrifice, Ailog's eyes gleaming with amusement. "Sentimental fool," he said with a laugh as Keira rose to her feet. She stood by Inias and Styx, raising her daggers. Tears continued to fall down her cheeks as she shifted.

"Kill them now!" Ailog ordered his son, who merely watched the two hellions. Keira's father had given up his life to save her. That demon was a better father than his own had ever been. If it weren't for Devilsbane, his father would have sacrificed him years ago. The spear crackled at his side, his swirling anger fueling its destructive power. Slowly, he lifted the spear, pointed it straight for his father.

The soldiers behind Ailog shook, stepping away with raised hands. "I'm not in the mood for your games, kill them!" His father shouted.

"No games, father," Sylvis said, mimicking his father's purr, "*Divine retribution.*" A surge of red shot past Inias and Keira, straight for Ailog. The bolts shattered his hammers and sent him flying. He cried out in agony, skin burning as every bolt came crashing down on him. Ailog writhed on the ground, desperately fighting to escape. "Kill him! Kill that boy!" He ordered the soldiers, hopelessly as they all turned and ran before any lightning could strike them.

Sylvis' smile spread into a wild grin as he watched his father writhe and thrash on the ground until flames erupted over his body, burning him down to nothing but ash. With him distracted, Inias, Keira, and Styx slowly backed away. He didn't seem to notice or simply didn't care that they were escaping. Once they were in the shadows, the three ran north towards the burning forest.

CHAPTER 48

Ava should have seen it coming. With Ailog's loyal soldiers following him to battle, the palace guard surrendered without a fight. They advanced in the name of Sylvis, just as she had orchestrated. The streets swarmed with people tearing down the Prefect's banners, a frenzy of rebellion overtaking the city as shops and banks became targets of the uprising. The proclamations of the new laws displayed throughout the city went up in flames. City guards, their armor discarded, sided with the rioters in droves.

Hector and Tamil seized control of the palace. Then their pursuit of her began swift and relentless. The traitor who bewitched them. Guards were pounding on the door, trying to break past the warding she had thrown up at the last minute. They wouldn't hold long, but she was still packing. When Ailog left, she had snuck into his room to get Endolyne's phoenix bracelet for Ashryn.

Layla, her sleek black viper, wound itself around Ava's form, coiled and poised for defense. Draping herself in a cloak, she flung open the window, greeted by the sight of guards below, their spears waiting to catch her. With a deep breath, she braced herself and climbed out onto the narrow ledge, and jumped towards the awaiting guards, their weapons raised. She opened her cloak, dropping pounds of purple powder from within. Wind rose to slow her descent and control the landing as she fell several stories to the ground below.

They coughed as the powder formed into a mist surrounding them as she landed gracefully on her feet. One by one, they fell unconscious, and she ran for the gate. Her tiny frame allowed her to weave past oncoming arrows. As Ava sprinted towards the gate, her heart pounded. The clatter of armor and shouts of pursuit echoed behind her, pushing her to go faster, to evade capture at all costs. She couldn't afford to be caught now, not when the revolt was in full swing, and her allies were counting on her to escape.

As she leapt, the winds carried her over the palace walls. The guards looked on with wide eyes as she soared high above them. The wind whipped through her hair as she flew over the startled guards, their shouts of alarm fading into the distance below. She descended to the ground and sprinted towards the city with a grin on her face.

Dusk Haven was a battleground now, a theater of rebellion and revenge. Her heart pounded in her chest, fueled by fear and determination. Those few still loyal to the Prefect fought desperately against the mobs. The cries of the people, the clash of steel, the crackling flames of burning proclamations—everything merged into a symphony of rebellion. Ava knew she had to keep moving, keep evading, before the palace guard caught up with her.

They had already caught her scent and began tearing through the mob to catch her. "She's going to warn Ailog!" One of them yelled to rally the mob against her, "We can't let her escape!" Some stopped their looting and closed in on her like vengeful shadows.

As Ava raced through the chaotic streets of Dusk Haven. The thundering footsteps of the palace guard grew louder behind her, their shouts echoing through the alleyways. Panic seized her as she dodged past rioters and looters, her heart pounding in her chest with a mixture of fear and determination. With every step, she felt the weight of the impending danger closing in on her. She was being hunted like a cornered animal fueled her sprint towards the city walls. Her only hope lay in reaching the other side, where Thaddeus, the wise mouse, awaited her.

