

HELLION'S DAWN

HELLION CHRONICLES #1



HELLIONS
DAWN

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HELLION'S DAWN

MAP OF HARROWSVALE



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PROLOGUE

No level of training could have prepared him for this. They had been leading refugees from the human realm, a family of persecuted witches when the redcaps struck. For years, the Nightfang, the strongest Fae clan in the Vale, have been secretly transporting refugees through Willowberry Creek, Massachusetts. Harrowsvale, a place beyond the human realm, offered a sanctuary for those with magical abilities.

The trip had taken them from Willowberry wood down alongside the border near the outskirts of Harrows Forest, close to goblin territory. Redcaps stayed close to the borders, hoping to catch travelers. Notorious for drenching their little hats in the blood of their victims, they were revolting pests. There were limitations to what even the Nightfang clan was prepared to tolerate, despite Inias' familiarity with gore.

As they were about to pass over the firefly bridge into Nightfang Hallow, a troop of redcaps struck their party. They launched their ambush before the party could cross, cutting off their escape on both sides. One on one, even an average person might fight them off. Striking in large numbers, they would take advantage of the terrain to benefit themselves. In the forest, they would conceal themselves and use arrows to immobilize their prey before dispatching ground troops.

The witches had created a shield of wind to aid in their crossing as the other members of the group engaged the attacking goblins. The devilish little goblins appeared to hide well, despite the decaying foliage around them. Still, there might not have been a significant amount among the trees. Inias believed that if they could surprise the attackers with a counterassault, it would change everything.

His father stayed close to him while he barked orders to the soldiers scurrying nearby. "Hold the bridge!" Cyran Nightfang shouted as a barrier of darkness enclosed them. It protected them from most arrows, but a few appeared to break through. Those with purple points were spell busting arrows. The crystal tip could dissolve any spell or shield like acid.

Little holes peeked through their barrier as more purple arrows came through. They could not remain concealed within a shadow wall indefinitely. They had to act. His father's caution had the potential to result in the loss of everything. "While you hold the bridge, I'll assault them! Who's with me?!" Naturally, he had the power to overcome the ambush. He was Inias Nightfang, the next in line to rule over Nightfang Hallow. He would show his dad what a hero he was and earn the recognition he'd deserved.

"No! We stay until they cross and follow! We'll outrun them once we're through." Three other soldiers shook their heads and stood by the young prince instead. Tremaine, along with his friends Ashryn and Vestin. "I'm ordering you all to stay here! The forest will be crawling with them."

"We're arrow fodder in this bubble, old man!" Inias ran headlong into the forest with the trio of knights following behind, hoping to route the redcap troops as his dad screamed, "*Idiot!*"

The hailstorm of darts and arrows from all quarters kept him pinned behind a tree. As the tiny goblins attacked from all sides, they struggled to shield against them, filling his senses with blood and iron. They kept the party pinned down as the foot soldiers moved in to claim their victims. The first scream sounded as Tremaine had his gut torn open by one of them.

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Inias threw one of his knives at an oncoming redcap, hitting it through the blood-soaked hat the creature wore. He attempted throwing another to the one slicing through his friend, but an arrow to the arm prevented it. The knife dropped to the ground as Inias swiftly removed the arrow with a cry. The iron points, always barbed and uneven, ripped through his flesh as he forcefully removed it.

"I'm sorry..." He whispered to his friend as three of them dragged him off. The other two who had joined him had fared no better. Lady Redwood found herself surrounded, and as Sir Vestin, with an arrow in his chest, weakly fired back at the enemy. He heard a loud screech and caught the flash of metal from the corner of his eye.

A redcap's head was rolling to the side when he felt someone grab him around the waist and haul him over their shoulder. A barrier of shadow and mist swirled around them as his father ran across the field. He could sense the arrows piercing through, but none struck him. It was then he realized the barrier wasn't protecting his father, only Inias as they crossed the bridge.

"Dad...put me down! Dad!" Inias pleaded when he saw the blood trail behind them. The two crashed onto the ground across the bridge. There were at least a dozen arrows and darts buried in his father's back, his armor soaked in blood. Inias gasped and reached out to shake him, but someone gripped him by the shoulder and hauled him to his feet. "Get moving, you idiot!" Another soldier scooped up his father as the party escaped down the path to Stonefog. As the party evaded oncoming arrows, Inias reached out to brush his father's cheek, wishing he'd open his eyes.

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CHAPTER 1

His feet felt as heavy as gold as he trudged through the snow. Why bury the dead far from the city? Kings and those in the line of succession were the ones preserved in the crypts beneath Knivae's castle. Inias didn't care how sacred this battlefield was. He was cold, wet, and tired. He had the option to complain all he wanted, but the moment he spotted the headstone, his heart sank. Cyran Nightfang. 'Idiot' was the last word Inias had heard from the man, his father. That day forever carved itself in his memory. Even his dreams seemed to dwell on it a week later. That image of his father's back covered in arrows and darts plagued him every night since. Inias had run straight for those red hatted little goblins. Three others had joined him, expecting a swift victory. His father warned the woods were crawling with more waiting to pounce.

"*Idiot!*" That word continued to reach his ears from afar, as if the man were screaming it from his grave. The scene played again as it had every time that word echoed. His father had carried him over his shoulder and dragged him from the thick forest over the bridge they were meant to defend. He collapsed, and his back became filled with more arrows and darts than the training dummies used for practice. Soldiers dragged him away without time to check on his father. He couldn't muster the courage to gaze at him during the ceremony. He had lingered by his uncle and looked away as they approached the casket together.

If only the bitter cold were enough to distract him as he trudged closer, his heart thumping. What could he say? He had ignored an order and his father now laid dead for it. The ache emerged as he fell and sat by the stone. He turned to rustle through his satchel bag, rummaging through bright glowing crystals until his fingers clasped the handle of a small knife. With three crystals beneath it cupped in his palm, he set the satchel aside. Purple to soothe him and two red to warm him. He was not ready to speak and so he silently placed the crystals atop the stone on his knees, then sunk down quietly again.

"You always said I'd be the death of you," Inias mumbled, the worst thing he thought to say as he cut up small bits of cheese from a larger cube. He laid a few by the stone, then greedily took a bite from the hunk and wrapped it up. The rough fabric of his gloves scratched at his cheek as he wiped away any tears creeping past his ruby red eyes. A few stray hairs crept into his vision, and he quickly stuffed it back into his hood. His gaze fell to the dagger digging into his hip through its sheath. He unhooked that and laid it in his lap, where he stared at the screeching hawk carved into its hilt. The same hawk now lying beside his father.

"I hope you like cheese..." He had little time to spend with his child. Inias knew more about the common guards than he'd known about his own father. Inias couldn't control his tears as he placed the weapon on the grave next to the cheese cubes. "I thought we could catch them off guard, but there were too many...if you hadn't pulled me out...I wish you hadn't, I wish you'd escaped."

That ambush was the first time Cyran had taken his son on any expedition, leading refugees from that little earthly town of Willowberry Creek. The redcaps emerged as they made it to the bridge connecting Midvale Grove to Stonefog. "They survived...but...you knew that. You got them across and pulled me out. Uncle says you should have left me. I think he's right. You're a hero...and I'm..." Failure, disappointment, there were so many words that had been flung at him upon his return from the battle. "They don't need me; they don't want me." All that flaunting and boasting to the other kids back home. He was the prince, he was superior. By blood, birthright, and power. He realized the extent of his belittlement over the years. His

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vanity and desperate attempts for glory seemed to come crashing down that night. He had sat alone in his room, thinking about the ones left behind in the battle.

As he was wiping his face once again, something black rushed past him. His pointed ears perked when he heard what sounded like cackling. The dagger was gone and Inias shot to his feet with a hand on his sword hilt. His eyes caught a raven black fox staring at him across the snowy clearing. Inias rushed to close, only to have the fox dart and trip him with its fluffy tail. He tumbled through the snow until he finally got his footing. Clearing it off his face, he growled at the fox, who was happily wagging his tail and observing from the tree line. Again, Inias rushed towards the creature, now with a sword drawn. "You're dead, you petty thief!" He snapped as the fox evaded him once again.

The fox seemed to whimper as it dropped the dagger from its mouth and backed away, as if it had sensed Inias's anger. Inias cautiously approached the weapon, dipping to one knee to inspect it and the fox. "You thought we were playing..." He reached out to let the fox sniff his hand. The word 'Styx' came to mind as the Fox licked his fingers. "Styx...that's your name?" He asked, to which the creature nodded slowly. Styx was an odd fox in the way he responded to everything Inias said, as if he understood. "You must be a familiar...where's your master?" he asked, stroking his fingers through Styx's fur. Familiar's who took animal form were more intelligent than their fellow beasts. Styx simply shook his head and glanced downwards. Gone. That was all Inias could sense from him, just gone. "Oh...well we can't play with this." He moved to hook the dagger back to his hip, but stopped and stuffed it in his jacket pocket again. "How about this?" He pulled a small stick to which Styx was already running across the field.

Inias chucked the stick away from the graves, and the fox gave chase. He leapt through the air in a blur of shadowy tendrils, catching the stick in midair before running off into the woods. A game of keep-away. With a grin, Inias chased him into the forest, only to be tripped again by the fox, who cackled each time. Inias groaned, standing for another quick round that ended as abruptly as the first. His attempt to imitate Styx by crawling on all fours wasn't as swift. It left his arms tired and the fox still cackling away.

Round after round and only twice did he wrestle it out of the fox's mouth. Once he had dropped from a tree and the next round, he faked a dash, then caught him from around a tree. Both times Styx shook it off and eagerly waited for Inias to throw it again. The only tear dripping down his cheek was the line of sweat that fell as he panted. Styx was just too fast, darting away every time Inias got close.

It must have been hours later when he finally collapsed in the snow, laughing as Styx came to lick his cheek and sniff at him. "I'm fine..." He pushed the fox's face aside and sat up to wrap his arms around Styx's furry neck. "You kicked my ass, but I'll be okay." He pulled away from nuzzling against the fox to grab the flask of water he had left by the tree. Thirst and leg pain were his only discomforts. He clipped his sword back to his belt and dug through his bag for some bread, which he cut in half for him and Styx.

Inias stood to his feet as the fox nibbled away at his bread chunk and groaned at the setting sun. He didn't want to go back home. All those faces glaring at him again. If he did not return for dinner, his uncle would only send someone to drag him back. Getting rid of his guards to venture out here alone was risky enough. He had treated them to a special tea, the same tea he had been using to help himself sleep. No one needed to see him crying out here or watch him fail to catch one little fox over and over. Familiar or not, he was a clever little fox.

"I'll see you when I come back, promise!" Inias would return to see his father again. There was still so much he wanted to say. Styx whimpered as Inias began walking away, "I have to go home," Inias said, turning on his heel to find him trying to follow. "Uncle says I can't have pets..." Styx seemed to understand, whimpering with his ears low as he moved away. "Don't do that...I..." The court was still

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deciding his punishment for the redcap ambush; how much worse could it get? Leaving Styx out here alone in the cold would keep him up all night. "What the hell...come on." Styx perked up and rushed to his side as Inias continued down the forest path.

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CHAPTER 2

The homecoming was exactly what he expected. Guards grabbed him and began dragging him across the stone floor to his uncle's throne room. "I have legs, you know, perfectly capable of using them." One carried the fox by the scruff of the neck as he tried biting at their hands. "Don't hurt him if you value your life." Inias threatened the guards practically carrying him through the winding hallways of the castle. "Is your intent to kill us *all*, your majesty?" Inias would have ripped the man to pieces if those words hadn't stung so much. They brought him right back to the grave he'd visited earlier.

Inias knew the place better than anyone, all its secret and clever little hiding places. He'd spent much of his free time exploring every corner and hidden door he could find. That was how he'd found his uncle's stash of liquor hidden away deep in the caverns. If they took Styx away from him, he was sure he could hide him. Torches littered every hall, providing minimal warmth. They passed a hall of heroes; the hall leading into the throne room. Paintings hung from the walls of famous heroes. One held a bow proudly in his hand as he stood over two dragons, another stood with his sword held high and a massive army at his back.

Both paintings depicted Onas Nightfang, the first true king of Nightfang Hallow, wearing the same crown that he wore. The Fae arrived from afar, journeying through the wilds to settle in Harrowsvale. Onas had been the first Fae among the clans to build a kingdom. He drove the elves back and spent much of his reign putting down rebellion after rebellion. It was the man sculpted by the window who had finally secured the Nightfang's rule in the valley. Vitriel Nightfang, who had repaired relations with merchant clans to the north and elves to the east. Inias always wondered about his rule, but now all he saw was disaster.

Inias dreaded seeing all those angry eyes again. It wasn't like when he cast an ice spell over the temple floors and made the priests slip. He ignored orders, chasing his own glory. People lost their lives and blood was spilled. Some were left without a son or husband due to his actions. This was much worse than all the hilarious pranks he had played on the visiting nobility and the times he'd bullied the lesser boys. He had progressed through his training more quickly than the others his age, now, and his prowess eclipsed even some of the veteran knights. Inias had never let the others forget his status, and he knew they resented him for it. Now that resentment had boiled into raw hatred thrown at him. It was only now, after the tragedy, he realized just how poorly he had treated everyone.

The large wooden doors opened and there was his uncle conversing with Lord Aubron, "Give the boy some time to grieve," Inias overheard Lord Aubron, his uncle's hand, whisper to the king. Ivaran's hair was silver, symbolizing the purity of their clan. Scars and wrinkles showed his age. Four centuries ruling would do that. His robes were an elegant azure and tied with a belt that held his sword, much larger than the slim blade Inias carried. Ivaran was an old man with a wounded leg that kept him relying on a cane to walk.

Moonlight spilled into the room so brightly it outshined all the candles and revealed every glaring face pinned on him. The atmosphere did little to calm his racing heart. The wolves carved out of onyx stones with two thrones between them atop the onyx dais had snarls on their faces and seemed ready to snap their teeth. Their eyes were red and full of fire. An empty chair sat beside his uncle's once housing Inias' Aunt, the Queen, who had passed when Inias was only a child. His wife and now Inias had taken his brother away.

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The king's gaze lingered on the fox who stood beside Inias and sighed. "Made a friend?" Ivaran's words had a way of chilling the room whenever he spoke. Inias could not meet those icy eyes as he rose from his bow. For all his shenanigans meant for his father's attention, Inias had never wished to stir Ivaran's wrath. His voice alone sent shivers down his spine that caused his back to straighten. He swore it was magic the king used to petrify his subjects. "His name is Styx. I believe he's a lost familiar." He spoke as bravely as he could, glad his voice had not squeaked like their last meeting.

Styx howled towards the king and lowered his head. "Clever beast," The smile upon the king's lips faded as he looked back to Inias, "How fitting that you've chosen a fox as your companion," Ivaran said, tapping his ring against arm rest of his massive throne. "A cunning trickster to drag us all into ruin!" His voice rose as he stood towering over the crowded throne room from atop the dais. "Why were two guards unconscious in your closet?!" His voice roared over the murmuring crowd, which seemed to hush themselves as they waited for an answer. "I wished to mourn alone, uncle. It's been a week since-."

"*Mourning*, yes, you're the reason for all the *mourning* in these halls!" Amidst the murmuring voices calling for justice, he longed for a chance to speak. What could he say to console those mourning their own losses after the attack? "I never meant to get them killed...I'm sorry."

"You hear that? He's *sorry*," Ivaran addressed the crowd with a roll of his gleaming silver eyes. "Isn't he always?" Another voice spoke from within the crowd. Inias had stood among those judging glares before, but he had never caused so much loss, nor had he wished to. They'd lost his father, a beloved prince and warrior. Three knights had fallen and one of their grandmothers was casting him a vicious glare.

The king gripped the armrest, slowly easing himself back onto his throne. Years of battle left the king with aching limbs, yet it did not diminish his threatening presence. With a wave of his hand, Ivaran could have his nephew gasping for breath. "Your prowess in battle has made you arrogant. You are undisciplined, impulsive, and now you've brought a wild animal into my home!" Styx growled as the king's tone grew thick with anger, "I want it thrown out! Guards!"

"He's not a wild animal!" Inias roared right back, nails extending into hooked claws as a pair of guards approached the fox. Once they saw the claws and heard Styx's warning growl, they hesitated. "I'm the one you're angry with, not him!" Styx was innocent and didn't deserve his uncle's wrath. "Don't raise your voice to me, boy!" Ivaran shouted, causing the room to shudder. "I will have you and the fox boil-."

"Your majesty!" A voice called out; Lord Aubron stepped forward with a hand extended towards Inias before he could charge the dais. The prince had a hand on his slim blade, ready to defend his friend. Aubron's chestnut eyes were gentle and as Inias caught them, his tension soothed. With a sigh, he stepped back and apologized for the outburst.

"Perhaps the fox-." Styx barked a protest at the man. "Apologies...*Styx* could teach the young prince responsibility. He has lost his father and Styx has lost his master; they make a good pair don't you think? Animals have aided in the grieving process. A man from Dusk Haven told me a story about a sweet little otter who-."

Ivaran waved a careless hand at the man to shut him up, "Whatever!" Aubron bowed and moved to stand behind the king. The hand did his job well, which usually meant keeping the king's anger in check. Within the court he'd been gentler towards Inias. "He may keep the animal." No one in the room wanted to hear another rambling speech from the king's hand, especially the king, who fell silent as he watched the pair.

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The wood crackling in the sacred fireplace against the right wall filled the silence. Inias wasn't sure what to expect, only thankful Ivaran had allowed him to keep Styx, who padded towards the fireplace, laying by its warmth. "The high council will decide your fate," Ivaran finally spoke as he watched the fox walk across his throne room. "You will have seven days to grieve and reflect upon your actions. Monday morning, I expect you here by nine o'clock." Inias heaved a sigh of relief and stepped back with a bow. "Th-thank you, uncle." He stammered, inching desperately towards the door. "As for the fox. He is your responsibility and is not to leave your chambers without you. Is that clear?"

Styx yipped his approval as he ran across the throne room floor to join Inias. "Yes, Uncle, I will train him well." He felt the hard oak of the door pressed to his back and the guard glaring at him. "May I?" He asked to which the man rolled his eyes and allowed Inias to leave.

He walked from the throne room to his own in silence. Inias cast his eyes onto the knots painted across the hallway floors. The presence of two massive brutes walking behind him did not help ease his mood. Styx watched them with suspicion, having sensed the unease Inias felt having them around. The guards opened his bedroom door and shoved the little prince inside. "May I interest you in some tea?" Inias asked before the door was slammed in his face. The clicking of a lock sounded as he wandered towards the bed. Styx had already taken the center, waiting for Inias to join him.

"You're going to be a handful, aren't you?" Inias asked him as he crossed the purple carpeting on his floor. Opposite the door, the fireplace sat within a black wolf's mouth, teeth bared towards him. "It could have been worse," Inias called out from the bathroom as he changed into soft cotton sleeping trousers. He stared at himself in the mirror. Tears still stained his ruby red eyes. He formed a cup shape with his hands, filling them in the black marble sink with the red faucet and splashing the chilly water over his face. "Got to keep you! That's a win..."

Inias returned from the bathroom and crossed the floor to slip beneath the thick black sheets. Styx's chin rested up on the pillow beside his head, turning his gaze to watch Inias. "Thank you for coming..." Inias whispered, leaning his over to bury his face in the soft raven black fur. Tears spilled down his cheeks as a paw came to rest on his shoulder. He wasn't sure when, but eventually those tears would put him to sleep.

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CHAPTER 3

Inias laid upon a black duvet; his head rested on a red velvet pillow. His forearm laid over his forehead as he followed the intricate knots carved into the onyx above him. He hated the boring stone of the castle walls, even the tapestries seemed dull. Everyone looked the same, dressed in the same elegant robes, and the same self-righteous judgement in their eyes. His room was dark, painted black, with only the light from his fire. From the ceiling dangled a variety of crystals that glowed in the firelight.

A small bookcase lined his left wall, but knick knacks and various knives had taken it over. He hadn't kept up his reading in the last two years. At fourteen, he had excelled through his training and found himself placed in a small corp. The only books he found himself interested in were the ones his uncle had forbidden him from reading. His private collection lay hidden within his closet. Although the court prohibited dark magic, he secretly practiced with no one noticing. It came naturally to him and, unlike the horror stories his family had told, it hadn't driven him mad.

Inias wasn't falling into a trap. He was a hellion, a fae born with demon blood. They were among the few who could use dark magic without falling into a desperate search for greater power. Regardless, the great city of Knivae forbade any hellion practices.

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 families 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. They had traveled a great distance since their banishment. After eleven generations of Nightfang rule, they had forgotten what truly lie beyond Harrows Forest.

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. The Nightfangs demon blood had been dormant for five generations, believed to be bred out, until Inias was born. The court hated him, hated what he represented. Now, all their loathing was justified. He had committed a grave sin; one they had always predicted of him. Battle after battle, he gave his all to protect their people when they asked for it. All his strength and prowess resulted from cursed blood running through his veins.

That cursed blood was the reason for his failures. Many times, his uncle had warned him he was destined only for the pits of Umbros, where the demons of old sit in eternal darkness. Hellions were wicked, predisposed to deviancy and villainy. It was only by his father's and uncle's grace that he could carry his title. His mother had brought him into the world, despite the risk to her. She had died and his father wouldn't allow Ivaran to kill him. She had chosen to save Inias and so had his father. The two had both sacrificed themselves to ensure he lived.

Sybil Nightfang was her name, formally of the Rosevenom clan. They said she carried a scorpion familiar, so he tattooed it on his chest in her honor. Tattoos were among the taboo hellion practices, except to honor the dead.

His hand rested atop Styx's furry head, lightly scratching behind his ears. "Do you think I'm a monster?" Inias asked his new friend, who seemed to think for a moment before shaking his head. Styx leaned forward, brushing his nose against Inias' cheek, and licked softly. "That tickles," Inias giggled as he ruffled up his head. He felt a warm paw against his chest, holding him down as Styx laid across his chest.

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A warmth spread over his torso as the fox closed his eyes, remaining close. "Thanks buddy," Inias said, wrapping him in a hug as the door to his bedroom opened. Red eyes flared as he looked at the servant rushing with a bowed head. "Your highness," the man addressed him, keeping his head low, "His majesty has summoned you for lunch."

"I believe you meant to say, your highness may I enter?" Inias growled as he and Styx slipped from the bed. The soft crimson carpet graced the soles of his feet softly as he stood. "Forgive me!" The servant fell to his knees, shocking Inias, "I was rushed. His majesty has grown quite impatient in the last week." Inias knelt and pulled the man to his feet. "Relax," He assured the man, pushing him towards the door, "Won't lose your head over some poor manners." When the door slammed shut, Inias muttered, "If only..."

Styx followed him around the room as he went through the usual hygiene rituals. He even stood guard outside the shower. "Perfectly safe," Inias said, but Styx refused to leave his side. Once he finished dressing, he wore a flowing black shirt with intricate patterns of red roses embroidered along the cuffs and collar. The fabric draped elegantly over his lean frame, adding a touch of sophistication to his overall appearance. He wore black trousers that hugged his legs tight, tailored to perfection.

