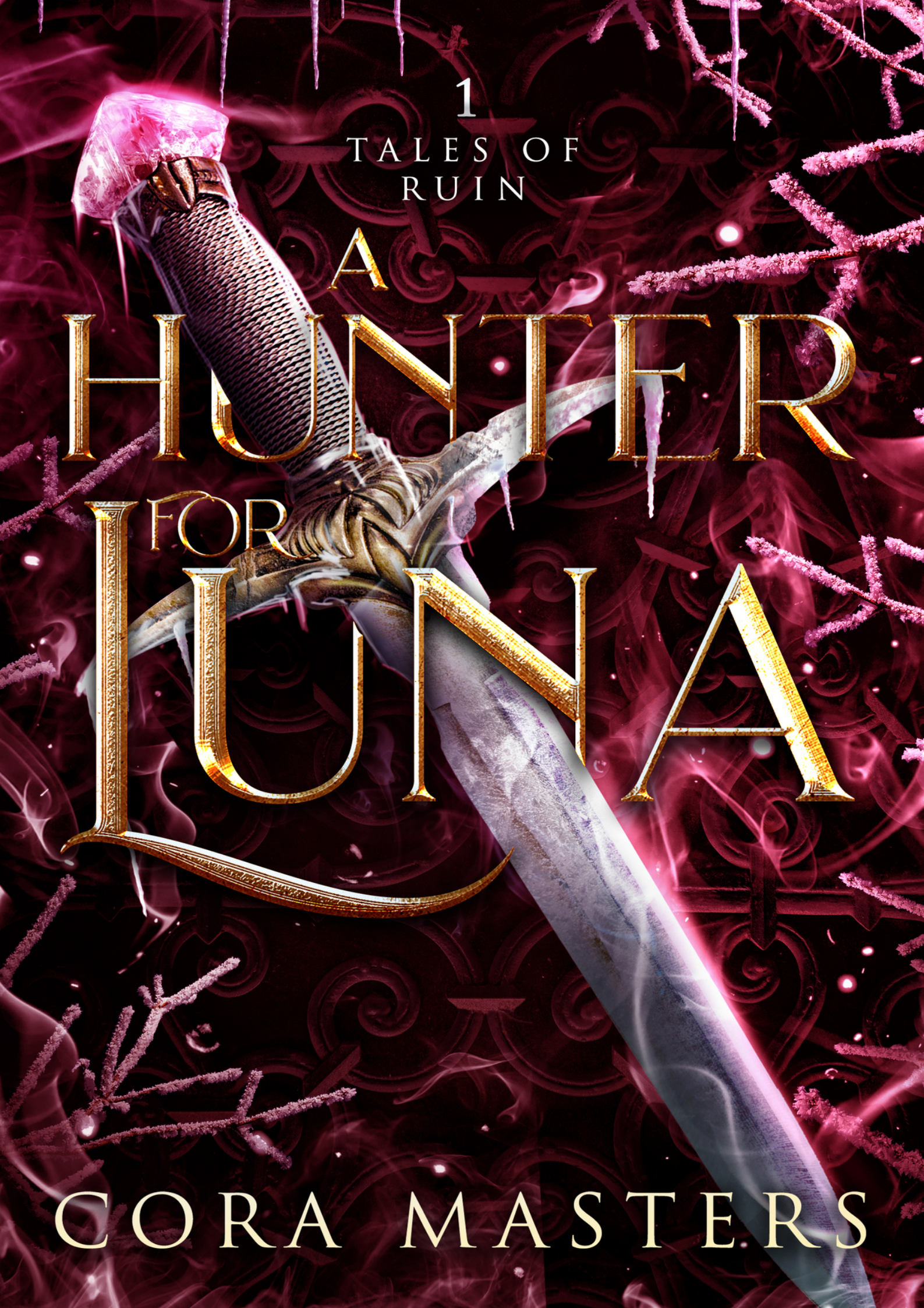


1  
TALES OF  
RUIN



A hand holding a sword with a glowing pink gem and a scaly hilt, set against a dark red background with a repeating pattern and pink branches.