The guards and rioters were gaining on her, their shouts growing closer with each passing second. With a burst of adrenaline, Ava leaped towards the rough stone surface of the wall. With two daggers drawn, she dug them into the stone wall and climbed. Her daggers shimmered, cutting through the wall's magic wards and stones. Layla hugged her tightly and Ava summoned a shield of wind around her.

Every muscle strained as she hauled herself up, the jagged stones of the wall cutting into her boots as she climbed higher and higher. The wind sent arrows flying in different directions as they neared her. The dark cloak whipped and tugged at her, threatening to pull her down.

She looked up to find the guards atop the walls, aiming their arrows as she neared them. With one last push pulled herself up, the wind carrying her high enough to catch the ledge and leap onto the wall. The guards drew their bows, but she leapt over the side. As she descended, the white speck on the ground came into focus and she smiled. Ava saw the little wand in his hand spinning as she wind slowed her descent to the ground.

Ava landed on her feet, bracing her knees as Layla slid up her torso and around her neck. "Was all this *really* necessary?" she asked with ragged breaths as the mouse climbed up her cloak to sit upon her shoulder. "It is, but I'll explain later, child. We must go." Thaddeus said and tapped his wand against her jaw. "You did well." Ava smiled and nuzzled her cheek against the little mouse, "Did you doubt me?" she asked as an Elk approached them.

"I worried," Thaddeus smiled and jumped from her shoulder to one of the Elk's antlers, "The prince has leant me his steed." He explained as Ava mounted Fievel. Thaddeus clicked his tongue, and the creature ran off towards the burning forests.

With Fievel's strong legs beneath her, Ava and Thaddeus rode towards the burning forests, the fire casting long shadows across the ground. The air was thick with the scent of smoke, and the sound of crackling wood filled the air. Despite the danger that lay ahead, Ava felt a sense of relief at the sight of three figures running over the hills. "There they are!" Thaddeus shouted, pointing ahead.

Ava could hear the cries of revolt fading behind them. She couldn't help but think of the people of Dusk Haven, of the chaos and turmoil that now filled their city. In just a couple weeks they had turned a bastion of purist ideals into a pit of rioting citizens. She had given it the push needed to topple the Magistrate's regime.

CHAPTER 49

Vestin's heart raced as he led his people through the inferno, his eyes scanning the crowd for his sister and friend. The heat was suffocating, and the ground beneath them trembled with each step. He could hear the trees cracking and groaning above him, consumed by the flames. Beside him stood his family, their faces smeared with ash and sweat. They fought back tears as they followed Vestin through the blazing forest. The knights, with their azure shields protecting them, were scattered throughout the group, guiding, and protecting the refugees.

Above them, Ashryn flew with Ruvyn in her arms. Her burning wings cleared a path through the flames as she guided them to safety. Vestin couldn't help but marvel at her strength and bravery. The slaves were freed thanks to Thaddeus' clever plan, and Ailog had few allies left to turn to. One by one, the Maenads disappeared into ivy leaves, carried away by the flames. The battle was over, and Bacchus was returning to his father.

As Vestin thought about Bacchus' words and looked down at the Raven bracelet on his wrist, he realized that one god's opinion didn't matter anymore. Even if Keira was the better heir, he still had a place among his people. He didn't need a title to remind him of his importance, their love for him was enough.

The flames roared around them, casting an eerie glow that danced upon the faces of those fleeing through the burning forest. As Vestin pushed forward, a sense of determination pulsed through his veins. His eyes searched desperately for a glimpse of Keira and Inias amidst the chaos. The crackling of the trees seemed to form a haunting symphony as they succumbed to the fiery wrath consuming them.

His family, resilient and unwavering, stayed close behind him, their expressions a mix of fear and faith. The knights, with their azure shields gleaming amidst the inferno, acted as beacons of hope in the nightmarish landscape. Each step forward felt like a battle won against the encroaching flames. Through the fiery tempest soared Ashryn, her wings ablaze yet radiant with purpose. Ruvyn clung to her, his trust in her unwavering as she guided them through the treacherous terrain.

Looking back through the smoke he saw a flash of blue and red running alongside the crowd. An Elk wasn't far behind it, but he didn't recognize the girl riding. He let out a sigh when Inias, Keira, and Styx made it to the front and mounted the two horses waiting for them. They were covered in dirt and blood, but they were alive. Once mounted they charged ahead to the front.