Inias' long black hair fell to his shoulders in wild, untamed waves, framing his face. A red pendant hung from a chain around his neck, glinting softly in the dim light of the hallway as he walked towards castle gardens, Styx following closely by his side.

As he strode through the corridors of the castle, Styx by his side, the whispers of courtiers followed in his wake, their glare filled with a mix of fear and judgement at their hellion prince. He kept his eyes low, unable to face them as he continued towards the castle gardens. Inias wasn't the prince they wanted. That man laid in a grave for his sake.

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CHAPTER 4

The training yard was full of energy as older soldiers drilled young recruits. Men and women were training side by side, a recent development in their army. Inias sat at his uncle's right hand, on the edge of the garden patio. Styx was laying by Inias' side on the stone floor. Around them sat a colorful garden of orchids, roses, and lilies. A large firepit sat before the three, warming them as they enjoyed the military drills together. Ivaran had constructed the garden as a wedding gift for his then fiancé, Gwenithyra Emberstone. Years after her death, Ivaran had continued to tend it the way his wife had once done. Inias had never asked questions about his aunt. They were met with an icy stare until one of them changed the subject.

The previous night kept returning to him in flashes. He had almost drawn his weapon against his uncle, the king. If it had not been for Aubron's calming words, Inias and Styx may have found themselves spiked upon the city gates. The silence between them left him uncertain. So many words unsaid, praying his uncle stayed silent. Their relationship had never been a warm one. He paid more attention to Inias than his father had, but never seemed to please him. Either of them.

"Any news from the scouts?" Inias broke the silence. When the party returned, they immediately sent scouts to the bridge hoping to retrieve the others for a proper burial. Ivaran let out a grunt as he sipped his wine, "They returned late last night," He answered his nephew, "Only Tremaine was found. No sign of the others." Something of a smile crept on his lips as he turned to Inias, "I wonder how your girlfriend handled the news of her brother's demise."

Keira. The Ravenmoons were among the few hellion clans to maintain their place. Lord Varen had loyally served the court against so-called wicked hellions. They were still treated as outsiders but were simply too powerful to fully eradicate without incurring serious losses. "She's not..." Inias voice broke as he looked away. He couldn't face her, not after he'd led her brother into a death trap. Everyone assumed they were a couple, both hellions, and all the time they spent together whenever her family would come for a visit. Through everything, she was the one person who had stood by him.

"We haven't spoken," Inias answered, nervously fidgeting with the ends of his hair. He wouldn't let his uncle bait him again. Any excuse to get his anger boiling, an excuse for Ivaran to strike him, remind him of his place. "My nephew, the coward," The king spoke, his baiting smile only growing. In the week since he had avoided her and even during the funeral he remained by his uncle's side. "I'll face her when I'm ready." Inias said, gripping his chair when he heard his uncle's scoff.

Styx seemed to enjoy watching the soldiers run around and shot to his feet, eager to chase one of them. "Not now, we'll play later," Inias would whisper to the bored fox and scratch him behind the ear. It felt odd to be near his uncle, given what happened last night. He wanted to avoid his uncle's attention but felt he should say something after what had happened. Inias looked towards Ivaran, who held his gaze for a minute, then glanced away, pretending something in the distance had caught his eye. "He follows orders," Ivaran remarked as Styx whimpered and laid back down. "His former master trained him well." There was a small whimper from the fox at the mention of his old master.

Inias nodded and cleared his throat, "He's smarter than the average fox," He tried throwing one of his friendly smiles towards his uncle, who looked away as a roar of laughter from a group of boys caught his attention. They had been taking a long break from their training. They were all around Inias' age and,

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in fact, he knew them well. When his eyes landed on the largest of them all, Sylvis Emberstone, his cousin by marriage on his late aunt's side and a noble pain in his ass, the laughter abruptly ended. With wild green eyes and dusty blonde hair falling in curls around his chiseled face, the boy was quite a sight.

Among the Fae, the three of them shone the ethereal beauty their people were renowned for. Inias, not angelic or beautiful, possessed eyes that mirrored a demon, blood red. He had fangs and long black hair swooped to one side, covering the curved scar on his cheek. From his nails, Inias would grow hooked claws. His appearance was terrifying. They were perfect, while he bore the face of the monsters they feared. He was not as large or muscular as they were, though he outclassed them in raw strength. His outfits often fit his devilish appearance: dark cloaks and fitted black tunics of the finest leather he could buy.

They turned away, as if whispering secrets. "Go play with your friends," Ivaran growled as he stood from his seat and began walking back towards the castle, "Unlike you, I have work to do." Half an hour, which was all his uncle could spare during his grieving time.

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CHAPTER 5

Styx heard the word 'play' and bolted to his feet, wagging his tail. Inias whistled for him to follow as he rose and walked out across the snow-covered lawn towards the men whacking each other with wooden swords. He had once strutted across this field, looking down on lesser warriors. The delight he took in humiliating his peers now left him cringing. His eyes scanned the black castle walls around them, guards armed with crossbows, and some magic firing mechanism on every spire. Scattered among them were cloaked individuals. They were the mages and sorcerers recruited to guard their castle. Because magic could be as deadly as an arrow, Ivaran recruited talented wielders.

Inias walked out to the training field, Styx following at his side. The sounds of training swords clashing, and the cries of soldiers filled the air as they practiced their combat skills. As he passed the group of young men, Sylvis' intense gaze bore into him, a mixture of challenge and superiority in his eyes. As prince Inias always held rank and Sylvis never pushed his luck too far. "Looks like the king had time for a quick visit," Sylvis sneered, glancing in the direction Ivaran had gone.

The other two behind him snickered at their previous joke. They were smaller than Sylvis, yet more muscular than Inias. On the right stood Vayne Skyfire, a boy with short black hair and sapphire blue eyes. His wolfish grin, whenever he directed it towards him, always felt mocking. On the left was Rurik Rosethorn. His brown hair fell in waves around his olive-skinned face. Inias knew better than to trust him despite the inviting warm brown eyes.

"Bet he's looking for a new heir." Sylvis pushed again, flanked by Vayne and Rurik who spread out to box Inias in. Inias turned on his heel to face Sylvis and his giggling companions. "A crown on that colossal head? Would never fit!" Inias would take the attacks from his uncle and the court, but he was in no mood to deal with the three noble brats. "But if he's ever considering a pompous prick, I'll throw him your name for consideration."

"Pompous prick?!" Sylvis laughed aloud, his guffaw ringing across the yard, grabbing attending onlookers. "Coming from a prince who failed to defend his own father," Vayne spoke, spitting on the ground before the prince. If he were not in such hot water, someone would have reprimanded them for their behavior. A guard or instructor had saved from his big mouth all the time. Now they stood with crossed arms and narrowed eyes, waiting to see what happened between the four boys.

Beside him, Styx growled at them, baring his razor-sharp teeth. "Found someone on your level?" Rurik taunted as he watched the fox with amusement. "Couldn't find a decent challenge around here," Inias tried to remain confident, but a part of him wanted to run back to his room where he and Styx could sit by the fire together, alone. Styx licked his lips as if he were tempting the three to try anything. Inias wanted to return to his room, where he and Styx could spend time by the fire.

Sylvis made his way to the rack of weapons, admiring them. "How can you still be so cocky after what you've done?" He wanted a fight. Inias could sense the air in the yard shift as the blonde took two of the wooden swords from the rack, tossing one towards Inias' feet. "What I've done is none of your business, Sylvie!" He wanted to take that wooden stick and bludgeon the boy over the head. Or let Styx loose to see what he could do with them.

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Sylvis growled, having always hated the nickname Inias had given him. "The king's brother is dead, because of you," Sylvis gripped the handle tight, pointing the stick straight at Inias, who balled his hands into fists, itching to lash out. "Or was it suicide? Did he feel so ashamed of you he'd throw his life away?"

Inias hissed and barred his fangs before he lunged towards the man in a blur of speed, knocking Sylvis to the ground, claws at his throat. He found himself pulled away by Vayne and Rurik, forcing him to his knees as Sylvis rose to his feet again, chuckling. "Get used to looking up at me, hellion. Once Ivaran's rid of you, that crown will be all mine." Rurik cried out and tumbled over with Styx snarling down at his terrified expressions. "Call him off!" Vayne snapped, digging his fingers into Inias' shoulder.

"Break it up!" An instructor stopped the boys before Inias could tear Vayne's arm off. The man ripped Vayne away and Styx crawled off Rurik's chest. "We're just training, that's all," Sylvis answered and bowed. They joined their friend as he returned to the training field. "We'll talk later, Inias!"

"Look forward to it, Sylvie!" Inias fired back at him as the instructor helped him to his feet. "Leave your boytoys at home next time!"

The instructor shook his head as he walked away mumbling, "Never learn..." Inias wiped sweat off his brow before he turned to find Ivaran smiling in one of the castle windows. It was not Inias he was smiling at. Following the king's gaze, it landed on Sylvis.

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CHAPTER 6

His knuckles collided against the tree with many satisfying thuds against the sturdy oak. Each blow came faster, shattering the bark beneath his fists. Inias pictured Sylvis' perfect face with every punch assaulting the massive oak tree sitting in the groves beyond the castle grounds. Far away, where his tantrum went unheard as he relentlessly tore through the solid tree with each blow. Styx was busy chasing a bunny around, more interested in playing than eating. The bunny didn't share the same playful intent as it ran across the forest floor, trying to escape.

Inias couldn't feel the bitter wintry winds whipping through the grove. Hitting the tree generated warmth within him. The pile of chipped bark had risen several inches above the snowy floor, and he had to keep repositioning to avoid stepping on it. Even the pain from the splinters buried in his knuckles didn't slow him down. The commotion sent the forest critters running, but Styx kept that one little bunny from escaping it all.

The encounter with Sylvis left his blood boiling. All his grief seemed to flow through his fists. He would've killed him if that man hadn't gotten in the way. Rip his throat to pieces while his lackey's watched in horror. The scene replayed endlessly in his mind. He slammed his fist harder as every loop ran. The hum of the forest was a mere buzz in the background. All that reached his ears was Sylvis' arrogant voice and the snickering of his boytoys. He'd waited for years for the high and mighty Inias to fall.

At every turn, that noble prick had tried to sabotage him. The tournament when he'd spiked Inias' wine before the last match. He'd squeezed out a victory, but that was out of sheer luck. Not to mention the date he'd prepared for his first crush. Sylvis had slipped a hex on the wine, causing the girl to become ill. There were shots from both sides, Sylvis and his goons were the only ones not afraid to push back.

"Piece of shit!" Inias snapped, shaking the entire tree with one last punch. Snow from the top branches fell around them, catching Styx's attention, who ran back to his side. "I'll rip him apart... peel the skin from his bones and..." He slumped back against the tree, sitting upon the pile of bark chips that had formed. He planted his face in his hands to hold back the tears. He didn't want to cry, he wanted to rip into that pompous prick and pull his heart free. What if Sylvis was right? His uncle had lost faith in him and the court as well. He couldn't salvage this. What possibilities lay ahead for Nightfang Hallow with him as its king? Who would trust him?

A constant rustling over the snow jolted him from his brooding. His ears twitched, points poking through his long raven black hair, as he strained to identify the source of the sound. That was when he saw the dagger hurling towards his face. He turned his face away as Styx leapt over him towards the girl who'd thrown it. Inias yanked the blade free from the oak he'd been punching for hours. "Get off!" A voice cried out as Inias bolted to his feet to join his friend. "Styx! Let her go." The fox continued to growl and snarl as he slid back to Inias' side.

Keira Ravenmoon, the younger sister to Sir Vestin Ravenmoon. "Geez, put a leash on that thing!" She said as she took Inias' hand and pulled herself up. She had the same solid black eyes as her brother. The same blue hair with hints of purple thrown in there, a common blend in the Ravenmoon clan. It fell straight, the ends touching her shoulder while her hair swayed in the breeze. Delicate black horns rose from atop her head, peeking just past her hair. She dressed in a tight combat suit, stuffing or hiding knives wherever possible. Various magical tools and crystals adorned her belt, ready for deployment.

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“How about I put a leash on you?” Inias answered, crossing his arms. “You tried to kill me!” He was mad enough to kill Sylvis earlier, but her brother had just died thanks to Inias. “If I wanted to kill you, I wouldn’t have missed!” She was an expert hunter. The only reason he heard her was because she allowed him to. Were it Sylvie or one of his goons, Inias wouldn’t have hesitated to gut them.

Inias chucked the knife down by her feet and slumped against the tree again as Keira watched him with a raised brow. “I’m sorry about your brother. Is that what you’re waiting for?” Everyone had at least one friend. He didn’t get along with the other boys. Only a few girls, seeking a crown, dared to speak with him. Keira didn’t look so faerie like herself, with her horns and those long-pointed ears extending beyond the back of her head. “Yes! What in Cerenos’ name were you thinking?!”

“I thought if we could surprise them...then...” It all came back to him in flashes as he recalled the entire scene. He shut his eyes tight and slammed his head back against the solid oak. “It should’ve been me...” He sobbed as Styx rushed to his side to lick his cheek. “Aw, he’s sweet.” Keira smiled, reaching down to pet the fox but backed away when he growled, “And I never said that.” Keira retrieved the knife left in the snow and sighed. “I could sense it...when you were fighting...he was in danger, and I knew.” She gave Inias a hard shove. “Why aren’t you out there looking?” Inias rolled over into the snow as Styx snarled again, ready to strike. “They’re dead!” He snapped, resting a hand on Styx’s head to calm him. No one could have survived that assault; his father had barely scraped him out of it. “They only found Tremaine's body.”

“So they dragged them away to eat la-.” Inias stopped himself when Keira looked away. She didn’t need to know the details. Both were familiar with redcaps. “I need to know...” Keira sighed and took a seat beside her friend. She was upset. Naturally, she had every right. But Inias hadn’t forced Vestin to run into the fire with him. That was his choice. “And instead of brooding out here, you need to come with me.”

“Uncle wouldn’t allow it!” He protested, digging the top of his boot into the snow to kick up a little into the air. “So? Sneak out. We do it all the time!” A mist of ice flew from Keira’s hand, freezing the little clump of snow as it fell to the ground. “No...I can’t...not this time.” Inias shook his head, fighting the tears as they wet his long lashes, “I’m sorry...”

“Whatever Inias,” she huffed and pushed off the ground, glaring down at him. “If I fail again...”

“If you won’t even try, maybe it should have been you,” she stormed off into the woods, the pounding of her boots vibrating over the surrounding ground. “Where are you going?!” Inias called out, she hadn’t brought all those weapons for him. “I’m going to clean up your mess as usual and find my brother. And remind those redcaps to stay in the forest border where they belong!” Her voice faded as she ran towards the castle in a blur of speed. Black and purple tendrils seemed to follow behind until she was out of view.

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CHAPTER 7

“*Sleep,*” Inias whispered to the man with his fingers gripped around his throat. The guard blacked out in the snow as purple mist enveloped them. As the guard slipped in the snow and fell, Inias pressed him up against the tree, his breath fogging in the icy air as he surveyed the unconscious man. *Damnit...now I'm really screwed,* He thought as he backed away from the sleeping man. After the encounter with Keira, his guard approached to drag him back to his room. They forbade him from going beyond the castle grounds, and Inias had wandered half a mile into the groves.

He wasn't in the mood to be dragged home again. And after a loud argument between them, Inias tossed a purple poison dust, casting the man into slumber. Styx avoided the mist, only returning to Inias' side once he'd stepped out of it. He pulled the scarf away from his face, revealing the intricate rune work sewn into lovely patterns over the black fabric. His immediate reaction was to hide it, almost leading him to abandon the freezing man in the snow. The sun was setting, and the wind blew more fiercely.

Inias wrapped the scarf around his face and stepped back into the mist. He unhooked his cloak and wrapped it around his guard as he hurled him over his shoulder. “Come on Styx!” Inias called when he caught the fox chasing another rabbit. He yipped and rushed to Inias' side.

While walking, they heard a woman's cries carried by the wind. He realized the second it reached his pointed ears, causing them to twitch in its direction. The same woman from the throne room, who had been giving him angry looks, cried once more. Endolyne Redwood, one of the eldest members of the high council, mother of Ashryn Redwood. Ashryn had accompanied him frequently to victory and had complete faith in his delusions of grandeur.

What a fantasy he'd let himself believe. The court had taught him to hate himself, hate those like him. He wrapped himself in a steel wall of glory and boasting so no one would see him for the devil he was. Prowess in battle did not make a good leader, but it proved his savagery. That wall had cracked and shattered in those woods. His truth was exposed to the world. He was no hero, just a cocky prince with a chip on his shoulder.

Those victories were only empty boasts. The heir to the throne wasn't sent on dangerous missions across the Vale. Ivaran had handed him the most effortless and guaranteed wins once his training was done. As time passed, he must have believed the exaggerated tales people told upon his return. Despite her skepticism, Keira always had faith in him. Her quick thinking often played a key role in saving his skin, and she never hesitated to take the blame when they got caught drinking in the crypts. He had let Keira and Lady Redwood down, despite their kindness towards him.

“If you won't even try-.” He snapped his eyes shut before that flashback could begin and tightened his grip on the body slung over his shoulder. The guard had stirred upon his shoulder and Inias wanted to be in his room asleep before he woke. He made his way across the now empty training yard towards the gardens, where the guards were less frequent. He ducked behind a large rose bush and rested the guard against it by the fire. “I'm sorry,” Inias whispered, backing away. He caught the shadow of a guard approaching and circled the bush to slip into the castle.

As he walked the torch-lit halls of the castle, he took long, deep breaths. One more confrontation and he'd snap like he had in the grove. He curled his fingers into fists beneath the sleeves of his shirt and

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turned a corner before another guard could spot him. Keira's room was in the east wing, Inias' in the distant royal wing. He needed to see her, to talk her out of this suicide mission. If another person died over his mistake, it would shatter him.

“Your highness!” Someone cried from down the hall, running to meet him. The same servant who had disturbed his morning stopped and bowed low again, “Emergency meeting! Your uncle requests your presence immediately!” Inias groaned. Just a couple hours. That’s all he wanted, a couple hours to relax in his room before he snapped again and went hunting for Sylvis.

A summons from the court wasn’t something he could brush off, especially not now. Inias waved the man away and stormed down the hall, Styx following beside him. They must have found something at the bridge, new evidence.

“Come on,” Inias said, leading Styx down the hall to his room, “He doesn’t like animals,” He said closing the door after a light kiss upon the fox’s head. Two guards led him down the halls to the throne room where the wooden doors were left open. The room wasn’t as full as it had been the night before. Lord Varen stood beside his daughter, his blue hair long and silky as it fell around his shoulders. He had the same silver eyes as his uncle, though his weren’t the same icy hues.

On either side of the throne stood Lord Caelan Skyfire, Vayne’s father. He had the same curly black hair and sapphire hues as his son. On the opposite side stood Lord Aubron. The king had two hands, one to advise him and remain a voice of reason. Aubron was a gentle voice and often managed matters of state. The other was to do his dirty work, a powerful enforcer to incinerate any enemies to the crown.

“About time...” Ivaran growled as Inias approached the dais with a low bow. “News from the borderlands. Hellions were spotted trading with those redcapped beasts.” His uncle’s words settled in the room and Inias could see behind them. If hellions dared to trade with those little goblins, they must be involved in the prince’s death.

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CHAPTER 8

Inias could see Keira's glare from across the room, pinned on his uncle and Caelan. Hellions made the perfect scapegoat. Any tragedy could be attributed to them, and his uncle wasted no opportunity to punish perceived threats to his power. Just another excuse for a purge, to send his army and occupy hellion land. Those lands would be bought out by one of Ivaran's purist cronies to expand their business ventures. As hellions were stripped, more and more purists were filling the court, feeding Ivaran's hatred.

Ivaran lifted his hand and Caelan stepped forward, bowing low as he addressed the prince, "They were trading spell busters and other magical weapons, your highness." He said in a tone that sounded almost sickly sweet, "Arming them to kill our people. They hold a deep hatred for our dear king and his family. Their thirst for violence cannot be helped, given their nature."

Demons were evil, Inias understood that. There were hellions who simply couldn't control themselves, or so his uncle said. He was never allowed to learn much about his nature. If wiping them out meant a brighter future for their people, maybe that was a sacrifice that had to be made. How could something as vile as a demon breed anything but chaos and misery for those around them.

"Elkshit!" Keira spat, shoving Inias aside as she stormed towards the dais. Varen followed his daughter, pulling at her arm, "Not the time, Keira!" She shoved him away and bowed before Ivaran. "With all due respect, *your majesty*. My brother and Inias are both Hellions. They wouldn't kill their own." *Not like you*. Inias could sense the words she left unsaid in that accusatory glare she shot at Ivaran. He seemed to notice it too, eyes widening in anger at the girl who dared to challenge him.

Caelan chuckled as he admired the blue haired hellion girl, "What a fire in this one!" He purred, his fingertips flickering with flames, "And I should know." The Skyfire's were famed for their fire magic, the Redwoods as well. The Redwoods were the phoenix clan, while the Skyfire's flame was said to have fallen from the heavens upon their patriarch.

"Lord Varen control your *spawn!*" Ivaran snarled, gripping his armrests tight as if it was the only thing keeping him from ripping the girl apart. "She is grieving, your majesty, please excuse her." Varen apologized for his daughter and pulled her aside. "Watch your tone before the king!" He hissed in his daughter's ear. Keira glared at Inias who only stood in submissive silence before them all. Her eyes begged him to speak up, say something.

"Your majesty," Aubron spoke up, resting a gentle hand on the king's shoulder, "Trading with redcaps is not a crime. Nor does it *prove* hellions were involved in his death." Caelan clicked his tongue several times and shook his head, "It *is* a crime to arm them." He corrected his fellow hand. Aubron scowled at Caelan and the smug grin on his face. The word hellion alone was enough to drive Ivaran to rage. It was hellions who'd taken his wife after all.

Inias saw the look on Caelan's face. The same look he wore whenever he got away with something. Something was hidden behind those striking blue eyes. The slimy grin of an entitled lord getting his way. Caelan was eager to settle the borderlands where hellions remained free. The resources were profitable and once they were pacified the lords could increase their wealth.

Varen stepped past Inias and approached the dais, his head low. "Which clan do you believe to be responsible?" He asked Caelan and the king, earning a growl from his daughter. Caelan tapped his chin and

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looked between the two Ravenmoons. "Your son's body was never recovered. I can't help but wonder if he survived and if so, how was *he* so fortunate?" His lips only curled further, looking at the hellion lord before him. Varen growled low in his throat, the silver in his eyes glowing, "Choose your next words *carefully*, Caelan." He warned, nails growing razor sharp at his side.

"Vestin had an arrow buried in his chest! He fared no better than any of us," Inias finally spoke up, stepping beside Keira who merely crossed her arms and moved away. Caelan would spin this around and around until Varen lashed out, proving his point. "Wounds heal, your highness," Caelan said, stepping down from the dais, "If treated in time."

They all turned as Ivaran began tapping his ring against the throne, "Your involvement cannot be ruled out, Lord Varen." The king spoke, narrowing his eyes at the blue haired man, "Many call you the hellion king. With Inias and Cyran out of the way, perhaps you see a clear path to my throne." With no clear heir, chaos would follow as everyone staked their claim. That's how his ancestor, Onas, had taken half the Elven Empire. They began to squabble, and he swooped in with the twelve great clans to clean up the mess.

"We served you loyally for centuries!" Varen said, pushing Caelan aside, "You accuse *us* of treason? We who have bled in your name, devoted ourselves to your cause!"

As Varen's voice rose, Caelan chuckled. "And you've become *quite* powerful, haven't you?" He said lifting an amused brow, "Remind me, how many clans once called your forest home?" Varen turned to Caelan, a steely resolve in his eyes, "Enemies to the crown, rebels."

Ivaran leaned back on his throne watching the two with a hint of satisfaction in his eyes. It was theater to him, watching these two lords bicker despite the stakes. Caelan was baiting him, even Inias could see it. The more defensive he became, the more guilty he looked. Aubron pushed himself between the two of them, his large stomach easily shoving them both aside. Inias was a little disappointed, hoping the two would throw some punches.

"Enough you two!" Aubron said, giving them another push back. Caelan raised his hands and sighed, "I suppose we're all grieving deeply." What did *he* have to grieve, Inias wondered. Varen had lost his son and Keira lost her brother. His father hated Caelan, considered him another slimy sycophant.

Keira shook her head and stepped forward, her sleeveless cloak flowing behind her. "My father's head would be sitting on a pike if he traded my brother," she said, crossing her arms. The knotted runes tattooed on her arms were in plain view and the king's snarling at them didn't phase her.

Ivaran took a long-exasperated breath, clearly growing bored with the whole exchange. "Caelan, investigate this matter." He waved a careless hand and looked at Keira, then Varen. "You're to remain in the city until we can determine your innocence. Is that clear, Lord Varen?" Varen shook his head, but sighed, "Yes, your majesty." He said through gritted teeth as he grabbed his daughter's arm and tugged her along.

"We're *prisoners?*!" Keira roared as her father dragged her out, staring at Inias, "When I need you most!" She spat as the doors slammed shut behind her.

"I'm sorry..." Inias said, again. He didn't know what else to say. Was he even allowed to speak? He was the reason Vestin, and his father were gone after-all. "She'll come around your highness," Caelan purred, clapping an arm around the boy's shoulders. Inias growled and slammed his elbow into the man's gut. Caelan yelped and fell to his knees cupping his stomach. Ivaran chuckled and Aubron shook her head. "Don't touch me," Inias growled at Caelan before storming out of the throne room.

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CHAPTER 9

Keira never meant it. No matter how angry he made her, she didn't want him to die. As upset as she was, she didn't fully blame him for what happened to Vestin. Inias had led the party into danger, but her brother had agreed to follow him. Ran alongside him towards their death. Taking heed of Inias never led to a favorable conclusion for anyone unless wine was part of the equation. The nights they'd raided his uncle's wine stash hidden deep within the castle crypts were always full of laughter.

When others found her grotesque, Inias saw her as fierce and striking. He'd liked her mixed hair color and solid black eyes. They'd spent hours transforming dresses and other outfits together. Numerous dresses remained in the closet, horrifying her traditional servants. She ran her fingers over the fabric of the midnight blue gown they had sewn together before he'd left for Willowberry. They had sewn the crest of her clan, a raven perched beneath a full moon, into the center where a diamond jewel had once sat. They sewed knots along the sides like vines intertwined with flowers. Securing her closet, Keira headed to the bathroom to complete her clothing for the journey.

She didn't hate Inias, but if he preferred to hide in the forest and weep instead of fighting to fix things, she wasn't certain she wished to see him again. All those years she defended him, took blame for their shenanigans, and now when she needed him most, he'd just given up. Her intuition told her that her brother was out there. The Ravenmoons were famous for their familial bonds. If he'd died, she would've felt it. She knew before the rest of the court that the mission had gone wrong, horribly wrong. If no one else would join her she'd fight those little goblins solo.

Her parents, Inias, and the court may not have believed her. If she turned out to be mistaken, at the very least she would return their bodies and ensure they received a proper burial. Not left in the woods for beasts to feast on. The incident has shaken everyone in the city of Knivae. The once fierce and feared shadow clans were hiding behind the walls of their city in fear of those red-capped goblins.

Keira looked at herself in the mirror as she slid the purple pendulum necklace around her neck. She slid a black leather jacket around her shoulders, made from a werewolf pelt. The amethyst buttons fastened as the jacket came to cover the thin white shirt beneath it. She was wearing the same leather trousers she'd had during her meeting with Inias.

Upon exiting the bathroom, she made her way back to her bedroom adorned with scenic tapestries of sunlit forest groves and fairy-lights of many colors dancing around the trees. She padded barefoot over the warm marble floor to the table where a map of Harrows Forest sat beside a fresh glass of wine. No one had ever ventured deeper than Goblin Territory or Werewolf Run. There were rumors of many tribes calling the massive forest home. What lay beyond the goblins were the wilds. Rumors suggested that deep within the fog-ridden forests, there were spiders the size of lions and a pair of red dragons. The only vermin she cared about were redcaps and any goblins in her path.

She would have to give Sylvis a good slap. Inias may have been a twit, but his words had cut too deep. The entire incident had already spread like wildfire around the castle, and she'd been right there, witnessing the whole sorry spectacle from the yard. "Bastards..." she muttered as she traced her route on the map with a quill. With a rolling motion, she pushed it into the satchel attached to her chair.

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If Inias wouldn't make this right, then she would. As she sipped from her glass, she experienced a sudden pain in the back of her leg. Her hand reached behind to find a dart buried in her right thigh. Her legs gave out beneath her, and she clung to the table for support. "Who..." she groaned as she felt an arm curl around her waist pull her away. She glanced up to find a dark silhouette standing over her as it swiped the glass from the table, along with the bottle. In a panic, she fumbled for a knife hidden in her sleeve, but it slipped from her grasp and clattered to the floor as darkness descended over her vision.

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CHAPTER 10

Inias paced the halls with Styx by his side. After the meeting he stormed out and grabbed Styx for a little walk. His uncle's stash of wine was unlocked in the crypts, but he wasn't in the mood for another lecture. Sylvis in the yard, then the verbal lashing from Keira were enough for one day. His arms shook as he walked itching for something or someone to dig his fist into. He deserved as much from Keira. She had stood beside him through everything and now he couldn't muster up the strength to believe in her when she needed it most.

Weak. Demons were weak pathetic creatures hiding in the shadows. They cowered when light was shown on their sins, unable to face themselves. Keira wasn't weak, despite her demon blood. She was fearless, something they once shared. Courage couldn't save her from a redcap ambush. The borderlands were a brutal front, if he let her go alone, he wouldn't see her again. They would tear her apart, feast on her flesh.

He laid back against the wall, sinking to the floor with his head buried between his legs. "I'll lose her..." Inias whispered as Styx sat beside him, resting a paw on his shoulder. Inias turned and buried his face in the fox's neck, pulling him in close. "What can I do?" He muttered, letting Styx's gentle heartbeat soothe him. If she died out there fixing his mistakes, he'd never forgive himself. Enough people had died over him already.

"Thank you," Inias whispered as he stood and continued walking down the hall to Keira's chambers. The guest wing was on the other side of the castle, but he had to see her before she left before he lost her forever. He ducked down quiet corridors, using the shadows to conceal himself before his uncle or Sylvis stopped him. Between the two wings was a maze of corridors, mostly storage rooms and offices for lesser officials.

Styx, with his nose raised, disappeared around the corner, whimpering. "Kitchen's just below us. We'll grab dinner after I see her, okay?" Inias turned to retrieve the fox and stopped when he found him outside a door, growling softly. The door led to a storage room, nothing of interest except festival decorations. As he neared it, he heard something inside, voices.

Inias strained to decipher the distant voices and turned to Styx. "What are they saying?" he whispered to his fox companion, whose eyes radiated a deep amber glow. They seemed to pull him in as the surrounding hallway blurred from his vision. Inias felt an odd sensation while gazing into Styx's eyes, as if he could see his own face. After a lingering moment, the indistinct voices took shape within his mind. He had seen himself through Styx's eyes and now seemed to listen through his ears.

A hushed voice hissed, "Couldn't have her sniffing around," from behind the door. Inias recognized the familiar, wolfish tone, but couldn't place it. His eyes remained fixed on Styx, who seemed to recognize it as well. With each word, the voice grew clearer. "They should be on their way. Let the goblins finish her. They'll just think she snuck off and got herself ambushed, like the last party." The words hung in the air, as he tried to piece it all together. "Should've heard her, yelling down the hall at her dad. 'I'm not giving up on him! He's still out there!'"

The pounding of his heart filled the silence. Whoever else was in there remained quiet enough that Styx couldn't hear. Keira. She'd planned to go after her brother. Had she already left? "I'd have liked to

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take my time with her, but we were rushed.” Another pause. He hated every quiet moment. “No, Sylvis has no idea-.” Inias gripped the handle and tore the door open to find a black silhouette of a tall man wearing a wide-brimmed fedora hat and long dark coat. Styx growled at the figure and rushed towards it, but it swiftly moved across the wall, escaping through a small crack.

Across the room, Vayne's eyes fixated on Inias. His expression was a mix of surprise and fear as Inias slammed the door shut behind him and Styx. “Where's Keira?” Inias asked as claws extended from his nails into razor sharp hooks.

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CHAPTER 11

The scene was chaos; decorations lay strewn across the floor, the festive trinkets, and garlands shattered in disarray. As Inias and Styx tore through the room, the colorful display of decorations spilled everywhere. Vayne had hidden the second Inias spotted him, and he didn't have time to play hide and seek. "Yule is ruined..." Inias muttered as he tore through the room, ripping through every box with his hooked claws and causing a colorful display of decorations to spill everywhere on the stone floor.

"Styx, guard the door!" Inias ordered, worried Vayne might slip past them. Styx rushed towards the steel door as Inias continued his assault. Wherever he was hiding, he'd masked his presence. His scent no longer lingered in there, making tracking him difficult. The room wasn't that big, and he would tear through every box pile. There was no scent in the room. Vayne had masked his presence. Moonlight streamed, illuminating the room, but it offered little aid as he frantically searched.

Tree decorations, garland, and various figurines lay shattered on the ground, the only noise filling the silence as he searched the storage room. There were a couple answers he needed from him. What was that silhouette, and why stop Keira from finding her brother? He didn't have time to ask any of them. Someone had taken her and all he needed to know was where.

His claws ripped through a thick wooden crate, yanking it across the floor to find a ball of fire coming for his face. "Styx, fetch!" Inias ordered in a panic as he ducked and as the flames passed by him Styx leapt out, extinguishing the flame in his mouth. Inias rolled across the floor and stood as more came his way. The fox moved behind him to catch each before the boxes caught fire. Tendrils of shadow followed behind his fluffy tail as he caught each one.

They were coming from all over the room. Every time one came their way, Vayne seemed to move his position with blinding speed. Styx grew fatigued, crossing the room repeatedly as the flames intensified. If one of them hit anything, the entire room would be up in flames. "Missed me!" Inias taunted, maneuvering through a relentless storm of blazing fireballs within the small space of the storage room. He ran behind boxes, ducking away from the oncoming flames.

Inias tried to get closer but was stopped by more fireballs. One grazed his arm, causing him to cry out as the flames burned at his skin. He snuffed it out and ducked to avoid the next volley of fiery balls. If he could just evade the flames long enough to close the distance between them, he could pin Vayne down. The gap in their physical strength was considerable, but that didn't help Inias when he had fiery projectiles coming from every direction.

He couldn't dodge those flames forever; it would eventually drain his reserves. Inias wasn't sure he could outlast him in such a small space. One would hit him or get past the fox and set the room ablaze. He wasn't giving Inias an inch, overwhelming him with a constant barrage of fireballs and blasts from his fingers. *Wish I'd learned some water spells*, He thought to himself, watching as Styx struggled to keep up with blocking every projectile before it engulfed anything.

"Keep it up! You'll burn the whole castle down, genius!" Inias cried as he rolled from behind a stack of crates to his feet. "Come on buddy, let's use our words!" He reached into his sleeve and chucked a dart toward the last fireball, only for it to land in the wall. "Just tell me where Keira is, and nobody needs

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to find out! Except the cleaning crew, I'm sure as hell not cleaning this up." He kept talking, hoping Vayne would tire of his voice and lash out to shut him up.

Suddenly, he emerged from the corner. "Gotcha!" Vayne's triumphant shout echoed through the room as he unleashed a blast of flames straight from his hand. Inias summoned a wall of shadow to shield himself, but the relentless force of Vayne's attack pushed him back, the flames searing through his defenses. The heat intensified, sweat dripping down Inias' forehead as he fought to hold his ground. His raven black hair singed at the ends, and he could feel his scarf catching fire. "So long, my prince!"

With Vayne distracted, breaking Inias' shield, Styx slipped into the shadows. Inias lifted his left hand to strengthen his shields as the fox seemed to lunge out from the wall, pouncing upon Vayne's shoulders with a harsh bite. He yelped as the fox took him down and Inias fell to his knees, with ragged breaths once the flames had stopped. He patted his scarf and jacket down as he stood at his feet.

The fires faded from the room, having only scorched a few boxes. "Where's Keira?" Inias growled again, crossing the floor to Vayne pinned beneath the fox. Styx sat upon him like a lounging cushion and wagged his tail. Inias fell to one knee and gripped Vayne's chin, forcing those shimmering sapphire eyes to meet his. He'd drained himself with all that fire. Inias could see it in the sweat dripping down his pale cheeks.

A cry echoed across the walls when Inias answered Vayne's silence with a harsh tug to his ear, "Where did you take her?!" Vayne spat blood across Inias' cheek, which he answered by slamming the boy's pretty face into the floor. He continued, slamming it over and over. "Where. Is. She?!" With every word, Vayne's face hit the floor, cracking the stone beneath his face. He didn't have time for a lengthy interrogation. "Listen, I'd love to take my time, but I'm in a bit of a rush, so talk." Inias saw the foam fall from Vayne's lips onto the floor and he shot his head up to find the black silhouette standing above them. Styx jumped from Vayne's back, but the shadow disappeared through the wall crack once more.

Inias looked down at Vayne's limp figure, his mind racing with uncertainty. Was it poison? He had encountered nothing like the shadow before. He had to find Keira before the goblins had a feast. As he prepared to leave, a whimper from Styx caught his attention. The fox had unearthed a small throwing knife from Vayne's pocket. "That's hers!" Inias exclaimed, taking the weapon, and hurrying out of the storage room.

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CHAPTER 12

"I heard it down there!" A voice cried from down the hall as Inias left the room. Outside the door, a guard turned the corner, heading for him. "I don't have time for this..." Inias groaned, scooping up Styx as he raced towards the nearest glass window and hurled himself through it, shards raining down around them. Pain seared through his legs as he landed, but he pushed through it, dashing through the gardens in a blur of shadowy tendrils. The task at hand was to save Keira. Wayne had mentioned that someone was on their way to abandon her as goblin food. He should have agreed to go with her earlier. If she died...

Inias shook at that thought as he dropped Styx beyond the castle grounds. He leaned down to let Styx sniff the knife in his hand before he stuffed it back in his pocket. Guards were rushing towards them, and as the fox sniffed around, Inias stuffed a hand into the pouch on his side and threw a handful of his purple dust straight at the guards, causing them to be enveloped in the sleep-inducing mist. Styx howled and ran off towards the tree line across the yard. "Wait up!" Inias called, rushing off to after him.

The pair reached the tree line, and Styx rushed to leave the groves for the thick forest. "Is she close?!" Inias asked as he struggled to keep up with the little fox. Styx nodded and took a sharp right turn towards the sound of horse hooves in the distance. Their distance from the castle was uncertain. Everything around him was a blur as the two raced towards Keira.

Please be alive...please... Inias pleaded in his thoughts when he caught sight of two horsemen ahead, traveling by torchlight. One pulled a small wagon, and he could see the outline of someone laying inside. He threw two knives towards the horsemen. They shined like purple stars as they weaved around trees to land in each of their heads, causing them both to fall from their horses dead.

Styx rushed to block the spooked horses before they ran and Inias rushed to the wagon, cutting it from the horse. "Keira!" He pulled her from the wagon into his arms as Styx let both the horses run off to join Inias, dutifully sniffing the unconscious girl. "She's alive..." Inias breathed a sigh of relief and slumped back against the wagon. He cradled her in his arms as she stirred. "Agh!" A cry echoed across the forest. He hadn't felt her wake before a fist smashed into his jaw. After all the magic and strength he'd exerted, he crumbled to the ground.

"Bastard-Innie!" Keira gripped him by the shoulders and pulled him up. "Are you okay?" she asked, inspecting his cheek. "What happened?! Who were those guys?!" Inias rubbed at his cheek as she continued to assault him with questions. Where were they who took her? A lot happened in one day and he didn't know how to process it all and tell her. "I'll tell you, but we have to get bac-." Going back now would raise too many questions. Wayne wasn't working alone and Inias didn't know what that shadow was capable of. The castle wasn't safe.

"I'm not going back!" Keira exclaimed as she stood at her feet and offered her hand to Inias. "I'm going to find Vestin, remember?" She reached into the wagon to retrieve the knives her captors had bagged up among her other goodies. "They left my knives next to me?" Keira rolled her eyes and began slipping each one back into its proper place on her outfit. "Careless idiots."

"Fine, I'm going with you," Inias agreed. She was determined to go, and now he couldn't go back. "Really?!" Keira beamed a smile at her friend and threw her arms around Inias shoulders, pulling him into a tight hug. "I hoped you'd come through for me, thank you!" Inias closed his arms around waist and let

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her pull him in close until he felt something sharp poking at his chest through his tunic and hissed as he tried to pull himself free of her, "Keira, you're stabbing me..." He groaned, as she hugged him even more tightly.

"Oh!" Keira pulled away to fix the knife left poking out of its strap across her stomach. "Sorry!" She moved aside and glanced at Styx, who had been observing them. "You coming too?" Styx howled and wagged his tail. Keira grinned and leaned down to ruffle his fur, which he accepted and nuzzled against her hand. She made her way to one of the dead men and pulled his cloak free, wrapping it around her shoulders, then took the other man's and tossed it to Inias, "Come on Innie! You can explain what happened while we find a place to camp."

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CHAPTER 13

The castle was abuzz with activity after the fire incident. Guards clad in thick black armor rushed around searching for Inias and that fox of his. They'd woken the king, much to the guard's horror, when he flung them across the room with a quick spell from his lips. Interrupting the king's slumber was a risky endeavor. Lord Aubron was there beside Sylvis as he inspected Vayne's body. The room still held the scent of fire and shadow. Standing charred were the broken wooden crates, and the walls stained black.

The scent of Inias' fox lingered in the air as well, painting a decent picture of what happened. One of them had picked a fight and given Inias' recent outburst in the yard, Aubron feared it may have been him who started it. Aubron had done all he could to protect him. Inias had never meant to get those soldiers killed in the battle and he wanted to believe in that sweet boy who'd once visited him every other Saturday to drink tea with him organize his bookshelves. That sweet child wasn't in there anymore, replaced by the entitled brat he'd grown into.

"*Inias*," Sylvis growled, bawling his hands into fists as he stepped away from his dead friend. Inias had killed Vayne over their confrontation in the training yard. He could scent that bastard's dark magic all over with room. Aubron shifted and glanced around at the destruction. "Vayne sure held his ground," He leaned down to scoop up a figurine of a winged woman wielding a staff with a frown. "He's out of control!" Sylvis shouted and shoved his fist through an untouched crate of figurines which crashed onto the floor, shattering into many pieces.

Angry footsteps echoed in the hallway outside the storage room. The pair heard the shifting of armor as the men standing guard outside stood to attention. "Can't I have a *moment's* peace?!" Ivaran came around the corner dressed in a simple robe he'd thrown on once he'd heard the news. His gaze shifted from Aubron to Sylvis, then to Vayne's lifeless body on the floor. Inias. He could scent it too, the fire and the lingering spell work.

"Inias seems to have..." Ivaran waved a hand to shut Aubron up as he stepped into the room with a scowl on his face. It was a mistake to allow Inias outside his room, but Lord Aubron had insisted they not cage him. He would've had the boy beheaded, were it not for the man's gentle guidance. "I can *see* what he's done, Lord Aubron, what I'd like to know is where he's run off to!" His icy voice rose, echoing off the walls and down the halls. First his brother and now Lord Skyfire's only son lay dead. How many more would die by that devil prince's hand?

Sylvis stepped forward, bowing as he cleared his throat. "Earlier today, he and I got into a fight. I asked how he was feeling and...he snapped, lunged at me," Sylvis lied through his perfect ivory teeth and ruby red lips, "Rurik and Vayne pulled him away, but that fox knocked Rurik to the ground. After that, one instructor broke up the fight. I'm certain he did this to get even with us," Ivaran's gaze was pinned on Sylvis through the obvious lies as if he saw right through the boy but let him continue. "The guards say he jumped out that window and disappeared into the woods," Sylvis explained as he raised his eyes to the king.

Ivaran glanced at the body and took in the surrounding scene before he returned his eyes to Sylvis. He'd seen the whole fight, heard their snide remarks. If he were Inias, he would've lunged at him too and the king was half tempted to take the boy's tongue for lying. Lie or not, the four of them had gotten into a fight and now one of them lay dead at Inias' hands. He needed Sylvis unmarred. As a young relative of his

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late wife, the king regarded him as a spare. Now that Inias was revealing his true colors, he needed Sylvis more than ever.

"I've also heard that Lady Keira is missing as well. Her father has already left the castle in search. I'm certain we'll find the two together." Aubron explained as the king stroked his scraggly gray black beard. Keira had been heard earlier in the day arguing with her father about her brother's fate. She was convinced Vestin was still alive out there and Aubron couldn't blame the poor girl for having hope. No one had seen her leave, and she hadn't escaped through the locked window in her room. The last time anyone saw her was when she'd stormed down the hall and locked herself in her room. While contemplating the day's happenings, he sensed something was amiss.

"Aubron, I think it's time we rid ourselves of future trouble," Ivaran spoke after a long silence. Enough was enough. Inias couldn't be allowed to drag their kingdom and the Nightfang legacy through the mud any longer. If only he'd seen the monster growing within his nephew sooner. He couldn't allow that demon to lead his kingdom. That much was clear now. "Sylvis!" Ivaran snapped, causing the young boy to straighten up, "I'm ordering you to avenge your friend. Put an end to my nephew and his girlfriend! That little fox too."

"Your majest-."

"Shut it, Aubron!" Ivaran roared, his voice echoing down the hall once again, causing the guards to shudder beneath their armor. "I've been lenient with him for too long and look what's happened. Their breed is cursed. They're demons and it's time we deal with them as such!" The horns, fangs, claws, they resembled the Nightfangs of old. The ones who'd conquered Nightfang Hallow, savages, beasts. In those days they'd bathed themselves in the blood of elves and goblins, forcing out from the south of Harrowsvale. Eleven ruling generations, all striving to eradicate that cursed demon blood from their lineage. It was his duty as king to root out the monsters within his lands, even when they were born of his blood.

"I'll burn him as an offering to my friend in the otherworld." Sylvis bowed, looking at Vayne on the floor. "Do whatever you like, as long as he's dead." Ivaran waved the boy away. Sylvis left the room, flanked by three guards, as he walked down the hall.