Together they charged forward and one by one the crowd broke into a run. The scent of fresh air was leaking into the burning forest. He turned to his people, seeing the weariness etched into their faces, but also the glimmer of hope that danced in their eyes. Finally, after what felt like an eternity of battling hell itself, they emerged from the burning forest into a clearing that seemed untouched by the devastation. The air was cool and fresh, a stark contrast to the hot, acrid smoke that had filled their lungs moments before. Vestin's heart swelled with relief as he saw his sister and friend waiting for them at the edge of the clearing.

Keira leapt from her horse and rushed forward to embrace Vestin, her eyes wet with tears. Together, they stood at the edge of the clearing, watching as their people poured out of the burning forest,

each one carrying with them a story of survival and courage. The knights formed a formidable barrier around them, their swords now sheathed but their stances still fierce and ready for any threat.

“Those aren’t tears of joy,” Vestin said, delicately wiping away a tear from her cheek with his thumb. “Father...he...” Keira choked on her words, succumbing once again to sobs as she buried her face in her brother's chest. Inias tenderly placed his hand on her back, offering silent comfort as they watched their home crumble before them. The air was thick with smoke and ash, the smell of destruction and despair permeating every breath.

Vestin's gaze shifted to Inias, who gave a solemn nod and gently squeezed Keira's shoulder. She turned and pressed her tear-stained face into Inias' chest, whimpering softly. His fingers ran through her hair, stroking softly. “He’s still with us,” Inias said brushing a kiss atop her head, squeezing her in his arms. She nodded slowly and looked up at him, “Beside your father, my mother, and Endolyne.”

As the last embers of their home faded into the night, a heavy silence settled upon the group. Their collective grief blending with the crackling of the dying flames behind them. The weight of loss hung heavy in the air; a reminder of the sacrifices that had been made to ensure their escape. As the first light of dawn began to break through the smoke-filled sky, a distant rumble echoed in the distance, signaling the end and a new beginning.

CHAPTER 50

The smell of burnt wood and plastic filled Sylvis' nostrils as he walked through the streets of Dusk Haven. The once-beautiful buildings now stood in ruins, their windows shattered, and walls scorched by fire. Bodies of soldiers and citizens alike lined the streets, their lifeless eyes looking up at a starry sky. The recent rioting had left its mark on the city, with the richer districts enduring the brunt of the destruction. Hector and Tamil had led the rebellion against Ailog. And now, with his father nothing but a pile of ash buried in the ground, Sylvis could see the true cost of his 'holy' quest reflected in the devastation around him.

It wasn't the feeling of loss he thought it would be, but a great weight lifted from his shoulders. He would no longer be confined in a cage and now, for the first time, he could truly spread his wings. The city would be his. Who else was powerful enough to stand in his way? Inias was on the run, easy to deal with at his leisure. The king wouldn't punish him once news reached Knivae. Dusk Haven had liberated itself from a tyrant. He would petition his majesty to send aid, hoping to rebuild.

Once the city returned to its splendor and its strength returned, he would begin the hunt for Inias and the remaining Hellions. Their trickery couldn't go unpunished even beyond their kingdom's border. The remains of Dusk Haven bore witness to the atrocities committed in the name of power and control. But Sylvis knew it had the strength and will to rise from the ashes. Dusk Haven would rise again, stronger, and more resilient than ever before. And Sylvis would be at the forefront, leading his people towards a future filled with hope and prosperity. The golden age and through the gates of Ambriel.

There was no point chasing them now. He couldn't slay Keira after Varen sacrificed himself for her, not yet. All his life, they taught him that hellions were beasts, living life on instinct alone. That demon lord had sacrificed more for his people than Ailog had. His father was afraid of the demons around him and never saw the demons within himself. No matter how pure their blood, the demons of the past still lingered in their souls.

Guards scrambled to their posts as he walked up the palace steps. Servants were pulling bodies from the steps and halls. Sylvis ignored them all, carrying his spear as he made his way down the halls towards the throne room. Whatever Hector and Tamil planned next, he needed to be there before they got any ideas. As he entered the throne room, ministers and guards parted from the pointed spear. Just as he suspected, there Hector was sitting upon his throne. "Keeping that warm?" Sylvis asked as he approached the dais.