Aubron stepped forward, leaning down to inspect Vayne further and shook his head. "Your majesty, look," He raised the boy's head, hints of foam still tainting his lips. "Poison, what of it?" Ivaran rolled his eyes at the man opening the boy's mouth. "Why would Inias poison him?" Aubron stood to his feet, wiping his hands with his own brown night robes. "Poison isn't the boy's style. He would go right for his heart and tear it out."

"It's late, Aubron. Let the guard's figure that out," Ivaran growled, storming out of the room as four guards fell into step behind him. "Your majesty, wait!" Aubron called to him before he could leave. "I want to investigate further, just to be sure."

Ivaran was ready to just wave him off again and call it a night, but he stopped and stroked his beard. Aubron had a point about the poison. Why attack Vayne just to shove poison down his throat? Inias was more than capable of tearing the boy to shreds without lifting a weapon. He'd seen his nephew tear through enemies with those claws of his. The only poison he'd ever used was that purple sleeping powder. "Fine, but until he's exonerated, I want all available swords hunting him. Then we turn our attention the Ravenmoon clan." With that, the king stormed down the hall as two women, clad in white, entered the room to collect Vayne's body.

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CHAPTER 14

As they searched the forest for a suitable spot to set up camp, Inias spilled all that had happened since their meeting with Ivaran and his hands. She was more surprised Vayne's fire magic had been so advanced than the realization he had been the one to kidnap her. That spineless prick had always hidden behind Rurik or Sylvis, and when they weren't available, his father made a decent shield. The Skyfire clan had enough gold to buy off half the Vale. When backed into a corner, he'd become especially brutal, desperate to eliminate Inias as quickly as possible.

"Glad he's dead," Keira said after a long pause. Despite searching for an hour, they were in a tough spot without supplies or time to build a proper shelter. Inias couldn't believe the distance he had covered in such a short time during his escape from the castle, twenty miles in, and they were now likely nearing the borderlands as they made their way to Stonefog. They resolved to walk through the night, huddling for warmth until they could rest in the city.

The full moon above illuminated the snow as they trudged through it. Inias would've risked frostbite just to lie down and rest, but his thoughts raced, keeping him alert. How could he hope to sleep when so many unanswered questions lingered in his mind, the biggest one being why Vayne was so determined to stop her from finding her brother? He pulled the dark wool cloak tighter around himself, shivering. His legs throbbed as he climbed the snowy hill, grateful for the sound of creatures scurrying in the night.

The quiet moments, when the forest was still, worried them. Inias was exhausted and had little magic to spare to conceal their presence. Keira was still feeling lightheaded from the poison and their long journey. It was all she could do just to keep some juice flowing through Inias' spell work. If they kept a distance of twenty feet from anything, nothing could trace their scent. They'd encountered a wolf in their path, but it was more interested in avoiding them. If they'd traveled on the road, a passing patrol troop would spot them. No doubt they'd sent word of his escape with orders to bring him back, or worse.

Styx pawed at his leg, whimpering as he shivered as well, more fiercely. They'd been walking for hours, and the fox's thick fur coat could only do so much. Inias reached down to scoop him up and wrap him between himself and the cloak. His legs curled in against Inias' warmth as his shivering calmed. His head poked out beside Inias' and nuzzled into his neck. Inias giggled as Styx's ear brushed against his cheek, "Stop! That tickles!" Inias protested, receiving a lick against his cheek from the fox who once again nuzzled in against him.

Keira, trying to piece together the information Inias had shared, spoke up with a light-hearted tone, "Can you fit me in there?" she teased, observing the pair with a warm smile. Inias had told her about Styx's clever shadow tricks and swift catching of fireballs during their fight, something she had never witnessed in any familiar. In the past, keeping familiars had been a tradition among the fae, but as war became less frequent, the practice faded. Inias's father was among the few who upheld the tradition, using a hawk named Lili to survey the land from above.

"So," Keira began, looking up at Inias from beneath her hood, "I'm guessing there's something Vayne doesn't want us to know. By leaving, I would've discovered something. All the more reason to keep searching." Inias agreed, glad they were talking again, anything to distract from the bitter winds. As they came closer to the inn, they inched away from goblin territory, but remained within the borders. "We start

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at the bridge,” Inias offered. Returning to the bridge was not what Inias wanted, but they needed clues and had no other choice.

“Gods be praised!” Keira chirped excitedly, quickly covering her mouth as she pointed ahead to a lone cabin sitting between the bone dead trees. Shattered windows and worn wood aside, Inias heaved a sigh when he saw it. His legs ached and the bitter cold was beginning to numb his fingers. Ignoring the pain, they broke into a run. Keira shoved the door open as Inias set Styx down. The inside was no better, papers lay strewn across the floor and a lone bed, covered in dirt and dust, was all the little cabin held.

Styx sniffed the air, and shook his head, whimpering. “It’s no royal bed,” Inias muttered as they kicked off their boots and threw themselves onto the filthy mattress. Styx hesitated but joined them as they pulled the stained white blanket around them. The rotten smell of the cabin faded as they sunk into the pillows, exhaustion overcoming revulsion.

Keira’s eyes were open watching Inias as he turned to face her. Styx buried himself under the blanket beside Inias. “I’m glad you came,” Keira whispered, reaching to take Inias hand in hers. “It’s my fault he’s out there,” Inias whispered, her fingers still cold as he entwined his into them. It was the least he could do, he should’ve defended her family when Caelan and Ivaran began accusing them of treason.

“You made a bad call,” Keira whispered, turning her back and pulling his arm around her. They had shared a bed in the past, often passing out after a night of drinking and games. “Everyone does.” She said, resting her back against Inias’ chest. *A mistake*. That’s how she saw it. Another one of his screw ups. After all he’d done, she chose to believe in him. “I don’t know,” Inias muttered, as she began to play with his fingers.

Her head tilted slightly, the corner of her eye meeting his. “When I came to the capital no one talked to me,” She said, “Everyone thought I was a monster. Wayne’s creepy comments were the only decent attention I ever got.” The other kids didn’t play with hellions, any time one of them was hurt, the parents pointed the finger at the demon child. He came back from a visit to his father’s camp to find another hellion in the court.

“We were both alone in that castle,” Inias recalled, burying his face in her hair. His nose lightly brushed the back of her neck while he himself. “You were the only one who understood.” He smiled and freed his face to look down at her. Keira had already drifted to sleep and when his head hit the pillow again exhaustion claimed him next.

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CHAPTER 15

The sound of whimpers and a cold nose against his cheek woke him. Inias turning his face away from Styx, who had been nuzzling and licking him. Sunlight streamed in through the broken windows, it couldn't have been later than nine. To avoid capture, they had to move swiftly with half the kingdom in pursuit. The journey to the firefly bridge would take them at least a day, as the usual roads were not an option. Before long, someone would sniff them out.

When he pulled the blanket free, he could already feel the cold caressing his skin. "Hey, little blue, get up," Inias groaned, turning to give Keira's shoulder a hard shake. She tumbled off the bed growling, "Oops...sorry, too hard?" He teased, swinging his legs around to slip his boots on. "We have-augh!" Something collided with his head, causing him to tumble onto the floor. A black boot lay beside him, with a dagger still tucked into it. "Sorry, was that too hard?" Keira growled as she pulled herself up onto the bed to grab her boot back and slip it on. "Next time I'll leave the boot."

Styx yipped, ran to the door, and then they heard it. "Tracked them here," One man said. From the bed they saw two figures clad in dark armor with a wolf's crest on their shoulder plates. Keira threw her knives threw the broken window, catching both men in the throat.

The trio rushed to the window, Inias scooping Styx up as Keira pushed it open. She had two daggers drawn as she leapt out. The duo had comprised royal guards. They likely had the cabin. With Styx in his arms, he leapt down, landing softly on the snow where he let the fox go. "No one's here," Kiera said, confused, scanning the empty forest. They were royal guards, obviously pursuing the two of them. Why hadn't they brought a larger troop to surround them?

Inias focused his gaze and inhaled, trying to detect any scents in the surrounding air. As the wind blew, the scent of chestnuts permeated the air. Inias swiftly moved forward to catch a single arrow aimed at Styx. "Only one." From behind a tree, a colossal figure emerged. Sylvis. He caught those emerald eyes full of rage, glaring at them. "You came alone?!" Inias exclaimed in shock as he reached for his sword, pulling it free. The black steel blade had a sparkling diamond edge magically embedded into it.

"Leave your boytoys at home," Sylvis answered, pulling another arrow to his bowstring. "That was your order, my prince." He growled as he stepped closer. A blur of purple flashed across his vision as Keira leapt out in front of him, cutting the arrow in half before it reached Inias. "Come to finish me off?" Keira asked, lifting her daggers to guard her chest and face. "He's here for me. Go ahead," Inias said to her as he stepped forward. "Take Styx with you."

Sylvis interrupted before Keira could object. "I'm here for both of you!" He dropped his bow and pulled a large spear from behind another tree, "King's orders." Something shimmered over the forest, as if something had faded. A barrier spell anchored by his spear. It always required two men to deliver it to him, and then he would swing it in front of them to display his strength. The pole had a daring emerald, green color, while the blade was a stunning red, rumored to be dipped in dragon's blood during its creation.

"I know Wayne had a crush, but kidnapping her was a little extreme," Inias threw Sylvis a smirk, who now looked more confused than angry. "A little?!" Keira snapped her head to Inias, who only went on, "He should've talked to her, told her how he felt and when she shot him down, cried and moved on. You

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know, like a little bitch.” Sylvis swore and hurled the spear straight for Inias, who ducked and rolled beneath it as Styx rushed him. The perfect mix of confusion and anger compelled Sylvis to strike.

Before the trio could rush him, a flash of red caught his attention. When he saw Sylvis wielding his spear and lashing out at them, it shocked him. His flesh crackled as if struck by lightning before the hard trunk of a tree slammed into the back of his body. Styx rolled to his feet, whimpering as Inias pulled himself up. Keira had rolled beneath the lightning strike and held the spear back with both of her daggers.

Inias sprinted towards the two, scooping up his sword as Sylvis broke through Keira's blades, forcing her to leap back. He turned and slammed his spear against Inias' sword, forcing him aside. Styx hurried towards him next, snapping at his leg. Sylvis fumbled as he stepped back, swinging at the fox, who ducked away from it. The trio struck from every side. When Sylvis knocked one away, the others strike at him.

If Sylvis had found them, no doubt more would come. He may have been cocky enough to fight them outnumbered, but Ivaran wasn't so reckless. No doubt the king had sent several parties to track them. They had to put Sylvis down fast and get to the bridge before dark. Inias wasn't striking to kill, unlike the other two. He'd remembered what Vayne had said in the closet before he'd thrown the door open. “Sylvis has no idea.” The anger from the yard was gone after all that had happened yesterday, and he couldn't justify cutting him down like this.

With that spear, getting close enough to strike him was difficult. It was his family's pride and joy, Devilsbane they called it. Inias had never seen it wielded, but there was no shortage of stories about its destructive power in the centuries since its forging. Sylvis swung it around with such ease that Inias couldn't help but be impressed. He had not once witnessed his rival fight so fiercely, but still every fumble cost him and eventually Keira could get a strike into his thigh with one of her daggers. Inias blocked the weapon before he could swing it again.

Before Styx could rise and aid them, Sylvis let out a mighty cry, sending another massive wave of lighting from his weapon. The three flew across the forest while Sylvis clutched his leg and stood up. “You're all going to die,” He ground out through heavy breaths, as the trio struggled to stand. That blast had rippled through Inias, and it only shot through him again as he moved. “Vayne kidnapped Keira,” Inias attempted to reason while Sylvis struggled towards him.

“You're full of shit, Nightfang,” Sylvis snarled, raising his spear before something caused him to pause. He swung it to the side, blocking a blast of purple energy coming for him. “You're on the list too, old man!” Sylvis grinned at whoever had fired at him. Inias thrust his sword out, forcing Sylvis to leap back. A purple bolt struck the boy on his shoulder and stomach. He cried out and stumbled. Inias, Keira, and Styx had regained their strength and Sylvis growled. In a bolt of red lightning, he was gone.

“Thanks for the hel- *Hey!*” Inias leapt back as a man jumped down from the tree to stop him. Seven others emerged as well in swirls of lavender smoke. The eight figures surrounded the trio clad in black cloaks with a stag's head sewn into their hoods. Another approached in a similar cloak with the hood removed. His silver eyes looked from Keira to Styx, then to Inias with a glare. There were many markings of lavender paint all over his robe, glowing with power as he approached. His hair held the same mixture of violet and blue as Keira's, falling like silk over his large shoulders. “Hey dad,” Keira threw her father a nervous smile as he approached.

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CHAPTER 16

The Ravenmoon Estate was paradise. It sat in the woods between Stonefog and Morningstar Valley. It was bustling with life and warmth. Emerald grass blanketed the woodland floor beneath the trees, casting shadows of many colors as the sun shone through the purple, red, blue, and jade leaves. Something about the magic here kept the winter chills from passing through the barrier. Little lights gathered on either side of their party as they passed, as if curious of the travelers. They twinkled like little stars and slid away when Inias reached to touch them.

Inias would have enjoyed the trip more if it weren't for the ropes fastened on his wrists. Some hex or spell would suck his strength any time he attempted to pull himself free. The ropes would glow, and he'd fall straight to his knees. They gave him the mercy of waiting until he could walk on his first escape attempt. He'd tried to rip through them with his claws, only to have them retract and his legs crumble beneath him. For that, they took away his horse privileges and forced him to walk. The rope encircling his wrists led to Styx beside him, encasing his neck as they walked side by side.

Keira got a good spot, horseback next to her dad in the front. He could only pick up a few words. Her father was angry she'd run away with him, but he didn't need to eavesdrop to understand that. What he wanted to know was her father's plan for him. All Lord Varen had told him was 'they'd decide it at the manor.' He had entertained the idea of leaving Inias behind, but everything changed when Keira told him about Vayne and the kidnapping. Varen may have spared him, but the menacing cloaked figures on all sides of him and the bound ropes left no room for trust.

Sylvis' words, "You're on the list too, old man," echoed in his mind. Why did his uncle want Lord Varen dead, or Keira for that matter? Inias had led his kin into a slaughter, lost his father in the fight, and had now killed Vayne. Unless he could discover why Vayne had taken Keira, there was no way to defend his case to the court. There was something he didn't want them knowing. If only he'd had more time to bleed it out of him.

Inias knew two individuals who would pursue him. Sylvis, who had already shown himself, and the other would be Vayne's father, Lord Caelan Skyfire. The person responsible for enforcing his uncle's demands. Ivaran possessed both a right and left hand at his sides; one for counsel and the other for executing his unsavory tasks. The Skyfire clan had been on friendly terms with the covetous merchant clans of Eventide Borough. They cautioned the fae to stay away from the Borough since it was near the human realm and there were rumors of fae, and other creatures being abducted. They disappeared without a trace. Inias speculated that the fae were not fond of humans but were eager to harness the power of magical creatures from their realm.

Approaching a shorter yet older statue, the air filled with the aroma of grapes. Over time, the stone deteriorated, and no offerings remained at its base. Seated on a tiny chair, a man with curly hair and goats' horns had two women on his lap. He held a long staff with a pinecone tip in his right hand, and in his left hand, he gripped a large goblet that carried the lingering scent of wine from ages past. Inias felt mocked by the statue's smirk.

"A God?" Inias asked, turning to the figure walking beside him, hidden by a hood with two daggers still drawn. "Forest Guardian," A woman's voice answered from beneath the hood, "They're god-like." He'd never seen this statue before, but he'd read about forest guardians in his studies. According to legends,

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gods moved to the Ethereal Vale, now their sacred dwelling, when the humans had abandoned them. Some seemed to retire from godhood and became lesser spirits or guardians. "Bacchus..." He read the name carved into the stone at the bottom. There were stories of Bacchus and his savage maenads, rumored to be more perilous than redcaps, spread widely.

Finally, he glimpsed the red walls of the manor amidst the trees. The warm air had been welcoming, but after an hour of walking, he'd started to sweat beneath the wool cloak. The manor rose three stories above him, with three large windows on every floor. Throughout their friendship, Keira never once invited him to this place. He'd been to their home in Stonefog several times, but it wasn't nearly as lovely as this place. The smooth walls seemed to be cut from rubies, sparkling as the sun shone on them. He would have liked to go inside to change, but the group had moved to the courtyard rather than the welcoming manor.

The sound of chirping birds reached him as they passed through the grand entrance into the luxurious courtyard. Inias whistled when he saw the steaming pool of water on the marble patio deck. The surrounding guards turned and left the group as they entered. Each one took a spot to stand - two by the door, two by the main entrance, and one in each corner.

As he admired the radiant courtyard, he felt the ropes come free and fall to the floor. The rope fell from Styx's neck as well, and he quickly took advantage of his freedom. The fox ran across the yard, sniffing every flower, the little lights that seemed to dance around, but when he came to the gate, he yelped and ran back. "A barrier," Varen said in a deep velvety tone, "Can't have you three running off again." It was better than a dungeon, though Inias couldn't imagine this paradise housing a dungeon.

Servants dressed in elegant silver silk robes came out onto the patio, walking across the crystal blue floor as they set up some chairs and a table for them. They returned a few minutes later with plates full of food and chalices of wine. They set up a small stool for Styx, along with ground meat and water. He rushed between Inias' legs, nearly causing him to fall. Styx slid the last few feet to the table, knocking it against one chair.

Inias removed his cloak and left it on a tree branch before heading to the patio. The release of weight and heat caused him to sigh. Styx ate as they all sat down, and the young man smiled at the perfectly cooked elk. "Escape?! I could get used to this!" Inias yanked the fork from beside the plate and dug in. Since breakfast the day before, he hadn't eaten, and only then did he realize how hungry he was. Varen picked at his meal as the trio devoured their plates.

The Ravenmoon's were famous for their luxuries, but he never imagined all this. They preferred to remain secluded outside of the cities, and he couldn't blame them. With so many scents and sounds from every direction, those places were anxiety inducing. Here everything smelled so natural, the fresh grass, warm summer breeze, and the air was so rich with magic he could almost feel it brushing against him.

"Can we talk about Vestin now?" Keira said, shoving her empty plate away. Varen looked to Inias with a glare, then sighed and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Yes, let's talk about my son, Inias." Inias remembered the arrow in Vestin's chest, the way he continued to fight on, wounded. Inias audibly gulped his wine and fidgeted with his hair. "I'm sorry..." It all came rushing back to him, leaving him speechless.

The grief, the flashes, they all came to him at once. He snapped his eyes shut until he felt Keira's hand on his shoulder, pulling him back. "He didn't force Vestin to follow him," Keira reminded her father. "I suppose not," Varen answered, followed by a long sigh, "But you still have much to answer for and I'm not convinced I shouldn't hand you to your uncle as a bargaining chip." The king wanted him dead as well, the entire Ravenmoon clan. Inias couldn't understand why, what had got into Ivaran's head. Maybe the

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death of his brother made him snap. It was possible he could negotiate his life with Inias to bargain with. "Do you believe my son is alive, Prince?"

The redcaps would've finished him by now if they'd taken him alive. Free meat didn't live long in their lairs. Inias hesitated, unwilling to break the hope in Keira's eyes. He could be alive, though unlikely. "I...don't know," He answered after a long gulp from his drink. "I didn't see him die, and the sentries never found his body. If his wounds were tended to in time, he could have survived in the state he was in." He thought over the confrontation with Vayne and why he wanted to get rid of Keira. "That shadow killed Vayne to keep him quiet. Something is going on with the Skyfires."

Varen looked at Styx, who was licking his lips beside Inias. "That shadow is a watcher, a familiar," He explained as a woman brought him a pipe carved from an amethyst stone. There was a sweet smell coming from the powder within. "Like Styx?" Keira asked, reaching over Inias to pet the fox. "They have no independent will. Only summoned to do the caster's bidding. They make excellent spies and assassins, but the caster must give up a piece of their soul to give them life. Not a fair trade, I think."

"Whatever it is, I don't think tracking it down is an option. Unless it comes for us," Inias gave his plate to the man who came to clean the table. As each servant came and went, they would walk backwards halfway, bow, then turn to leave. "You're correct, young prince. All we need is bait." As Varen spoke, the sound of rattling chains dragging across a marble floor interrupted the peaceful garden song. As the doors opened, two cloaked guards revealed Rurik bound in iron chains and dragging him. Varen looked at the prisoner dressed in whatever rags they could spare and lit his pipe. "That's what he's for."

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CHAPTER 17

Keira was ready to pound him with every question she'd had since her capture. Wayne's secrets, his motives for taking her, and her brother's whereabouts consumed her thoughts. It seemed that someone else had already given him a thorough questioning, judging by the cuts on his cheek and his swollen lip. Her father had stopped her when she tried to question him. She stood, dagger in hand, a reminder of the ease with which she could end his life. "He won't give up anything," a woman spoke beside Keira, gripping Rurik's shoulder. Inias recognized the voice under the cloak, the woman who corrected him about the statue. "I tracked that shadow back to you." Varen stood from his seat to approach Rurik.

Styx growled beside Inias, causing Rurik to flinch. "Aw, he remembers you!" Inias teased from his seat, patting Styx, "How'd he taste, buddy?" Styx turned to Inias and licked his lips with a cheerful smile. Although he should have, he had not even considered suspecting Rurik, given how close those two had been. "He was talking to you," Inias realized. He had heard the conversation through Styx's ears. If that shadow was a familiar it was likely doing the same for Rurik.

Inias stood to his feet. They didn't have time to torture it out of him. Sylvius would recover, and he'd team up with Caelan to hunt them down. "So what? We wait for him to summon it again? He'll just wait us out," Rurik looked to Inias with a knowing smile. They needed him alive if they were to lure the shadow out. "And I doubt her brother has the time." Rurik chuckled even as Keira's boot in her stomach caused him to cough and gag.

"So, he's alive," Varen calmly smiled at the boy and brushed his elegant, wavy hair now caked in dirt aside to look into his eyes. "Would've been a waste to kill him-." The boy snapped his lips shut and looked away before he could say more, but Varen gripped his chin and forced their eyes to meet. Rurik seemed caught in Varen's gaze as fear covered his face. Something about the way Varen's silver eyes glowed made Inias uncomfortable. Keira, already aware, looked away to avoid it.

"What's he doing?" Inias whispered to Keira, who pressed a finger to her lips, shushing him. "He needs to concentrate." She whispered back, watching as Rurik's face continued to twist into a horrified expression. "Where is my son?" Varen pressed him again as Rurik tried to jerk his face away. In a hoarse voice, Rurik forced out, "C-crescent... Arcana..." as foam started forming around his lips. He coughed it up, but Varen's grip kept him from falling. "The *shadow!*" Varen reminded Inias as Rurik began coughing up more violently onto the patio.

Inias, Keira, and Styx looked at every surface around them. The fox yipped and growled at the floor where it lay stretched from Rurik's body. The setting sun's light illuminated it as it stretched far across the floor. Its head stood straight on the ruby wall across from them, staring at them. Instead of the wavy shadow of Rurik's hair. Inias saw the fedora hat. "Great, how do we-." Inias reached out to grab it, but it faded away as Rurik's body crumbled to the floor.

Varen stepped away from the body, wiping his hands with a white silk cloth. "It fades with its caster," He explained as the two hooded guards dragged the corpse away. "Hoped he'd last longer." Those silver eyes drifted to where the shadow had once laid, frowning. "Crescent Arcana, is that a place?" Keira asked, poking her father's arm to get his attention. "Let's go, the three of us, while you inform the King. We know enough now; they can form rescue parties and-."

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"It's not a place, it's a syndicate," Varen interrupted her with a stern gaze as he continued to clean his hands free of blood and foam. He passed the cloth to one of the silk robed servants and instructed them to have that foam examined. "And I'm not sure his majesty is ready to listen. This isn't about his brother or Vayne. He's a purist, believes the remnants of demon blood in our veins curses us and the kingdom."

Inias wanted to defend his uncle, but he couldn't deny it. Ivaran had often associated Inias' violent and mischievous antics with those blood-red eyes and fangs. He had the look of a demon. Of course, he was prone to deviancy. "Yeah, Ivaran's a prick. Can we get back to this syndicate now?" Inias demanded, receiving a glare from the elder as he stepped into his path. There was no time to debate politics while Vestin and possibly Ashryn were with some syndicate. "More importantly, how we find them?" Had that attack been staged to capture him and his father? Or whoever they could snatch in the chaos?

"Are you itching to avenge your father, Nightfang?" Varen asked, echoing Inias' exact thoughts in that moment. He walked past Inias, Keira following to stand beside him as he sat down. "We have to go! Vestin's alive! Let's *go!*" She shook his chair, only stopping when Varen gripped her arm. "You're staying here!" He ordered with a growl and shoved her away. Keira groaned as her back hit the floor, glaring up at her father. He reached out to help her up, "I'm sorry," He whispered and brushed a kiss against her forehead. "It's okay I miss him too," Keira whispered as her arms circled around her father.

As the two embraced, Inias only grew more impatient, his fingers curled into fists by his side, and he rolled his eyes. "Sylvis, Caelan, the royal army, all of them are after us!" He shouted more loudly than he intended. Varen threw him another glare as Keira slipped out of her father's arms. "And yes, I *am* itching to avenge my father," Inias answered, moving the chair aside as he approached Varen, "Let's not forget, I am your prince. Tell me where to find this syndicate now!" His voice rose, but Lord Varen remained calm, rolling his eyes as he fixed his chair.

"You've been declared an enemy of the kingdom," Varen scoffed as he returned to his seat. "If you hadn't rescued my daughter, I'd have left you in those woods." Was he ever not an enemy? His uncle had driven into him what a monster he was. What did they expect him to become?

"Then I'm disposable. I'll find Vestin myself. What do you have to lose?" Varen seemed to consider Inias' offer, but Keira quickly interjected, "I'm not staying here!" She told them as she looked to Inias, then her father. Varen looked from his daughter to Inias, where his eyes lingered. Inias had to look away, fearing he might get trapped like Rurik.

"My lord!" A loud cry echoed from within the manor as the doors burst open. One of the silk robed men fell to his knees breathing heavily as one guard brought him a cup of water. "They've breached outwards on the west side, my lord!" He cried again once he could catch his breath and have a drink. "Sylvis or Caelan?" Inias asked, bringing a hand to the blade at his side. The servant shook his head as Keira helped pull him to his feet. "Redcaps, your highness dozens, a hundred, we can't be sure. But they're headed for the manor."

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CHAPTER 18

“Can we hold them?” Varen demanded, his voice dripping with urgency as he fought to conceal his mounting worry. Inias recognized the steely resolve in Varen’s eyes, a look that mirrored the determination of his father and uncle when faced with danger. Faced with danger, composure was essential for a leader. “Be ready to hold the line!” He shouted to the courtyard guard, who began climbing up the walls.

Had Inias been able to maintain his calm on the bridge, he might not have leaped into action so recklessly. “I doubt they’ll break the manor,” the servant murmured, stealing a few more gulps of water before continuing. Varen’s commands sliced through the air, sharp and commanding, as he rallied the guard to defend the manor at all costs. “Is there anywhere we can get out?” Inias asked, hoping he, Keira, and Styx could find some way through the forest while they held the manor. “No, once they breached the wards, they spread over the forest. We’re surrounded.” The servant answered and was ordered by Varen to immediately relay his command to the house guard, and he quickly bowed and returned to the house.

“Inias, do as you please, but my daughter will remain,” Varen said, his gaze stern. “The hell I will!” Keira stepped between Inias and her father, daggers drawn. “I’m the one who believed Vestin was alive, and you were ready to abandon him!”

“And just how are you planning to escape?” Her father asked the two of them as Styx rushed to guard the courtyard doors. “Remember what happened the last time you went running off, prince?” Inias sought glory before. This time he wasn’t fighting for the sake of ego. He thought back to the forest, every trail he’d mapped in his head as they’d traveled through. The forest guardian, smelling wine and grapes.

“Yes, and I’ll never forget it,” Inias answered, slipping a hand into his pouch, turning from Varen to hide it. “This time I have a plan and it starts with a nap,” In one swift motion, Inias pushed Keira out of the way and shoved his purple sleeping powder into the air. The mist surrounded Varen as Inias pulled the scarf over his face. The man stumbled as he breathed it in, gripping Inias chin to force him to meet his eyes. Keira threw a punch to her father’s back, forcing him to release Inias as he fell to the marble floor.

Inias scooped up the wine bottle and threw Keira her cloak. “I’m in so much trouble,” Keira muttered at her father’s unconscious body as she threw the cloak around her shoulders. Inias pulled a purple crystal from his belt and threw it at the walls. The wards shimmered and broke like glass as he ran towards the courtyard wall. “Yeah, we’re both in deep shit. Let’s go!” The remaining guards hurried to secure their lord and capture the escaping trio. Styx followed close behind Inias, Keira joining them as they leapt over the walls and into the forest.

Battle roared, echoing through the forests. He could tell the redcaps pushed forward from the screams of falling knights. Night had fallen, and those goblins were using the shadows to their advantage. The manor guard was already at their posts on the spires, firing arrows at the incoming redcaps. Some were common arrows, but others burst into blue flames that devoured their target and quickly faded. “Who are they?” Inias asked as he Keira and Styx ran across the yard towards the forest. He’d never witnessed the hooded guard before, and no one had ever spoken of them.

“The Knight’s Shade, Ravenmoon’s elite guard.” Keira ducked beneath an oncoming arrow and threw her dagger at a redcap sitting on a low tree branch. The blade spun straight through its neck, body and head, dropping straight to the ground as Keira caught it again on the other side. She turned a corner,

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but Inias grabbed her arm and pulled her. “Hey!” She shrieked as Inias pulled her onto the opposite path, heading back the way they had come earlier. “That’s the west side! We have to go east through the gardens!”

Inias let her go and gripped the bottle tight against his chest to protect it as he ran. Despite her protests, she followed him as Styx rushed past him to catch arrows in the air. He zipped from tree to tree like a black bolt of lightning. Keira tucked her daggers away and drew three of her knives, aiming them straight for the ground goblins closing in on them. “What’s the wine for? Gonna invite them for a drink, talk it through?” Keira continued, her tone dripping with sarcasm as Inias drew his sword to protect his center.

Inias fought the flashes again as he ran across the forest floor. All those arrows coming towards him brought him back to the bridge. His eyes glanced to Styx in the blurs of motion he could see. If only he’d met him before then, with him by his side, they could’ve survived that ambush. Those arrows were coming faster, and many were slipping by the fox’s quick jaw. “There!” Inias spotted the statue again. It seemed to have shifted, staring at the bottle in his arms with hungry eyes. “Did that statue move?” Keira asked as she pressed herself against a tree. She lashed with her dagger as a redcap swooped down from a branch above with its iron talons drawn.

Inias backed against the tree next to her, watching as the statue’s face twisted from joy to impatience. In a rush of speed, Inias dashed across the field, almost falling into the statue, as the ground troops moved on them. The goblet was stretched out and with Styx now covering his back Inias popped the bottle open and poured it into the goblet, emptying it out. The wine swirled and emptied from the goblet as it was brought back to its original place.

A redcap’s talons lashed at his back, causing Inias to cry out as he fell beneath the statue of Bacchus. Before he could turn, a knife was in the redcaps’ head, courtesy of Keira. He shoved the body away and clutched his back. It wasn’t deep, but pain still ripped over his body from the iron wound. “Hurry!” Inias growled up at the statue as vines of ivy wrapped themselves around it.

The forest filled with the sweet smell of wine, catching the attention of redcaps, who paused their attacks to sniff the air. Silence filled the air, interrupted only by a gentle laugh in the forest. Something dove over Inias to catch one of the stunned redcaps in the clearing. He watched in shock as the form in the darkness of a woman with ivy in her golden hair began tearing the creature in half.

“*Inias!*” Keira cried in terror as more leapt out at the stunned little goblins. The Knights were just as horrified, unsure who to fight in the chaos. Ivy vines had sprung out from the trees to catch the goblins, and they were so lost in the chaos they began striking their own. Inias ran towards Keira, weaving through the bloody mess now littering the forest floor. In the brush, several lights appeared as he reached Keira, still pinned against the tree. “What did you do?!” she cried as he pulled her away towards the path of lights forming.

“Just a little divine intervention. Follow the lights!” He ignored the pain shooting up his back the faster he ran. Styx came to his side, huffing as he ran beside them. All along the path, redcaps were being slaughtered in their desperate attempt to fight back. Vines lashed out to snatch and pull them to an unknown fate; maenads were coming from every direction in waves. The entire run they’d had to navigate through the gore and duck around diving wild women.

Inias could see the bone dead forest beyond the lush tree line, the snow that littered the ground and heaved a sigh of relief. A familiar figure emerged from that dead forest, a long polearm in his hand.

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CHAPTER 19

"If that's true, I fear the worst has happened," the voice of Lord Aubron whispered outside the sanctuary door. The king was not to be disturbed at the altar of his brother. Ivaran sat in the small room, a three-foot statue sat upon the table in the likeness of the late prince. Beside it sat a bowl with various hawk feathers left in it. The scent of cinnamon filled the air, Cyran's favorite. The incense burned, causing smoke to fill the small room.

He shut out the voices beyond the door. Lord Aubron was waiting to deliver some news. It didn't sound like anything he wanted to hear now. All he wished to hear was the voice of his brother in the other world. "Why won't you speak to me?" Ivaran whispered, with his head buried in his hands. A hawk had haunted his dreams since the night Inias killed Vayne. It stalked him through the castle and into the woods. Cyran must have been reaching out to him, but now that he was ready to listen, he wouldn't answer.

"We shared the same dream once before," Ivaran spoke as he turned to look upon the statue illuminated by three candles. "To cleanse this land of that hellion breed. To undo the sins of our ancestors." It was Inias. His mother had died to give him life. Cyran vowed he would honor his wife's last act in this world, to ensure her son would live. That boy had drawn a line between the two. Inias had taken him, stolen his brother, twisted him. Malice surrounded him. He brought nothing but chaos to the realm. So blinded by the memory of his wife to the demon growing within his son.

Aubron had always seen something in Inias, something beyond the darkness. Ivaran had once wanted to believe in the boy when he'd witnessed his prowess at the summer tournament. That fiery determination in his nephew's eyes mirrored his father. Now he feared what Inias may be capable of with the power and authority of the crown. He couldn't allow the kingdom to be plunged into chaos. "Brother...you know what I must do. You must see it now." Ivaran pleaded to an empty room, "He will bring nothing but ruin."

A knock came at the door, and Ivaran growled in response. "Um...your majesty, forgive me, I know you wish not to be disturbed, but I have urgent news," Aubron's voice spoke from the other side of the door. There was a pause, and Ivaran grew impatient. "Well, tell me already!" Ivaran swung the door open to the hall, stunning Aubron.

The Lord looked to the statue of Prince Cyran and bowed, "My Prince," He spoke in deep reverence. "Your majesty, our scouts have reported a redcap troop stormed Ravenmoon Manor. They said maenads were there as well, Inias was spotted among the defenders. They believe he's fallen." He spoke as quickly as he could, his head kept low before his king. "Has this new elated you?"

Redcaps and maenads? Why would redcaps attack a stronghold like the Ravenmoon estate? What were they doing so far from their territory? The king rubbed his head with a groan, "Not in the slightest," He mumbled, looking towards his loyal hand. The poison, the redcaps, Keira's mysterious disappearance. None of it was adding up. "Any developments in your personal investigation?" He asked, motioning for Aubron to rise.

"The poison you mean?" Aubron asked as he lifted his chestnut brown eyes to meet the king's icy silver hues. "I've discovered it's not poison, but venom. Since when was Inias capable of that? His talon's

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perhaps? Fangs?" He rubbed at his bushy brown beard and let his other hand rest on his rather enormous stomach. "I don't recall any marks on his body besides the fox bite and some bruising."

Ivaran shook his head. The fox bite hadn't been venomous, Rurik hadn't died when he was bitten. "He isn't." He answered Aubron, stroking his own beard in thought. If Inias hadn't killed the Skyfire boy, then who had? It had only been those three in the room. Was Inias petty enough to drag him into a closet to kill him? He'd want it seen. If it was about the fight in the yard, he would've done it right in front of Sylvis to make his point.

"If Inias didn't kill him, who did?" Aubron echoed his thoughts too clearly. Whoever had done it may still lurk in these halls. Ivaran growled, not at Aubron, at the frustrating situation in front of them. Until he saw the body, Ivaran wouldn't be convinced Inias was dead. "Lord Aubron, I hope you don't take my short temper as a reflection of your service," Ivaran finally said, turning to Aubron with concern in his eyes. "I try not to, your majesty," Aubron answered with a smile towards the king.

"I didn't heed your council once," He admitted, rubbing his hands together, "And I lost my wife for it. Swore I'd never make that mistake again. I ask you, what must I do? I can't achieve my vision and honor my brother's last act in this world." His voice was soft, it was only Aubron. He'd confided everything to him. Ivaran was both grateful and irritated by the man's gentle wisdom.

Aubron stepped forward and rested a gentle hand on Ivaran's shoulder. "I wasn't there to see it, but I will tell you what I believe his final thoughts to be, your majesty." He looked at the statue with a smile, then at his king. "If I let him die here, how will I ever face her again?"

"You're saying...I should spare him? If he lives," The candles upon the altar flared bright and settled, stunning the two. "Will you be able to face Cyran if you don't?" Ivaran wasn't sure, conflicted by what his brother truly wished for. To see their golden age, cleansed of darkness, or to see his son live a long life. "Whatever the future holds, I want to see my brother on the other side."

"Then what of Inias?" Aubron asked, heaving a sigh of relief as he helped lift the king from his chair. He brought the king's jeweled can to his hand so he could support himself as he left the altar room. "I want all scouts on alert for them. They're not to engage, only watch and report back. Call off Sylvis. Send aid to the Ravenmoon Manor with my utmost apologies to Lord Varen." It wasn't so much a change of heart. There was another enemy lurking in the shadows, and they couldn't face it with their clans at war.

"And Lord Caelan? Shall we call him off as well?" Aubron followed slowly beside his king as they made their way down the hall together. "Caelan..." the king said, humming to himself. The one person who may know more was Lord Skyfire. He had agreed to assault Ravenmoon Manor and with this sudden redcap attack. Sylvis was to cut off their route to Stonefog, Caelan wanted to strike Ravenmoon manor. Their next likely destination would've been the safety of the manor.

Ivaran shook his head and stopped before his bedroom doors. "No...let him chase the boy," He answered with a sly grin spreading across his face. "Can you have someone infiltrate their party?" The king asked. Inias was alive. If he was half the warrior his father was, then he'd at least survive by the skin of his teeth. If he wasn't, then he was at least ten times the monster those redcaps were, or the maenads, for that matter. With that clever fox and Keira by his side, they were a formidable trio. Especially after they'd overwhelmed Sylvis with that god like spear of his.

Aubron opened the bedroom doors for the king and bowed, "I hope it won't upset you to know," He began raising his eyes to meet Ivaran's, "I've already acted on that. Just to be certain."

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Ivaran threw him a rare, but sincere smile before he turned to limp over to his bed across from the roaring blue flames of the fireplace, casting an azure light over the room. "Not in the slightest. I'll leave it to you then. I need rest. Thank you and goodnight." The door was slammed in Aubron's face before he could return the king's wishes.

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CHAPTER 20

Sylvis looked with horror as the scene unfolded. His feet stood firm in the snow. The heat from beyond the Ravenmoon wards reached him, shielding him from the winter cold. After Lord Varen had blindsided him, he escaped to Stonefog where Lord Caelan had instructed him to go should he fail. They gave him as many fast-healing tonics as they could spare to help his wounds and regain his strength. Even if their enemies somehow survived this, they wouldn't have the strength to face him. They'd barely overcome him outside the inn.

Where had the redcaps come from? And what he couldn't believe were maenads. The wild women dressed in Ivy vines he'd only ever seen in stories. They didn't seem to notice him; the maenads had sprung out after he'd spotted a horned headed boy in wild faun skin lurking in the shadows. The boy stretched and yawned, as if someone had just woken him from a deep sleep. Once he spotted Sylvis, he laughed and faded away in a flurry of ivy leaves.

Caelan said he was bringing an army out of Dusk Haven to siege the manor. Was this his doing? Now they were to ally with the vermin to achieve their own ends? The King would never stoop so low as to even associate with those pests. "Vayne kidnapped Keira," Inias had said, but why? There was no way he was that obsessed. She'd gone to look for her brother, but no one knew how she'd escaped. Some believed that someone had scrubbed her room before the guards could investigate.

He wasn't about to run into that bloodbath, even with his spear. He kept his spear held in front of him, ready for whatever came towards him. It was then he saw the lights forming and saw two figures emerging from the lush forest. Inias and Keira were alive. He lifted his spear, ready to strike them as they came through, but hesitated. If Caelan would use redcaps to achieve his goals, then Vayne may have kidnapped Keira to cover it up. With a long sigh, he pulled his spear back, as they approached, and planted it the ground next to him.

"Sylvis, we don't have time," Inias huffed as they exited the barrier. The three of them looked exhausted and Inias had his hand clutching what he assumed was a wound on his back. "We'll kick your ass later, I promise."

Sylvis raised a brow at him and shook his head. He turned to Keira and narrowed his eyes. "Vayne kidnapped you. You swear it?" He pushed his dark blonde hair out of his face and watched her. She nodded her head and looked to the now retreating redcaps, avoiding the bone dead winter wood beyond the breached wards.

"There you are!" an elated voice called as a figure emerged from the lush forest. His long jet-black hair and crystal blue eyes gave him away. "Never knew you were *such* a ladies' man, Inias," Caelan pulled a large staff from within his cloak as he spoke with the same sickly-sweet tone as his son. "Where were they when your father died?" The weapon was half the man's height who stood over the four of them, black as his hair, and at the tip sat a red crystal in the shape of a spiraling flame.

"Same lame fireworks? Guess it runs in the family." Inias taunted him and drew his sword through his heavy breaths. Keira still had her daggers ready and even Styx was ready to stand his ground. They were in no shape to fight, not with Caelan. If Inias had summoned those wild women, then it was Caelan who led the redcaps. "Are those goblins yours?! Why?" Sylvis demanded, placing a ready hand on his spear.

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“Have you ever heard the expression ‘two ducks, one arrow?’” Caelan looked to Sylvis with a smile. “The redcaps won’t survive this. We’ve delivered a significant blow to the Ravenmoons and now we’ve caught them. So, three ducks, in fact.”

Sylvis shook his head and gripped his spear tight. “Not like this,” he said, and vanished from where he stood. It was only when Caelan summoned up a wall of fire to protect himself from a barrage of red lightning that the others saw him. “Go!” He looked at the trio as Caelan pushed forward against the assault. “Traitor!” Lord Skyfire growled as his fire grew larger, forming into the shape of a dragon.

Styx was the first to run away, followed by Keira. While Caelan was distracted, Inias wanted to run his sword through his back. Growling, he turned and ran with his friends into the snowy wood. Blood dripped from his wound over the snow and left a trail for anyone to follow. “Keira!” He called out to his friend ahead of him, who turned around huffing, “We can’t stop!” Where were they even going? Everyone in Stonefog would be on the lookout for them.

“Please tell me you have a tonic?” Inias limped towards the two and leaned against a tree. “I have one...” Keira pulled a small vial with a blue liquid inside. “I guess we can buy more in Eventide.” She slipped it to him, and he gulped it. The wound in his back burned and stung as the tonic got to work healing him. He bit his scarf and groaned into it as it closed. “Eventide?” he asked as the pain subsided.

“Dad said Crescent Arcana was a syndicate,” Keira explained, stuffing the empty vial back into her satchel back. “Eventide is full of shady groups. If we look around there, we’re bound to find something out. It’s a start at least.”

“And there’s bound to be an inn on the way,” Inias pushed himself off the tree and began walking. Keira and Styx fell into step beside him. Eventide was a big place run by merchant clans and it would give them a break from the valley’s warriors hunting them. “How did you summon Bacchus?” Keira asked, now that they were alone. The forest was silent, likely because of the redcaps that had come through on their way to assault the manor.

“He’s a wine god, or he was,” Inias explained. It was a long shot, but one that had paid off and allowed them to escape. “It was the statue, the way it looked at me. When it saw the wine, I knew.” This time his gamble had paid off. Varen would be fine, just a little lightheaded for a few hours. There was no way the redcaps had breached the manor in that chaos. “I’ll be paying close attention to Mr. Bacchus!” Keira smiled, happy to be out of there.

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CHAPTER 21

“*Useless!*” Inias found himself rooted to the spot amidst a moonlit meadow blanketed with grass, as the sound of a man’s angry voice resounded around him. Helpless and pinned down, he had no choice but to endure the relentless assault with his unresponsive legs. The man repeatedly kicked him in the stomach, yelling. He strained to see the attacker's face, but all he saw was a large man kicking at him.

“You nearly cost us the fight!” The voice thundered, punctuated by another punishing blow to his stomach. What did they expect? He could only run as three wolves closed in on him. He didn’t know how, but he seemed to recall the memory. Not one of his own. He’d seen no wolf tower over him like that before. They certainly weren’t ordinary wolves. In that memory, he crouched low to the ground, on all fours. The memory, the blows to the stomach, and the strange feeling he experienced as he whimpered all came to him too quickly. Upon hearing footsteps, he glanced up and noticed the man walking away.

He attempted to stand up and give chase, but a chilling order echoed in the air. The voice thundered, “Stay!” and a powerful gust of wind knocked him down onto the grass. Attempting to rise, he looked up and witnessed the man vanishing in the dark. Despite his cries and howls for his fleeing companion, he obeyed the instruction to stay. A deep pit formed in his stomach, as if someone had ripped out a part of him. Lying on the grass, he softly whimpered while gazing at the meadow.

Inias slowly blinked, trying to clear his vision as he shook off the remnants of sleep. His eyes struggled to focus from the deep sleep he’d woken from. They walked for three hours, finally finding tonics and rest. They bypassed the routes leading to Stonefog and reached a village near Forge Haven. The Dwarven Flintaxe clan controlled most of the mining and forging trade. The only criminal activity in Forge Haven was the ridiculous prices they charged for their goods.