"As if I would hand it over to a *child*," Hector growled as guards rushed to stop the boy. Sylvis chuckled and swung his spear, sending the guards flying out the stained-glass windows. Glass shattered as ministers trembled. "Last chance, general," He pointed the spear straight for Hector's chest, "I'll pardon all crimes committed before this moment. Is that chair worth your life?"

Hector hesitated, shaking as the spear crackled. Die or kneel, that's what the boy offered him. All crimes forgiven; he had nothing to lose. "Forgive me," He submitted, sliding from the throne to his knee with a bowed head, "I surrender the city to you, Lord Emberstone."

As Hector knelt before him, Sylvis climbed the marble steps, and took his place on the throne made of gold and velvet. "This act of defiance was out of loyalty to the city," Sylvis said in a gentle voice as Hector rose. "It will be honored, not punished."

The ministers and guards looked on in silence, their eyes wide with awe and uncertainty as they watched this new ruler ascend to power. In a commanding voice that echoed through the grand hall, Sylvis addressed the crowd. "Relax, all of you," he declared, his gaze sweeping over the room. "I have slain my father, avenged this city, and tonight a great darkness has fled our land," Sylvis declared, his gaze sweeping over the room.

"Dusk Haven will shine brighter than ever before," Sylvis proclaimed, his voice resonating with authority. The gathered crowd listened intently; their hope renewed by the young ruler's words. Sylvis knew that rebuilding the city would not be a simple task, but he was determined to see it through. To right his father's wrongs. "You've all heard the phrase, beauty from ashes," He continued, inviting the crowd to come closer. "Dusk Haven will not only rise from these ashes but soar to greater heights than before. The gods will look down on it in envy and awe."

The speech was a little dramatic, but they needed something. He needed to show them he wasn't the man his father was. It was the same flowery language his father would use, but at dawn tomorrow, he would honor those words. Sylvis would stand beside them, pounding nails and bringing food. They deserved better than his father and he swore a silent oath to be the king Nightfang Hallow deserved.

EPILOGUE

Three weeks later, they finally arrived in the little settlement of hellion refugees. Inias, Keira, and Thaddeus looked out over the small village from atop the hill. The Freefolk had taken an oath to never turn away wayward drifters or lost souls. So long as you followed a few fair laws, you could settle. The federation formed to repel the greedy merchant clan's influence. Three cities rose together and drove them out. Now a fourth was growing to the south, adding to their strength.

"It will serve our purposes," Thaddeus explained from Keira's shoulder, "From here we rest and build connections with the surrounding cities."

Inias wondered how long it would be before they saw their old home again. This was only the beginning of their journey. Inias knew they would never be truly safe until they erased Ivaran and his followers from the world. For now, they could rest. It would take time for Dusk Haven to rebuild its strength, and Ivaran knew invading the federation meant war with all three cities. For now, they would wait, build their strength, and strike when the opportunity rose.

An old mansion sat beyond the village in the forest, abandoned, but after some reconstruction, it would be an excellent place to build his base. "All according to your master plan, sage?" Inias teased, smiling at the little mouse. "My plans have yet to fail, your highness." Thaddeus assured him.

As the trio descended the hill towards the settlement, the first rays of the morning sun filtered through the canopy of towering trees. Emerald leaves rustled gently in the breeze, casting dappled patterns of light and shadow on the forest floor. The sweet scent of wildflowers filled the air, accompanied by the distant melody of chirping birds.

The little village of Hellion refugees came into view, nestled peacefully among the ancient trees. Small cottages with thatched roofs dotted the landscape, their walls adorned with colorful flowers cascading down wooden trellises. Smoke curled lazily from stone chimneys, carrying the comforting aroma of home-cooked meals. Children played in the grass, their laughter echoing through the village. In the center square, a crystal-clear fountain bubbled merrily, its water sparkling like diamonds in the sunlight. A few villagers tended to their gardens, carefully cultivating rows of vibrant vegetables and fragrant herbs.

"Can we name it after my father?" Keira asked, looking between the mouse and Inias. "Of course!" Inias said, thinking there was no better way to honor him.

Inias and Keira couldn't help but smile at the simple beauty of their new home. Despite the hardships they had faced on their journey, they knew they had finally found a place where they could rest and rebuild their lives. It was no enchanted forest, but for now, they were home.