The inn was of luxurious quality compared to the filthy cabin. Against the wall, a blue fire roared in the small fireplace. The beds, as soft as clouds, welcomed the three after their journey. The shower was spacious enough for all three of them, while the room itself could accommodate a whole family. Rays of sunlight streamed in from the large window shining on the yellow white walls and wooden floors.

Watching him was Styx laying by his side. Inias tried to process the dream as their eyes locked. With a gentle smile, he extended his hand to stroke Styx’s fur. The howl and whimper in his dream felt familiar. Just as he was about to ask the fox, he noticed Keira stirring in the bed nearby. “Cute bedhead, little blue!” Inias said as she rose from the pillow, her hair a mess of tangles. “Zip it! Yours isn’t so pretty either.” She answered, running her fingers through to smooth it out, “Do you think Sylvis is okay?”

When she mentioned Sylvis, memories of the fight came rushing back. If it weren’t for him, they never would have escaped. He knew that a clash with Caelan would result in his death. Maybe now that his strength had returned, he could track him down and finish it. But they needed to find her brother and Ashryn first. He had led them straight into danger, falling into the clutches of some syndicate. He couldn’t let them suffer for his mistakes.

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"Yeah, Sylvis can handle himself." Inias answered, pulling himself from the bed to slip his boots on. Despite the shower, their clothes still reeked, causing him to cringe.

"I hope so," Keira said, pulling a cloak around her shoulders. "The innkeeper mentioned a small market village just a mile away. We can pick up some clothes and ask arou-." A hand emerging from outside the window interrupted her, pushing it open. Inias positioned himself by the window, preparing to pull in whoever was outside forcefully, while she clasped one of her daggers. The figure wore a hood, and Keira noticed the deer sewn into it.

"Wait!" Keira said, rushing to the window to help pull the cloaked woman in. "It's Naesala!"

"Who?" Inias recognized the deer from the Knight's Shade who'd defended the Manor. He caught the scent of salty sea air as she entered and removed her hood. Her deeply tanned skin and amethyst eyes greeted Inias and Keira. "My father sent you?" Keira asked as she shut the window behind her. Styx rushed across the room to the newcomer, dutifully sniffing around her as she reached down to pet his head. "Lord Aubron." She answered, revealing herself as the woman who'd corrected him about the statue and snapped her head to Inias. "*You* woke Bacchus."

Inias crossed his arms and replied, "If I hadn't, you'd be dead," Every time she moved, he could hear the beads in her braids brushing against each other. She had braided one side of her hair with beads of many colors, which shone against the dark brown of her hair. The other side was long and thick, like a mane, covering the other side of her face. "Why are you here?" He asked, keeping a hand on his sword hilt.

"That's a long story, but I'll make it quick," Naesala went on explaining that after they escaped the redcaps fled, then the Maenads vanished. She shared Aubron's message with them, revealing that the king had agreed to spare Inias. "You've been spying for Aubron?!" Keira interrupted, gripping one of her daggers tightly. "No! He and Lord Varen rescued me when I was young." Naesala explained, allowing Keira to lower her guard. "I serve them both."

His uncle had spared him that was one threat off the list. "And you're here now because...?" Inias tapped his foot on the ground, hoping they would get to the point of her arrival.

"I'm here to ensure that *you* don't mess this up." She answered, shooting a withering glare at Inias. "You've woken a dangerous power and now you're running off with no clue where you're going!" Inias shuffled, adjusting the ends of his hair nervously. "I know what I'm doing," he mumbled, refusing to meet her gaze. "How are you supposed to help us?"

"I know how to find them." She pulled her thick hair away from her neck, revealing a crescent moon tattooed just beneath her jaw. "But...we can't discuss here. I'm certain the walls have ears."

The market village was nothing like he'd expected. There were shops everywhere and many of them sold goods from the human realm. He'd heard that the merchants smuggled in goods through Willowberry Creek to sell. There were shops for human literature, candies, but they were only interested in clothes. Keira fussed over his outfit as she always did. She knew what he looked best in, and Naesala didn't seem to care either way. He chose a long black coat, a pair of black tight trousers called jeans, and kept his travel boots. Keira wore a black jacket made of leather and a similar pair of trousers, but they were purple. Thankfully, they had found tunics, since those thin shirts would do little to protect them.

The knight couldn't have been much older than them, and Keira trusted her. Inias did his best to keep his skepticism to himself. If he didn't find Naesala so fiercely attractive, dressing wouldn't have felt

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so awkward. She followed them through the little market. After discarding her cloak, it revealed a tight tan werewolf pelt jacket over a light red top, paired with loose trousers draped elegantly over fur boots. That she'd hunted the werewolf herself brought a smile to his face. She stood at an average height, but her compact frame belied the powerful muscles rippling beneath her skin, a testament to the countless hours spent honing her strength and agility.

Inias admired the intricate tattoos adorning her neck, her amethyst eyes glistening in the sunlight as she followed them. People assumed they were together because of their long history. He'd never looked at her that way, never thought to. She was one of the few friends he'd ever had. He didn't want to lose that when he inevitably broke her heart.

"Something wrong?" Naesala asked when she caught Inias' gaze on her once again. "Lots of things," Inias answered as they sat upon a rock garden just outside the market with lunch in hand. "Like, how can I trust you won't betray us to these crescent folk?"

"*Inias!*" Keira gave him a glare. "She's one of our most trusted knights!"

"I never worked for them if that's what you think, prince," Naesala picked at the cubes of chicken in front of her, "They kidnapped me as a child."

Inias set the rest of his chicken down for Styx once he finished the rabbit he'd hunted while they were out shopping. "So where are they?" As much as he enjoyed the little shopping break, they didn't have time to buy clothes or laugh at human culture. "I don't know. They're always moving."

"*Convenient,*" Inias had fallen for the deception of pretty faces in the past. Those sparkling eyes couldn't soften him; he knew better. "Thought you said you could find them?" He pressed, resting a hand on his sword hilt. Trusting her could've been his next failure. She could deliver him, Keira, and Styx to this syndicate whatever it was they did. Without her, they wouldn't be able to find Vestin or Ashryn. He could never return home without them. Inias was half tempted to treat her as a prisoner until he was certain of her intentions.

"How do we find them?" Keira pressed. She'd already cleaned her plate and wanted to get moving. Naesala set her food down by Styx, who happily dug into it. "Willowberry forest sits between the human realm and us," she explained as she rested back against her hands. The daggers at her sides scraped against the stone, causing Inias and Keira to cringe. "We'll find something there."

"What does Willowberry have to do with this?" Inias asked as he stood and fixed the sword on his back. The town was of little concern to the Nightfangs. They used it to smuggle refugees into the Vale where they could express their gifts freely. He'd only seen the town once from a distance in the woods. It reeked of smoke and tobacco ashes. Humans must have gotten used to that smell over their lives. Why would this syndicate even care about the humans?

"Things come through the portal all the time, prince," Naesala answered as she stood beside him and helped Keira to her feet. "Ever consider the possibility something may be smuggled *out*?"

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CHAPTER 22

Inias perched on the snowy hill just outside the village, waiting for the return of Keira and Naesala, who had ventured into the village to purchase horses. Inias and Keira felt tired just thinking about the long journey north on foot. They had traveled so far already on foot. Inias had set two fine horses free the night he rescued Keira, a fact she pointedly reminded him of when he grumbled about the high prices in the village. Keira and Naesala were busy bargaining for the horses while Inias remained watchful of the village gates, ready for any unwanted guests.

Nuzzling against Inias' leg, Styx lay beside him. Inias would not have survived the past few days if it weren't for him. While his father's familiar had some extraordinary skills, none could rival those of Styx. Even the most gifted warriors couldn't match the fox's speed. His master must have been equally impressive. As capable as he was, Inias didn't feel right dragging him into the coming battle. Three times in the last few days, their lives were almost lost.

Today, he appeared different from his usual playful self. Inias tried throwing snowballs, but he didn't chase after them. He especially didn't appreciate the one Inias threw at him directly. He groaned and whimpered in response. As Inias looked out over the snow-covered meadow beyond the village, he couldn't help but notice the familiar line of towering pine trees. They brought an unsettling word to mind, "*Useless.*"

"Your old master, he abandoned you, didn't he?" Inias asked as he stroked Styx's sleek fur. With a glance at Inias, he nodded towards the meadow. Inias gently caressed Styx's ears as the fox nestled on his lap. Styx rested his head between his paws as Inias playfully tousled his fur. "Keira wouldn't be alive if it hadn't been for you," Inias reminded him. "Vayne would've killed me in that storage room. I don't think you're useless."

Inias surprised Styx when he revealed he knew about that. He cradled Styx's face and placed a kiss between his eyes. "You can go if you're scared," he said, looking into his small amber eyes. "We'll be okay, the three of us. I'm sure Sylvis will pop up soon, too. Think he's on our side now." Inias tried to reassure him, half hoping he'd find safety somewhere away from the fight.

Even though he said otherwise, Inias was unsure if he could survive the next battle *without* Styx. In recent days, his limitations were becoming clear. Sylvis would have killed them if Varen didn't appear. Despite Vayne's trap, Styx was the one who defeated him. Had Sylvis not betrayed Caelan, they would be in the Skyfire's trophy room, preserved in elegant urns. Bacchus had sent his maenads and cleared the way for them to escape. Luck had saved him every time, even with Keira and Styx beside him. But, by freeing Vestin and Ashryn, he could face his father in the other world. That was enough for him.

Styx was uncertain of what to do as he glanced from the meadow where his master had left him to Inias. "I'll come back for you, promise!" Inias tried to display a confident smile, but Styx seemed to see through it. Styx didn't want another friend to leave. When a familiar lost his companion, it left a deep scar. He was a tool to his last master, not a friend. No soft strokes, no snowy fun. Inias wasn't his master. He was a friend, one who had faced death to protect him.

"But if you come with us, I want to take you as my familiar." They fought so naturally together, he brought out Inias' strength and had been a protective shield in every encounter. Styx stood from Inias lap and lifted his paw with a nod. Inias grasped his paw with a grin as he brought his other wrist to his lips.

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“Alright partner, let’s make this official.” He bit into his wrist, fangs piercing the skin. Blood dropped over the snow as he extended it to Styx. The fox leaned in to lick the blood dripping from his wrist before the wound could close.

A flash of light emerged from his neck, shrinking into the visage of a fox. As Inias gripped his neck tightly, the marking burned into it, causing him to cry out. Styx shut his eyes and whimpered, shaking his head. As the pain faded, a fox marking was present on his neck. Styx finally opened his eyes to reveal the same blood color as Inias. Their magic seemed to mix as the bond formed. It felt as if something were shoveling coals into the fires of his magic. Styx, too, sensed it, raising his eyes and unleashing a powerful howl. The trees behind them swayed as if blown by a mighty wind.

Keira and Naesala returned with wide eyes, leading three horses as the wind calmed. “You claimed him?” Naesala asked while they both stood. Inias nodded with a smile and pulled his hair back to reveal the fox marking on his neck. Styx flashed his red eyes at them, beaming a smile of his own. Keira’s shock twisted into a smile as she looked between the two of them. “Great, now we have two troublemakers. Hope you know what you’re getting into with him, Styx.”

Following behind Inias, the fox grinned and barked while Inias mounted the snow-white horse given to him. "In the human realm, it's summer," Naesala commented while mounting her own horse. Inias' lap became Styx's new spot as they hopped in and settled between the reins. “Why does that matter?” Inias asked as he turned towards the north, with the sun setting to his left. “Willowberry forest is the dividing line between our worlds,”

“She means we can camp comfortably tonight.” Keira flicked the reins and galloped off, her hair blowing freely in the wind. Inias and Naesa swiftly followed, making a beeline for the pine forests ahead.

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CHAPTER 23

Naesala, positioned between a prince and a lady, had the duty of taking the first watch as a knight while the rest slept. She had serenaded them with a soothing lullaby from her flute, the gentle melodies echoing through the still night. Inias had sparked the fire to life using a crimson crystal he had gained in the bustling market village. Its ethereal glow illuminated the crystal below the flame, creating a mesmerizing sight in the clearing. She was glad for the warmth, relieved to be away from the snow.

Winter was a mere legend in the heart of Bloodbone Bay, where she grew up. However, when she was only thirteen, her father faced a heart-wrenching decision and sold her to provide for her older brother. Because of a cruel twist of fate, she became a victim of the Crescent, who exploited her in their freak show exhibitions. The Crescent shamelessly paraded her before leering human spectators, reducing her to a mere spectacle in their zoo. They collared her like a wild animal and compelled her to showcase magical abilities to the applauding spectators.

On a spring night in Midvale Grove, Lords Varen and Aubron discovered her. They were coming back from a battle with a goblin army that had been causing trouble at the borders for months and dove them north. Discovering the circus and with a sizeable army at their back, they overcame the syndicate and freed her, along with seven other captives. People believed they had disbanded, but they proved to be as relentless as ants. The Crescents would reform and reappear in another place. Once again, she was in the middle of that circus. This time, she wasn't on display as a captive. She came to assist her lady and prince, aiming to expose the Crescents to the king so he could aid those still trapped.

The sound of footsteps interrupted her thoughts on the forest floor. From the shadows, a man with a pair of green eyes watched her, gripping something in his hand. She sprang to her feet, daggers in her hands. "Lord Sylvis," Naesala hesitated, not sure whether he came as a friend or foe. It wasn't long ago that he was willing to end Inias and Keira's lives. "How'd you find us?"

"Inias forgets to mask his spellwork," Sylvis explained as Naesa lifted his daggers. He lowered himself to place his spear on the ground and raise his hands. "After Caelan broke through my lightning, a maenad attacked him, and I fled."

"Where's Caelan now?" Inias stirred from behind the fire, shifting to sit up. On the opposite side, Keira let out a groan and rubbed her eyes, directing her gaze towards Sylvis. "On his way here, most likely. Aubron sent a message by raven, instructing me to follow you." He looked at Keira and passed her the parchment. "Says your brother's alive."

"We already know that!" Keira threw the small parchment into the fire, and watched as it burned up. "You're a few chapters behind, Sylvie." Inias pulled a small cube of cheese from the satchel beside him and tossed it into his mouth. "Do you know what Caelan's planning? Why he's working with redcaps, or why Wayne took Keira?" Sylvis asked taking a seat by the fire with them.

"The Crescent," Naesa answered, tucking her blades back into her belt. "If I had to guess they sold her brother and Lady Ashryn to the syndicate. Now he's trying to cover it up by eliminating us."

"If we find this Crescent he's bound to show up," Sylvis said nodding. It wasn't a terrible plan, if they managed to catch Caelan, they could overwhelm him together. He wouldn't stand his ground for long against all five of them.

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Naesa's gaze was fixed on the elegant spear lying on the ground. She slowly moved towards the ruby red blade, running her fingers over it. "*Devilsbane*," She read the runes carved into the pole, staring at it with wide eyes. "I've read stories. So, it's true the blade fires lightning." There were many famed weapons across the Vale, but few were as revered or celebrated as *Devilsbane*. Onas forged it as a wedding gift for his mightiest general, and soon to be son in law, who repaid his king's generosity by using it to destroy the elves settled in what would later become the magnificent city of Knivae.

Sylvis flashed her a charming smile and answered, "Sure does, knocked these three on their ass," She seemed to study his face the way he'd watched her in the market. Of course, she was looking at him. He was like an angel, all he needed was a pair of wings. Inias buried that sting of jealousy and laid back down, "Since you're here you get to take the next watch Sylvie."

"I've been trekking *all night*."

"And *now* you get to sit for a while! Rest those pretty legs." Inias rested his head against Styx's tail who still slept by the fire. "And you attacked us." Keira reminded him as she too laid down, resting her head against her satchel. "And *I'm* exhausted," Naesala rested back against one of the pine trees and closed her eyes. "Oh!" Inias sat up and pointed out towards the forest. "Try not to walk over there, buried a crystal that *will* explode if you step on it." He tapped his chin and glanced around, "Or was it over there? Be careful where you walk, okay? It's around here somewhere."

"I'm thankful for the warning, *my prince*," Sylvis ground through his teeth, kicking dirt at the now sleeping Inias.

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CHAPTER 24

A large collective operating in the woods would need thorough protection. Concealing such abundant magic was no easy feat, and some would leak out. Sylvis had suggested Inias go deeper into the forest with Styx to scout the woods. With their senses connected, the two could traverse more territory. When he closed his eyes, he could see through Styx's, so long as they were close enough to hear one another. They always stayed close, never more than a mile apart, their calls echoing through the forest. Inias mimicked the fox's howl to conceal his presence.

Inias found it impossible to resist the refreshing feeling of an early summer morning, an experience that he had missed. Winter was bearable with a fire and a cozy bed, but trudging through snow wore him out. It made him long for warmer days and the welcoming scent of a summer breeze through the trees. He wished he'd known about that when they'd escorted the witches. They had met them at a safe house beyond the forest, fearing they'd slip into the human world, unable to return.

Sylvis, Keira, and Naesa were at the camp preparing a trap for Caelan. Inias was sure he just wanted the greater prize for himself. Display the traitor's head to the king. Despite his own suspicions, Inias had to admit that the plan was solid. He and Styx made the ideal scouting pair, and the success of their mission depended on Devilsbane overwhelming Caelan. While Inias had spent years boasting and strutting, his peers had been training and refining their skills, a truth that now weighed on his mind. He'd have to worry about Sylvis' ambitions for his throne after they rescued Vestin and Ashryn from those Crescents.

A stick snapped, causing him to turn. He saw a small goblin with an arrow aimed at him. Inias ducked behind a tree and drew his claws as he closed the distance between him and the lone redcap. A strangled cry echoed through the forest as Inias curled his fingers around its throat and slammed it up against a tree. Inias let out a fox's howl to recall Styx and returned to the gasping goblin. He sniffed the cap upon its head, scenting Tremaine's blood.

"They're here, aren't they?" Inias demanded, throttling him hard against the tree. The redcap couldn't answer, but it wasn't an answer he was looking for as he stuffed his hand into every pocket of the redcap's little tunic and trousers, eventually grasping a small piece of paper in its jacket pocket. It looked like nothing more than an invitation card. No different from the ones he'd receive for parties or a local theater play. The printed words were unreadable, but the card showed a circus tent with knotted runes on the edges. He'd have to ask Naesa when he brought it back to camp, but for now, he had the goblin to finish as Styx rushed over the undergrowth to meet them.

"All I need now is your head," Inias growled, curling his fingers. This redcap had killed Tremaine, and it was his duty to burn it as an offering. His claws tore through its gray flesh as it kicked and squirmed with strangled cries. With a twist of his wrist, Inias ripped his hand away, knuckles scraping the rough bark. The redcap's body fell limp onto the floor with its head away. Styx approached the body and sniffed it with a lick of his lips. "Ew! No!" Inias kicked the body away and leaned down to retrieve the head. Styx groaned but followed behind Inias as they began their trip back to camp.

Bursting through the forest, they raced at blinding speeds, each eager to be the first to return. They burst into the camp to a startled Keira who threw a knife towards Inias' head. He slipped as he ducked, falling into the dirt, but thankfully the knife missed him and found it's him in a thick tree trunk.

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“Hey!” Inias grabbed the knife and chucked it down at her feet. Keira sniffed towards the head in Inias’ hand and covered her nose. “Did you have to bring that?” She asked and stuffed the knife back into her belt. “He was at firefly bridge,” Inias explained as he stepped towards the fire. He closed his eyes and said a silent prayer before dropping the severed head into the flames.

“Did you find them?” Sylvis asked, as he and Naesa returned from a chat. Inias shook his head and handed Naesa the card he’d found. “Does this mean anything?” He asked as Naesa ran her white painted finger over the runes lining the card. She seemed to mouth the words and paced between Inias and Sylvis. “A key spell!” She finally answered, “This will let us pass their warding. Once the moon reaches its peak, the spell triggers and reveals a path. I heard them talking about it one night. He was carrying this?”

“Redcaps make decent scouts; their scent is hard to trace.” Sylvis pulled his spear out from the ground to lift the wards around their camp. “When have you ever faced a redcap?” Inias challenged him if Sylvis wasn’t taunting him in the training yard. He never paid much attention to him. If he had, maybe he would have caught his royal ambitions sooner. “Unlike you, I don’t flaunt all my victories.” Sylvis fired back, pointing his spear at Inias’ chest.

Inias positioned his hand firmly on his sword. “Few to flaunt,” he said, taking a step back from the pointed spear. “I’m not sure we need you given your recent track record, hellion.” Sylvis took a step forward, keeping that spear pointed as Inias drew his sword slowly. His eyes met Sylvis’ emerald gaze, shining with intensity. Inias flared his eyes right back as Styx elicited a warning growl towards Sylvis. Keira drew her daggers and moved to stand by Inias while Naesala remained close to Sylvis.

“I’m the reason they’re here!” Inias pointed his sword back, ready to draw up his shield in the event of a lightning blast. “As their prince, it’s my responsibility to bring them back home.”

Naesala positioned herself next to Sylvis and unsheathed her daggers. Keira aimed one of her daggers directly at Naesala. “Yes, *you’re* the reason they’re here.” Naesala repeated, “*You’re* the reason Lord Varen was left defenseless during a deadly battle. Every move you make puts more lives at risk.”

“And if he hadn’t, we would’ve lost more knights,” Keira asserted, positioning herself protectively between Naesala and Inias. “And *you’d* be a pile of ash.” She shot her onyx eyes at Sylvis and pointed her other dagger straight for him. Naesala aimed her own dagger at Keira’s throat, prompting Keira to step back. “All we’re asking is for *him* to stay out of the way,” Naesala said pointing her other dagger at Inias.

Inias couldn’t shake off the lingering doubt as he contemplated stepping back. Another mistake, like the bridge, would cost them all. “You two can’t take Caelan alone,” He warned them, looking between Naesala and Sylvis. There were two battles to face. They still didn’t know what to expect from the Crescents, and Caelan wouldn’t go down easily.

“We can’t either.” He slid his sword away and raised his hands as he moved back. Sylvis contemplated and gradually brought down his spear. “I’ll follow your lead and do as you say.” Inias surrendered. It was Sylvis who had developed a plan that helped them find the Crescents. His warding protected them in the night, and he had turned on Caelan to protect them.

“Can you stomach that, hellion?” Sylvis asked, and slowly brought his spear to stand beside him. “I’ll do my best!” Inias said, beaming a smile to ease the tension in the air. Naesala and Keira stored their daggers and Styx calmed beside Inias. “What’s the plan, commander?”

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CHAPTER 25

If they could rely on Naesala's memory of the tent layout, they had a workable plan. Inias and Styx would use the ticket to slip past the wards and bring them down. While Keira and Naesala attacked the circus, Inias would free all the captives. Sylvis planned to wait in the forest, intending to capture Caelan and keep him occupied until the others returned. Caelan didn't have the chance to slip ahead of them. Sylvis left him wounded, and Naesala said there was a large pool of blood outside the estate's bounds.

The ideal spot for it would be the expansive clearing at the forest's northern tip. He waited on the branch for the moon to reach its peak. The soft moonlight bathing the grassy clearing was easier on his eyes. Inias wrapped his coat tighter as a chilly breeze crept through the forest. The moon would soon reach its peak, and he sensed something shift in the surrounding air.

Inias wanted to claim Caelan's head. He was behind that attack on the bridge. His father was dead, and his friends were suffering in cages. Thoughts of vengeance swirled, and he had to force them down. He couldn't risk losing his friends to avenge his father. If Sylvis was the one to burn it as an offering, then so be it. His uncle had at least another century, plenty of time to manage Sylvis. For now, he would bring their people home and cleanse his name.

Inias rested with one leg draped over the branch while contemplating his next move, as Styx stood watch in front of him, both focused on the clearing ahead. Shapes became visible as they stepped out from the line of trees. Inias sniffed the air to confirm it and nodded. "Humans. It's starting." He leaned forward and wrapped an arm around Styx. "You ready for this?" Styx gave him an eager nod and Inias slid off the branch, falling towards the ground below.

"Prepare yourselves!" Inias could hear a voice echoing from the center of the clearing as more figures emerged from the forest. Slowly making his way out of the forest, he noticed the card's rune work glowed, and something shimmered in the air. "For the haunting wonders that lie within!" A vibrant dome tent emerged from the ground as the veil faded. The moonlight directly above dimly illuminated the red and white stripes. It covered the entire clearing and at the tip sat a flag with a red crescent stitched upon it. "From out of the foreboding mists of Harrows Forest, we've discovered something truly terrifying. And for you skeptics in the crowd, prepare to become believers as we deliver proof that gods do indeed exist!"

He slipped around the tree line merely ten feet from the tent flaps. Once he was within the wards, he slid three purple crystals from his belt and threw them at the invisible wall, keeping the tent hidden. It came down like shattering glass, causing a commotion from the line into the tent. Keira and Naesala wouldn't wait long to tear through that crowd of humans. The screams grew louder, and the scent of blood permeated the air. They would make an example of those who took pleasure in humiliating their people.

In the chaos, Inias lifted the tent flap and slipped in to find many cages lined up on the ground behind a large velvet curtain. The room was silent and even as he called out, there was no answer. He drew his sword and Styx sniffed around the dimly lit room. The cages were empty. Styx shook his head with a whimper after sniffing every corner for some clue. Outside, several pops caught his attention, and the screaming ceased.

Inias tore through the velvet curtain, only to be grabbed by his hair and forced to the ground. Someone grabbed Styx by the hair and forced him to the ground beside Inias.

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“Inias! Just in time for the show!” Upon hearing Caelan's voice, he lifted his head and struggled to break free. “While the crowd roared, someone managed to put iron shackles on him and Styx. The fox struggled and squirmed, trying to bite the hands of its captor as they dragged them apart. With each tug, Inias grew weaker as his strength was drained away. “Traitor!” Inias spat on the floor at Caelan’s feet.

“To *whom*, my prince?” While answering, Caelan wiped the floor with his boot to remove the dirt. A sharp point pressed against Inias' chin, making him meet Caelan's piercing sapphire gaze. In his hand, he grasped the staff. Inias could be turned into an ash pile for his collection at any moment. “I’m loyal first to my family. The Crescent ensures we remain rich. A few lost souls are a small price to pay to ensure my beloved want for nothing.” He explained himself, yanking the staff away with a cut across Inias’ chin. Inias growled and thrashed, falling to the floor as the shackles weakened him. Styx yelped across the room and howled as his own binds did the same.

They lifted Inias to his knees, facing the crowd. They all sat in slim metal white chairs and a sickening mix of perfumes and colognes had taken over the air. Keira and Naesala were being dragged across the grass between the rows of seats. They had bloody holes in their back, too large to be arrow wounds. Inias had heard the humans had a weapon that could fire projectiles from long distances. Ivaran’s strict policies had always kept them out of the Vale. Inias felt some relief as the two girls squirmed while they were being dragged onto the stage.

“As we promised folks, our Last Show Spectacular!” That promoter’s voice boomed so loudly across the tent it pained his ears. The promoter wore a long coat of red and black stripes with a tall hat on his head. He kept his back to Inias as he strutted across the stage. “Final?” Inias ground out as they brought Naesala and Keira to kneel beside him on display for the crowd. The cheering was almost worse than the promoter’s sickening voice. “Yes, we’ve been caught,” He heard Caelan say softly beside him. “It’s time to regroup, rebrand, and move on.”

“An epic battle of survival awaits us tonight!” The hatted man continued, motioning to a long slim black box coming down from the tent ceiling. It was thin, but nearly as long as the stage itself. Naesala and Keira turned to see it as well. Behind them kneeled two men, working some healing spell upon their wounds. Small metal pieces fell from their backs, and they lifted their heads towards the surrounding room in horror. From the other end of the room, they were bringing in clothed figures stuffed with hay. Many had been torn into with knives. “An illusion,” Keira whispered beside him. “They cast an illusion.”

The screen flickered and revealed the image of a forest, Willowberry Forest. Inias recognized the tall pine trees. Sitting at the bottom of one sat a figure with dark blue hair and fair skin. “Vestin!” Keira cried out, pulling against her chains, only to slump back onto the floor with a whimper. “Not again...” Naesala groaned and closed her eyes tight to avoid the staring crowd. She had been here before, on that very stage. Inias could see the way she avoided the crowd’s eyes, the same way his own would snap shut when thinking back to the bridge.

“In this very forest we’ve released a horde of little goblins you may know as redcaps!” The crowd gasped and cheered so eagerly at the bound figures depicted on the screen. The screen then changed and Inias found a maenad with her wild tussled hair and ivy leaf dress. “These four heroes have journeyed from afar to rescue their captive comrades, so let us give them the opportunity, folks!”

Four? Had they not found Sylvis? Or did they simply not know? “What did you do with Sylvis?” Inias jerked his head up to Caelan, who merely turned an eye on him. “Nothing,” He answered in a soft tone, “After he escaped, I received a letter to Aubron informing me he had been called home and to keep up the hunt for you.” He didn’t know, but why would Aubron lie to Caelan?

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“Once our heroes are transported, we will lift our shields and set the redcaps loose. Can these four face the redcap hordes and rescue their comrades? Find out in five, four, three, two, one!” Black smoke swirled around the stage, reaching up towards the ceiling. As the smoke dispersed, the crowd was amazed to find the captives gone.

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CHAPTER 26

Once again, he found himself caught between his friends and a swarm of redcaps. Despite the forest's silence, he was aware of their deadly swiftness. Observing his environment, his eyes emitted a deep crimson glow. He couldn't smell anything, not even the fragrant pine that once perfumed the forest. No longer bound by the shackles, he could now inspect his belt. He used up his last purple crystal on the tent's barrier, leaving him with only his sword, powder, and a selection of throwing knives positioned on his thigh and belt for quick access.

Standing up, he tried to connect with Styx through his thoughts, but the Fox remained silent, out of his reach. Once those arrows began flying, he would need the fox. He hoped that Naesala and Keira could endure. Styx would make it to him. He had to. He was the fastest among them and would overwhelm a troop of redcaps. If any of them could make it, it would be him. Believing it was something Inias had to do. They had created a bond between them. Inias would survive for Styx, so he wouldn't be forced to go on alone.

As he made his way across the forest floor, he felt something gently touch his ribs underneath his coat. He paused and retrieved the concealed knife. Upon seeing the golden hawk etched on its handle, he let out a sigh. "Father, give me the strength I need." Inias slipped it back into his pocket and glanced up at the trees. He caught the shine of something shining between the branches and pinned his gaze on it. Those humans were craving a show, and he would give it to them. He was Inias Nightfang, heir to Ivaran, son of Cyran. With the blood of conquerors and mighty heroes running through him, he held the power to liberate his friends. Then, with his father's knife, he'd carve out Caelan's heart.

The moonlight filtered through the dense canopy, illuminating the forest floor. Inias waved his hand, causing the shadows to dance and swirl around him, wrapping him in their embrace. With finesse, he cloaked himself in darkness, perfectly blending into the night. With the full moon above and everything around him full of life, there was more power for him to draw on. In bleak winter forests or during daylight, he depended entirely on his own magical reserves and wits to survive.

Inias started jogging, sticking to the shadows of the forest as he looked around. He didn't have long before the redcaps picked up on his trail. The moon above gave him a good sense of his place in the forest. Now further west, it showed his position to be somewhere east of the tent. They wouldn't leave redcaps in the north of the forest. It was dangerously close to the human world. That meant they would come from the south, east, and west. Since he hadn't sensed their presence, it's likely he came out somewhere in the north.

The sound of a growl caught his attention and made him stop. Tied to a tree was the maenad he'd seen on that box in the tent. "H-hey," Inias approached with a knife as the woman thrashed against her binds. He didn't know if she could speak. The maenads gave off an impression of being feral. As he knelt, he carefully cut the enchanted ropes that held her, and she appeared to calm down. "You're strong, right? I need you to head south. My friend is there. He has a big spear, can't miss him." She blinked and tilted her head as if processing what he'd said, then nodded and tugged at the rope. He released her and watched her sprint ahead.

With her in the lead, he could search for Styx. Keira would be on the lookout for Vestin, Naesala would be out looking for any of them, and gods willing, Sylvis would discover them in time. As the deafening cries of the redcaps reached him, Inias started running. As the shadows enveloped him, he

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extended his claws. Beyond the black mist, he noticed a bolt of darkness bouncing among the trees and smiled. "Styx!" Crying out, he watched as the fox crashed to the ground on his side. A redcap held a spiked club high above him. As he brought it down, Inias caught it in his hand, causing the redcap to shriek in surprise. Inias threw the club and shoved his hand straight through the goblin's chest. The creature fell limp as Styx pulled himself up. Inias smiled and hugged the fox tightly, saying, "You're alright... thank the gods..."

Inias stood up once more, retrieving a sword from his back and two knives from his belt. "Think you can track Keira?" Inias turned to a nodding Styx whose ears twitched. Despite the absence of scent in the forest, it was common knowledge that foxes had exceptional hearing. While Styx relied on his ears, Inias surveyed the forest. Eventually, he let out a howl and sprinted away from the sound of shrieking redcaps in the distance.

Inias tried his hardest to keep pace with the fox's sudden bursts of speed. Two goblins sat in a tree, bows at the ready. Inias skillfully threw his two knives, and with a purple glow, they weaved through the trees. They circled around, striking their targets from behind and leaving them lifeless on the ground. Styx was in the air, skillfully snatching more arrows while they descended. Inias stuffed his hand into the powder bag and threw a large handful high into the air. The mist spread as Inias and Styx made their ways out of its boundaries.

They released the redcaps into the forest, preventing them from forming their usual raid strategy. He wouldn't have to worry about so many in the trees firing down on him in this battle. Most of the forest was full of pine trees, harder to perch themselves in. As a wave of ground troops rushed towards them, Styx licked his lips and charged forward, clamping his jaw around the throat of one of them. Inias wasn't far behind, bringing his diamond edged sword down onto another. Claws drawn in one hand and his blade in the other, he spun, ripping through one's chest. He brought his sword down on the other, cutting it through the stomach.

Fighting without the smell of blood was a strange sensation. Styx handled it fine, swiftly darting into the trees to catch the few goblins that had climbed. Inias wouldn't let them surround him, keeping them on the defense. Styx would eventually return to take the few who had gotten behind him. Once they were clear, the fox burst forward again towards a flash of blue ahead.

Keira had both her daggers drawn and an aura of blue surrounding her. It had the ability to lash out with small tentacles and thrash any enemies that came too close. By using the defense to her advantage, she bravely fought back against the attacking wave. Styx was quick to clear the trees so she could focus her shields directly in front of her. A redcap brandishing a dagger was being desperately kicked by a figure seated behind her. Vestin. With a swift movement, Inias slashed through the ropes as he lunged forward.

Vestin tore himself free and tightly grasped the redcap's throat, slamming it onto the ground until its screams came to an end. Keira's shields dissipated, causing her to huff in annoyance. Scattered goblin bodies were left behind, leaving them standing in a mess. "*Vestin!*" With tears streaming down her face, she clung to her brother, burying her face in his chest. "I knew you were alive... I *knew* it!" Vestin returned her hug, squeezing her little frame tightly. "And I knew you'd come for me."

Inias turned his eyes away. "Vestin..." Unsure of what to say, he knew he had to speak quickly. "I'm so sorry. I should've listened to my father," The two siblings released each other and Vestin shook his head at Inias. He gave him a look that said now wasn't the time, "The ambush was a setup," Vestin spoke, "Caelan sold us out."

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“We know, he set this trap for us,” Inias answered as he wiped blood from his sword against his coat. “Can you fight?” Keira asked, inspecting him for any wounds. Vestin nodded and cracked his knuckles, “Payback time. Before anything else, we collect Ashryn. I remember where they left her.”

“Naesala’s out there alone, so is Sylvis,” Keira looked to Inias, then to Styx, who had his face buried in a redcap’s gut. “Styx and I will find Naesala,” he told them and whistled for the fox’s attention. “I sent a maenad to find Sylvis.”

“We might survive this after all,” Keira took a deep breath and pressed a kiss to Inias cheek with an arm around his shoulders. “Keep him safe for me, okay?” She asked Styx, who stood with his paws against her legs so she could pet him. “You can explain the fox later,” Vestin eyed the animal curiously and motioned for Keira to follow as he left. “Save your strength for Caelan,” Keira reminded Inias as she turned to leave with her brother.

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CHAPTER 27

Sylvis was still processing everything. His closest friends had betrayed the king's brother, sold them out to some criminal gang. Hellion or not, Keira and her family were innocent. They had earned their deaths. He repeated that thought to himself as he fought the grief threatening to swallow them. In the dark corridors of the castle, their laughter was the only company he felt. His father, a magistrate, was happy to send him off to the king for grooming.

The mighty Devilsbane had chosen him as the family successor. That mighty spear was the only reason anyone cared to notice him, aside from his angelic looks. Wayne and Rurik never cared about his power; they knew him long before. They were the only ones willing to stand up to Inias beside him, challenge his royal ego. His father had never cared to look at him until that bolt of red lightning fell from the sky, gifting him the precious heirloom.

Inias could never be trusted as king. They could not allow the devils to rule the land again. He had proven himself unworthy time and time again. For now, they were allies against a common enemy. When they returned to Knivae he would present Ivaran the head of his brother's killer and prove himself the worthy successor.

As Sylvis paced through the dense woods, the absence of any scents struck him immediately. What troubled him was not just the lack of smell, but also the unsettling stillness of the woods. The forest harmony was no longer heard, as creatures remained hidden. All he felt was the fear and nervousness coming from the creatures in the shadows. The suffocating silence gave him goosebumps and a growing sense of dread. The longer he waited for Caelan, the more uneasy he became, and now, with his senses dull, he realized he had been lured into a trap.

"*Of course* he'd set a trap!" Sylvis exclaimed, and with frustration, he threw his fist straight into a nearby tree. What caused him to neglect taking that into account? It should have been the first obstacle to consider and plan around. Sylvis took a deep breath, snatched the spear beside him, and dashed further into the forest. He heard the cries of battle and quickly headed towards it. With the others in danger, waiting for Caelan was not an option for him. Sooner or later, Caelan would come for them. Hopefully, they'd still have the strength to oppose him.

The familiar cries grew louder and louder. The horrified redcaps' cries were heard as they were torn apart. He impaled an oncoming projectile with his spear, which happened to be the upper half of a bloodied redcap. There was a maenad, coming at him with full force. A path of bodies marked the way she had come. Holding the spear close to his chest, he stepped back after tossing the severed body aside, unsure if she was friend or foe.

With a flash of lightning, Devilsbane crackled as the woman stopped abruptly and raised her clawed hands in defense. Straightening her posture, she gradually brought her hands down and widened her eyes in surprise, mirroring the electric energy of his weapon. "Your friends are out there, fighting for their lives." Her voice, unexpectedly deep and ethereal, startled him as she spoke of his friends fighting for their lives.

Sylvis responded with an eye roll, saying, "I already know that," before walking away from her, "Are you coming?" He asked. The maenad remained motionless, gazing into the forest. Slowly she turned to meet his gaze, shaking her head, "Bacchus summons me. I must go with my sisters." Creepy or not, he

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would've liked to have her by his side. The maenads were almost invincible, even Caelan struggled to defend against them.

She disappeared suddenly, leaving him to fend off the approaching redcaps alone. Dozens closed in around him as they followed the panicked cries of their comrades. With his spear raised high, bolts of red electricity shot into the sky, casting a crimson glow that illuminated the clouds. The goblins surrounding him were struck and scattered by the raining bolts as he brought the spear down. Those who escaped retreated and fled for their safety.

Hopefully, the others had seen it. He was on his way. They only needed to endure a little while longer. Inias and the others had trusted *him* to lead them. He hated Inias, but he didn't want him to die like this. If Keira and Naesala fell as well, how could he return? That feeling...the thought of failing them...it must have been the same pain Inias carried. It hadn't held him back, it *drove* him. Sylvis would have to do the same. Gripping Devilsbane tight he sprinted into the forest towards the nearest cries.

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CHAPTER 28

Inias and Styx suddenly stopped when a crimson lightning bolt erupted in the sky. "He made it," Inias grinned with relief. Despite the trap, luck seemed to favor them once more. All the pieces had fallen into place; Keira had finally found Vestin, and they were on the way to find Ashryn. The maenad had raced to Sylvis with astonishing speed, and with Styx's help, Inias knew they could navigate through the waves of redcaps. Caelan was watching them, and Inias could feel that it wouldn't be long before he joined the battle.

Styx let out a wild howl and sharply changed direction, causing Inias to struggle to keep up, nearly slipping. In the midst of grunting and blade clashes, Inias glimpsed rainbow braids twirling in the air as Naesala forcefully pushed a redcap into a tree. The creature's head exploded with a sickening pop against the trunk. In her right hand, Naesala held a dagger, and in her left, a pistol crafted from redwood and an unfamiliar metal, its barrel emitting a red aura.

Naesala pulled back the hammer and aimed the pistol directly at Inias, who quickly raised his hands. "Hey! Same side!" he called out, coming to a halt. She shook her head and fired. A beam of red light flashed past Inias, striking a redcap behind him in the face. "Crystal magic?" Inias asked once his shaking had subsided. Naesala nodded and flashed the weapon before his eyes with a mischievous grin. "Stolen from a pirate in the bay and modified. Don't tell anyone, okay?" Naesala glanced at the redcaps she had left behind.

"Can you make me one?" Inias asked with a hopeful smile. She shook her head and listened for any oncoming enemies. "Keira found Vestin, and you saw the lightning?" Inias asked as he made his way around the trees, navigating around the goblin corpses. Naesala nodded and took a deep breath. "I freed two of them," she breathed as she reloaded her gun with small red crystals. It held only six in a wheel pattern, which Inias found impractical.

Naesala wiped blood onto her pants as Styx began sniffing at the bodies. "A hobgoblin and a dwarf. When I found them, I remembered why I came here. I wanted to come back and free the others, but when they had me bound again..." It felt like reliving it all over again - the shock collar, the laughing humans, and the leering eyes as she performed for their amusement. Inias knew the feeling all too well; he had been grappling with his own demons since losing his father.

"And the heroes have found each other!" Caelan's voice rang out as the three turned to face him. "A little too quickly, though."

Naesala fired her pistol, but Caelan lifted his staff and caught the beam of red against the crystal flame. "Rushing to the finale?" Inias asked, pointing his sword at Lord Skyfire. Caelan gave the three of them one of his sickly sweet smiles, pointing his staff straight for Inias. "It would seem your lady friends haven't forgotten you. I barely managed to escape them."

"The maenads? They're here?!" Naesala asked in a mix of concern and hope. "I freed one of them, guessing she found her friends." Inias explained, stepping ahead of her towards Caelan. "They swarmed the tent as they did the manor, ripping through everything in sight like feral beasts."

"Saves us the trouble," Inias grinned as the diamond edge of his blade glowed. He wished the others were by his side, but this was the fight he'd been waiting for. Vestin and Ashryn were safe, Sylvis was on his way, and now Caelan stood before him. "We should lead him to Sylvis, send Styx to find Keira," Naesala

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whispered beside him as Styx growled at Caelan. Inias shook his head and held his sword ready in front of him.

“There it is!” Caelan beamed a smile at Inias as those crimson eyes bore into him. “Your father had that same look when he discovered my dealings.” Warnings went off in his mind, but the rage he felt as Caelan spoke overshadowed them. “Said he’d deal with me upon his return.”

“You killed him!” Inias roared as his body shook. Boiling blood sang in his veins as he gripped his sword tighter, fighting the urge to rush him. Styx barked and snarled beside him, waiting for Inias order to strike. “Inias he’s bating you.” Naesala whispered beside him, giving him a light shove with her shoulder to draw his attention. “He killed himself. The Crescent could’ve made us the richest kingdom in all the Vale.” Caelan went on, his smile growing as Inias’ glare deepened.

Inias shoved at Naesala and pulled a knife from his belt. “Styx, are you ready?” He whispered to the fox, who nodded with an eager lick of his lips. Styx sunk into his shadow and slipped beneath Inias. The tattoo on his neck glowed, to Naesala’s surprise. “Find Sylvis. I can hold him.” He could only borrow Styx’s strength for so long, he only hoped it was long enough to wear Caelan down.

“Do you ever learn?” She asked, pointing her gun straight at Caelan, who was forming a ball of fire at the end of his staff. Inias shot forward like a bolt of black lightning, moving more quickly than the crystal she’d fired. Caelan slammed into a tree, barely able to lift his staff in time to catch the boy’s blade. Despite her surprise, she shook her head and rushed to join Inias. “Sylvis will find us!” She reminded him, knowing Caelan’s flames would draw his attention.

“So that’s it,” Caelan growled as red flames lashed for Inias face, who quickly jumped away and rolled. “You eat the fox and gain his strength. Clever boy. Even your father hadn’t thought of that.” He turned and deflected another crystal aimed at his head. A blow came to his right and before he could turn, another came to his left. Before he could make any noise, a fight slammed into Caelan’s gut. Naesala watched as that black bolt darted around, slamming Caelan from every direction until the man finally flew across the forest.

Inias held his knees, huffing as Styx reformed at his side, short of breath as well. They hadn’t had time to practice, only discussed the plan with Styx and gave it a trial run on the way to the tent. That sudden burst of speed had drained them more than he’d intended, but it left Caelan in a great deal of pain. One slash across his side, claws to his right, and a punch to the gut all in two breaths. Naesala fired a shot at Caelan, who drew up a wall of fire as he struggled to stand. “Can you do that again?” She asked, resting a hand on Inias’ back.

Bolts of fiery red streaked through the dense forest, propelling Caelan into the air with a gut-wrenching cry. “Caelan!” Sylvis bellowed as he sprinted past the two towards Caelan, his eyes blazing with fury. The elder raised his staff, unleashing a whirlwind of flames aimed directly at his charging foe. With a powerful leap, Sylvis brought his spear down into the swirling inferno, causing the flames to scatter as Caelan caught the blade with his staff.

“Brave children with your flashy toys,” Caelan smiled up at Sylvis, whose spear crackled with lightning. Sylvis turned to find a large ball of fire hurtling towards him. They had fallen from every direction, catching the foliage and trees around them. Sylvis jumped away from Caelan, who stood with a fiery hand against his wounds, burning them closed.

Inias dove as fire fell from every direction. Naesala and Styx circled around trees to evade them and close the distance with Caelan. Inias threw one of his purple knives straight for Caelan, only to have

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him duck away from it at the last minute. He'd revealed his ace too soon, and now it was all he could do to evade the falling flames. Trees were ablaze and the surrounding brush was catching fast, sending smoke into the air.

Soon, the fire stopped falling as Naesala fired another shot towards Caelan. It slammed him in the shoulder, causing him to stumble back. "You!" He snapped, sending a volley of fireballs from his staff. Styx leapt forward, catching them in his mouth before he shot straight for Caelan, snapping his jaws. Blood sprayed from Caelan's throat as Styx twisted his body, tearing the man's head clean off.

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CHAPTER 29

The silence that ensued was overwhelming, except for the sound of flames crackling and Inias and his friends panting as they recovered their breath. Sylvis hoisted himself up and headed towards Caelan while Styx rushed to Inias. The flames encircled them, preventing Sylvis from taking the head as the body ignited. They watched as the severed head burned, grinning at them. Neither of them could claim their prize, as it was already too late.

Caelan's last laugh, Inias thought as he watched the grinning face burn to an ash pile at Sylvis' feet. It must have been clear to Caelan that his fate was to perish here. Even if he survived, how long could he run before one of them found him? The man burned, killed for his betrayal and those Crescents were at the mercy of Bacchus and his maenads.

Inias and Naesala realized they had to act fast with the flames spreading. "We need to contain the fire!" Naesala shouted over the roar of the flames. The spread was too rapid to control, causing Inias to shake his head. "It's too late," he said. Even after Caelan's demise, the flames still burned, fueled by the same magic that had summoned them. The fires had destroyed the wards, awakening the smell of smoke and blood in their surroundings.

Sylvis ran when a tree toppled over the other three. Styx ran as Inias shoved Naesala aside. Stepping aside, he swung his sword and sliced through the solid trunk, while Sylvis descended from above to deliver another blow. The tree fell into three pieces, evading them all. Naesala tugged on Sylvis and Inias wrists. "You two can show off later," she told them and pointed to the gathering specks of light lining a path out of the flames. They raced through the blazing forest, the air thick with smoke and the sound of crackling flames pursuing the flickering lights in hopes of safety.

Inias and Sylvis took the lead, clearing the path of obstacles, with Naesala and Styx following behind. Trees had fallen and branches were crashing all around them. They couldn't run fast enough to escape the flames. The magic within those lights was fading as the fire spread beyond them. One by one, the lights were disappearing, making the path ahead darker. "We have to hurry!" Naesala cried from behind them, pointing to a pillar of flames, rising, and swirling into the form of a serpentine dragon.

"Caelan's parting gift." Sylvis muttered, turning his spear towards the figure as it weaved through the trees towards them like a flying snake. Naesala discharged her pistol, but the shot passed through the flames and extinguished. A sudden burst of red lightning repelled the dragon, but it changed direction and headed straight for Inias. Running towards the dragon, he slid beneath its fiery form and thrust his sword up. As the flames were sliced through, the dark aura surrounding the diamond edge shimmered. The dragon's screech echoed as the shadows from Inias' blade overcame the flames.

Engulfing everything in their path, the dispersed flames of the creature spread. As a strong wind blew, the fire spread and encircled them. As the wall of flames closed in, Inias stood up, with no escape in sight. Redcaps emerged from the fiery walls and launched an assault on them. Inias extended his sword, striking one on the neck. With a swing of his spear, Sylvis, six of them flying back into the fire.

Naesala's fired pistol shots hit one goblin in the face. She threw her dagger towards a redcap that had jumped onto Sylvis' back. The creature sliced off the head of its target before returning to her hand, ready for her to stab the approaching goblin. Dropping her pistol, she pulled out her other dagger and

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charged towards Inias with Styx. Sylvis sent waves of lightning towards the swarms with each swing of his spear. The walls were the only safe spot, as goblins poured out in masses to escape the fire. Back-to-back, Naesala and Inias kept each other protected. Styx was wrestling one into the ground, tearing into its throat. Styx was wrestling one into the ground, tearing into its throat.

A rising blue light pushed the flames back. A pair of luminous blue walls materialized between Keira and Vestin. Between the siblings, a third person stood as they hurried to reach them. "Ashryn!" Inias beamed and ran ahead of Sylvis, between the protective barriers. "My prince!" While the rest moved towards the azure walls and away from the fire, she hugged Inias. She thanked him, then allowed Inias to be embraced by Keira.

"Lord Aubron's waiting," she told them as Vestin, with outstretched arms, kept the walls up. "Can we save the hugging for later, please?" He hollered as redcaps were trying to escape into the barrier. Sylvis launched a powerful attack with his spear, propelling the goblins backwards as the blue barrier enclosed them.

"Aubron!" Keira cried out. Behind them, a cloud of brown smoke billowed and transformed into the form of a chubby, bearded man. "About time. This entire forest is lost." Aubron spoke, coughing as he waved the smoke away. "How did you get here?" Inias asked as he stuffed his sword away. "The same way we're headed home, my prince." Aubron lifted a reddish-brown flat stone from his pocket and smiled. "A portal stone, his majesty permitted it." It fell to the ground, opening a dark hole that sprung tentacles at them.

Keira let out a scream as a tendril pulled her into the dark portal. "Don't be alarmed!" Aubron reassured, as a tendril pulled Sylvis, who was whimpering, into it. Eventually, they all gave in and let the portal pull them inside.

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CHAPTER 30

Inias woke up to a warm and wet sensation caressing his cheek. "Okay, okay I'm up!" He chuckled, gently patting Styx's head with closed eyes. The ground underneath him was as comfortable as a cloud, and Inias nestled against the soft pillow below his head before jumping up and scanning the surroundings. The crackling fireplace in his bedroom resembled a howling wolf, a cozy and warm atmosphere filled with the scent of sizzling bacon. Through the window, he could see the training field, the snow melted, and a warm breeze seeping through the cracks. *Home.*

Styx barked, and Inias turned to embrace him. Styx looked around with a tilted head, casting a sense of confusion. "We're home!" He kissed Styx gently between his eyes as he spoke. "Yeah, I'm just as confused as you, pal." After that tentacle had dragged him in, everything had gone black. Now, here he was, safe in his bed. Inias had several questions for Aubron about that portal stone, but he was just grateful to be home. It had been night and now sunlight streamed through the window, late into the morning.

Swinging his legs around, Inias remained clad in his burned and tattered coat. While heading to the bathroom, he tossed it onto a hook. Styx hurried to the bacon strips next to Inias' breakfast of eggs and sausages. To get to the bacon, the fox leaped onto the little stool next to Inias' chair. He patiently waited for Inias to come back from the restroom, then dove into the strips. As Inias sat down beside the fox, he wiped his face with a towel and reached out for a strip. With a growl, Styx snapped his teeth at Inias' hand. "Fine, no sausage for you!" Inias snatched them from his plate and took a big bite out of both.

Styx was too quick for Inias, swiftly ducking his head under Inias's hand to snag one into his mouth. Frustrated, Inias stuffed the other strip into his mouth and growled. "You let him eat at your table?" a guard dressed in black armor with a blade at his side asked. As they turned, Inias and Styx spotted the guard standing by the door. "Don't you mean '*may I enter, your highness*'?" Inias countered as Aubron entered the room. "And *you*. Mind explaining that portal stone?!" That kind of magic is only allowed in emergencies, as it drew on fickle forces that are likely to backfire.

Aubron bent down to pet the fox while Styx hurried over. "That *thing* saved your life, young prince," Aubron bowed low to the boy. "Right," Inias nodded and placed a hand on Aubron's shoulder. "Thanks for saving us." Inias led him to sit upon the sofa by the fire, then went to grab his breakfast and Styx's, laying them on the sofa table.

"It was no trouble, really. Once we discovered you weren't Vayne's killer, I did some digging," Aubron explained as the two sat on either side of him, eating their breakfast while he went on. "I discovered that your father had questioned Lord Caelan before he left. The Skyfire family had an overwhelming amount of debt, but miraculously they paid it off and became one of the wealthiest families in the Vale."

"I remember..." Inias set his plate down and threw his feet up onto the table. "I used to pick on Vayne all the time. Hand me down *everything*." He almost laughed but caught himself cupping his mouth. Vayne held a deep hatred towards him, as he did everyone who'd mocked him. After what he did to Keira, he felt no regret for Vayne's death. If he were in Caelan's position, what would he have done? Would he have taken the Crescent's offer to save his clan? Offer his own people as a sacrifice to enrich himself? In desperate circumstances, Inias made regrettable choices that caused harm to his loved ones.

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“Those poor boys...” Aubron shook his head and took a long deep breath, “Mere pawns for their clans. Lord Rosethorn never bothered to look for his son. In an attempt to hide his association with the Skyfire's, he shifted the blame onto Rurik.”

“Where is he now?” Inias asked. The only thing he knew about Rurik's connection to the Crescents was that he had sided with Vayne. “His majesty may have a temper, but he's no fool,” Aubron went on as a servant entered the room to bring him a steaming cup of tea. “He allowed Varen to hunt Lord Rosethorn as retribution for his children's misfortune. Ivaran hoped it would mend the rift between them, but I fear it's only fated to grow further.” There was sorrow in his voice as he watched the flames. Even his gentle tone couldn't soften the weight of his words.

Lord Varen lost all trust in the crown when Ivaran ordered the extermination of the Ravenmoons. Allowing him justice on the Rosethorn's didn't wipe away the years of persecution towards the Hellion clans. Despite Ivaran's actions, he was still his uncle and that couldn't be denied. Maybe Inias could be the one to repair the damage caused by Ivaran's rule once he became king. His uncle had plenty of time to ensure that any hope of peace would be impossible. Keira was his best friend; he couldn't imagine fighting against her. Could he betray the clan his father died defending?

With a loud groan, Inias shook his head and buried his face in his hands. Styx bounded around the couch and leapt up next to Inias, giving his cheek a lick. Aubron reached out to brush the fox's fur as Inias smiled again, pushing the fox's face away.

“One battle at a time, your highness,” Aubron stood and bowed, “Your uncle has summoned you, Styx, and Sylvis to the throne room. He's growing *impatient*.” Inias shivered and sprung to his feet, running towards the bathroom.

When Aubron heard the shower, he left the room and waited outside the door. “My lord,” the guard beside him whispered, “Why put your faith in Inias? The court will never accept him.” He continued, leaning in as his voice softened. “With a hellion on the throne, we can finally cleanse the court of this *purest* cancer.” Aubron's tone fell into a growl as he explained, “Beyond his bigotries, Ivaran wants what's best for the kingdom. If Inias can prove himself a worthy successor, the throne will pass to him. It's a long shot, but I have faith.”

Inias swung the door open dressed in black and a long flowing cloak with the royal seal pinned upon his breast. He clipped his father's dagger to his side and strapped his sword to his back. “Lose the weapons,” the guard instructed him as Aubron looked at the dagger. “Keep the dagger.” He said as Inias pulled the sword from his back, surrendering it to the guard.

Styx barked and ran out of the room, flattening his ears back, and nestling low onto the floor. His tail wiggled playfully as Inias reached down to ruffle up his fur. “We'll play outside, I promise. Uncle wants to see us.” Styx whimpered but stood and followed the group down the halls. The sunlight streaming through the windows bathed the hallways in light. It felt so much brighter and inviting now. The warmth of spring was creeping in, and he took long, deep breaths to savor it.

“Is he in a good mood?” Inias asked Aubron, who walked beside him. “As good as expected. He's angry, but not at you.” Aubron's words calmed the last of Inias' anxiety. He would worry about Varen later. They all made it home, Caelan was dead, and the Crescents were exposed. It was time to rest and prepare himself.

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CHAPTER 31

“Fawning over your hair, boy?” Ivaran asked as his nephew entered the throne room, bowing beside Sylvis. Bowing his head before the king, Styx received a smile in return. Aubron hurriedly moved past them and positioned himself beside the king. “They've had a long trip,” he reminded the king, who nodded and motioned for the three to rise. Sylvis stood with his hands behind his back as Inias looked at him. In the sunlight, his green eyes appeared to glisten. “Thank you,” Inias told him as they approached the dais. “If you hadn't turned on Caelan, we'd all be dead.”

Sylvis nodded and bumped Inias' shoulder with his before turning his attention to the king. Upon the king's gesture, the two knelt with bowed heads. “You both appear rested and in good health,” the king began. Although his words were kind, they still had a cold undertone. “I'm happy to see it. Rise and hear the words of your king.” The boys rose to their feet with their eyes pinned on the king's elegant black leather boots.

Ivaran looked between the two, lowering his hand into their view, instructing them to raise their eyes to him. His icy gaze bore into them both. Even Sylvis seemed to shrink from it, taking a step back. The king turned his gaze from Sylvis to Inias, then to Styx, who whimpered and looked away. “The high council has agreed that you are not to be held responsible for your father's death,” Ivaran stood and walked over to them with his cane to keep him steady. “What remains of the Skyfire and Rosethorn clans will be hunted down and questioned. We have much to learn about these Crescents.”

Inias felt the urge to shiver as his uncle approached him, resting a hand on his shoulder. It was chilling and unsettling, causing his body hair to stand on end. “You've avenged your father, rescued our people, and exposed an enemy hiding in the shadows. Well done, my nephew.” The hand squeezed him before the king turned back towards his throne.

“Styx slew Caelan,” Inias gestured to the fox who barked beside him, “Sylvis, Keira, and Naesala-wait...what happened to them?”

“Lord Varen has taken them to the estate,” Aubron explained as Ivaran rested against the throne. “He was eager to return home. Lady Redwood is still resting.” Inias wanted to say goodbye to them but given the king's orders to have them killed, he knew why they couldn't stay. The thought of sharing a roof with the man who had recently tried to have him killed was unsettling to him. There was no lavish manor for him to escape to.

“I wanted to see Keira one last time,” Inias pleaded to his uncle. “You may call on her if you like.” His uncle nodded, “I won't force you two apart, but there is no friendship between Varen and I.” No friendship, but did that make them enemies? He wouldn't let that come between them and make Keira his enemy. Apart from Styx, she was his most cherished friend. The sole person who supported him throughout all his antics.

To bring Inias back from his thoughts, the king cleared his throat. “Despite your actions, your title as heir is still in question,” Inias was ready to protest, but Ivaran's bony hand stopped him. “This experience may have changed you, but I cannot trust my kingdom in your hands, *hellion*. Perhaps there is a place for your breed among our people, but that remains to be seen.” He turned to Sylvis, who raised his eyes to meet the king with a triumphant smile on his face. “You displayed loyalty, strength, but you lack *foresight*. Your

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plan led my nephew right into Caelan's trap!" Ivaran's voice rose, and Inias couldn't help but smile as Sylvis shrunk back again and lowered his head.

"Forgive me..." Sylvis begged, as if reduced to a groveling prisoner. Ivaran observed Sylvis's groveling with disappointment, as the boy slowly backed away with trembling limbs. "However, you're both still young. Mistakes are inevitable and you've learned from yours," he said in a gentler voice, allowing Sylvis to meet his eyes again. "I have," the two answered more quickly than they intended, looking at each other.

Styx yipped, assuming it was his turn to speak. The king's attention shifted towards the fox. "And *you*, your courage surpasses even the bravest of my knights," he said, a gentle smile on his face. "I thank you for avenging my brother." Styx rushed towards the dais, but Inias caught him before he tried jumping into Ivaran's lap. "Cuddling isn't his thing, buddy."

"As for your title," Ivaran continued, raising his voice to draw their attention. "Sylvis has been recommended by the court and I will provide him with the chance." Ivaran nodded towards the boy whose fear-stricken face twisted into a beaming smile. He threw Inias a smug grin before Ivaran's hand came to his chin, forcing those emerald eyes to look at him. "To prove yourself, both of you." Ivaran snarled, looking between the two of them with those icy silver eyes. The two shivered and stepped away as the king returned to the throne.

Inias turned his head towards Sylvis, who kept his eyes on the king. They could never mend their bridges. If both desired the throne, they could only be enemies. The king had created a division between them, pitting them against one another. The court widely supported Sylvis. Lord Aubron, the king's most trusted advisor, was among Inias' allies. Lord Varen might also be supportive if Inias could convince him.

"What are we doing about the Crescents?" Inias approached the dais and stood beside his uncle. While stroking his beard, the king gazed at him. "What would you like to do with them?" Shifting his body, he directed the question towards his nephew. "We..." Inias nervously fidgeted with his hair, thinking about that forest and the portal beyond. "What they need to rebuild can be found beyond that portal. Let's build a stronghold in Willowberry Forest and disrupt their supply route."

Ivaran's lips curled into a smile with a light hum from his throat. "I can lead an army against the redcaps, raze the borderlands," Sylvis suggested, running towards the dais himself, nearly shoving Inias out of the way.

Aubron laughed next to the king, who responded with an eye roll and a forehead rub. "Neither of you will *lead* anything," Ivaran said, shoving them away from his throne with a growl. "I will offer both ideas to the high court." The king waved a hand before either of them could speak again and rose to his feet. "You're dismissed!" He told them as he stepped behind the throne towards the door.

"Uncle!" Inias called out, bowing low as Ivaran turned to him. "What is it?" Ivaran snapped as Inias rose to meet his eyes. "Would you allow me to spend Spring in Dusk Haven?" He asked.

"Why?" Ivaran rested against his cane, narrowing his eyes at the hellion boy before him. Inias wanted to get away. That was the truth. The thought of living in this castle with an uncle who had both wished for and ordered his death left him uneasy. Now he would have to look over his shoulder for whatever schemes Sylvis would plan. The court was itching to see Inias removed and replaced with their green-eyed, golden boy. "I want to know what the Ravenmoons are planning," Inias answered slowly, thinking through his words. "Like you said, we're no longer friends, but Keira is still mine, so is Vestin."

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Ivaran didn't look convinced at all, eyeing Inias as if he'd already poked through every hole. "Your majesty, if the Ravenmoons rebel, they will take Dusk Haven first," Aubron offered, standing beside Inias, a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Inias is a friend to the Ravenmoons. He is the only one who can mediate a solution between your clans. With a friend in Dusk Haven, they will hesitate to attack it." Ivaran looked between Aubron and Inias, then to Sylvis who remained quiet looking at Inias' skeptically. "You want to ally with them against us, *hellion!*" Sylvis accused him, moving to stand beside the king.

"I *want* to avoid a civil war!" Inias answered, shrugging off Aubron's grip as he approached Sylvis. "I'm a hellion, same as them. They don't trust you, or *you* uncle." Ivaran gave him a warning snarl, "Watch your tone, boy."

"What he *means* is, if there's a chance, we can avoid a conflict we should take it. This will give Inias the opportunity to change your mind." Aubron bowed and stepped away from the three of them, hoping the boys wouldn't start fighting on the throne room floor. Ivaran grumbled, but finally nodded with a sigh. "I want you prepared to leave by winter's end, and I expect to be informed about their position." He ordered Inias, "Now all of you *leave!* You're not the only ones in need of rest."

"Yes, uncle, thank you!" Inias bowed low beside Sylvis, who merely nodded and turned in a huff to march across the throne room floor. "Good plan?" Inias asked Aubron once both doors were closed tight. Aubron nodded his head, stroking his long brown beard. "In Dusk Haven you can build a new base of support, convince Lord Varen to stand behind you." He pressed a hand to Inias's shoulder again, causing the boy to cringe slightly and yank himself back. "I don't appreciate all the touching."

"Forgive me, my prince," Aubron bowed and stepped away from the boy, hands behind his back. "I must support his majesty here, but if you're willing, there lives a mage in the forests south of the city. Thaddeus is his name. He's instructed many Faerie lords, even your father, during the goblin invasions two centuries ago. If you can convince him, he'll make a valuable ally."

"Thaddeus...never heard of him." His father had never mentioned an instructor during the goblin wars. "He likes his privacy." Aubron explained, bowing towards the young prince once again. "The rest is up to you, my prince."

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EPILOGUE

Inias made his way up the hill. Grass had grown again, and leaves were budding on the trees. At the top of the hill, Inias could read the headstone clearly, Cyran Nightfang. "Stay here," Inias instructed Ashryn, who barked the orders to the rest of his retinue. He and Styx crossed the field to greet his father with a bow. Inias fell to his knees and pulled a pouch from within his jacket. He poured ashes from the pouch over his father's grave and sighed.

"I couldn't burn him as an offering," Inias explained, wrapping an arm around Styx to hug him close. "But I hope you can rest easy now." He turned and sat beside the stone as he had a month ago, now with Styx laid over his lap. There was so much he wished he'd said before, but now he was ready to face his father. "*I know he was cruel,*" Inias said. "That's what Aubron said about you. But you weren't cruel, you weren't *anything*. I would've liked cruel. At least I'd know you care that you loved me."

A hawk screeched above him, causing both to snap their heads up to the bird. "But now I know," Inias said, watching as the hawk perched itself in a tree, looking at them. "In the end, you chose me. Just like mom did." That was his father's last choice, to ensure Inias lived on. Knowing that wasn't enough to erase the scars it had left behind, but he didn't have to wonder if he was loved.

"You're a purist like him, aren't you?" Inias asked the grave beneath him, resting his hand against the stone. "You hate the hellions just like uncle and the court, but I was your son. I was different." His father had spent years chasing after Ivaran's dream. That's what Inias had always been told, but by the time he was born, the two rarely spent any time together.

Inias stood and placed the golden dagger atop his father's grave and stepped away from it. That hawk screeched again as the hawk carving gleamed in the sunlight. "If uncle threatens Keira or her family again, I'll stand with them." He looked down as a lump formed in his throat, "But I won't take your blade, I won't use it to fight a battle you don't believe in." Inias stepped away, avoiding the headstone as if his father's eyes were glaring at him from it. "If you reject me for it, I'll understand."

"Goodbye father," Inias smiled and whistled for Styx, who ran to his side. As he crossed the tree line, he heard the hawk's screech again. "Changed your mind?" Ashryn asked him. Inias followed her gaze to something hanging from his side. The golden knife he'd left behind sat on his side, gleaming in the light of the setting sun. "No, I-." He looked to the gravestone again to find the hawk perched upon it, tilting its head at them.

"Are you alright?" Ashryn asked as she approached. Inias nodded and closed his eyes as a gentle breeze followed the hawk's screech. He took the knife from his side and cradled it in his hands. A tear fell from his cheek onto his finger as he traced the carving. "I'll honor our clan's legacy," Inias told her, hooking the dagger back onto his cloak, "But I won't be bound by it. Not if it means losing Keira. Will you stand with me if it means betraying the king?"

Ashryn drew her sword. The sunlight bounced off it onto her red hair, falling in waves like wildfire. She drove the blade into the ground and fell to one knee, nodding. "Ivaran has made an enemy of Varen and brought us close to war. We cannot trust him anymore with the Vale's safety." Inias knelt to lift her, wrapping her in a hug. She threw her arms around his shoulders, then slipped away to retrieve her sword. "First, we visit Lord Varen, then we take Dusk Haven."