# A HUNTER FOR LUNAR

CORA MASTERS



# A HUNTER FOR LUNA

TALES OF RUIN

BOOK ONE

CORA MASTERS



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*To anyone looking to be **ruined**.*

# CONTENTS

1. [Luna](#)
2. [Luna](#)
3. [Luna](#)
4. [Benedetto](#)
5. [Benedetto](#)
6. [Luna](#)
7. [Luna](#)
8. [Luna](#)
9. [Benedetto](#)
10. [Luna](#)
11. [Luna](#)
12. [Benedetto](#)
13. [Luna](#)
14. [Luna](#)
15. [Benedetto](#)
16. [Benedetto](#)
17. [Luna](#)
18. [Luna](#)
19. [Benedetto](#)
20. [Benedetto](#)
21. [Luna](#)
22. [Luna](#)
23. [Luna](#)
24. [Luna](#)
25. [Benedetto](#)
26. [Benedetto](#)
27. [Luna](#)
28. [Luna](#)
29. [Benedetto](#)

30. [Luna](#)
31. [Luna](#)
32. [Benedetto](#)
33. [Luna](#)
34. [Luna](#)
35. [Benedetto](#)
36. [Luna](#)
37. [Benedetto](#)
38. [Luna](#)
39. [Benedetto](#)

[About Cora Masters](#)

[Also by Cora Masters](#)

## CHAPTER ONE

# LUNA

I PRESSED MYSELF FURTHER INTO THE SHADOW UNDER THE window seat, holding my breath and pulling my magic as tight to my skin as I could. Useless as it was, only good for unraveling other people's spells, the feathery texture of it made me easy to find if I didn't control it.

It was hard to concentrate on reigning in my magic, but the fear of being found made a good motivator. There would be even more pain when I was found.

Sofia, the governess hired to teach my sister to control her magic, rose from the settee she shared with my sister and walked toward my hiding place. She was plump and favored very wide skirts, though she moved as lightly as wind gliding over waves. Turning when she reached the window seat, she draped her skirts to the sides of her as she seated herself, the flowing dull green fabric providing additional concealment as the heavy footsteps approached.

Father had returned.

"Now, Rose, can you demonstrate for me again the Sun's Fury?" Sofia's voice, calm and kind, soothed almost as much as the rose scent she wore. Despite my father's orders, she always found a way for me to watch the lessons, even if they didn't really work with my magic.

I shifted so I could peek out of the tiny gap between Sofia's skirt and the edge of the seat.

Rose cupped her hands, scrunching her face in concentration. Her long blonde curls bobbed as she nodded, her blue eyes

focused on a point just above her hands. Her pale starlight magic swirled, then clumped into a warm silver-gold light a finger's breadth above her palms. I squeezed down on my magic as it stirred, wanting to disrupt the energy she'd gathered.

My useless, useless magic.

The door crashed open, and our father strode in.

The light sputtered out, Rose's hands trembling. Her anxiety hung in the air, almost tangible as our father walked into the room. At ten, she'd learned, as I had, not to provoke his temper.

Sadly, I did that by breathing.

Sofia rose, her skirts rustling, and I knew she inclined her head even though I couldn't see it. "My lord. Have you come to observe Rose's lesson?"

"No." His voice, warm and smooth, carried an undertone of anger, and his presence filled the small schoolroom like dark smoke. "Where is Lunetta? I require her presence."

"I have not seen her since Rose's lesson began. As per your order, I saw her out the door before the lesson began," Sofia replied with perfect truth.

She'd closed her eyes after shutting the door on me.

Father's magic, sourced from the moon, coiled through the room, only to meet the slow burning fire of Sofia's, preventing it from tunneling under the seat or entering the side of the room where she stood.

"Move, woman," he said with soft menace.

"This is the best place for me to illustrate Rose's lesson, my lord. I'm afraid I can't accommodate your wish."

He stepped closer to her, the glossy leather of his boot near my eye. My heart hammered and I fought the urge to pant.

"Do you know what I could do to you?" he asked, his voice soft as summer rain. I cringed inside. The angrier he became, the softer he spoke.



He towered over her. A large man, with strong hands, accustomed to the sword and fighting. Once he grabbed you, you couldn't get free, no matter how hard you tried.

"Do you remember the penalty for harming one of Soulrider's apprentices?" she asked, her tone and volume as smooth as if she were asking what sweetener he preferred in his tea.

In the pause, Rose and I hardly dared breathe. Father had raged when Canta, Rose's mother, hired Sofia to teach Rose. She'd called in a favor owed to her family, and the Sorcerer Soulrider had sent his least favorite apprentice. But even his worst apprentice was better than any other teacher in the city.

Only Sofia knew what her contract with the Soulrider to teach Rose said, and she often invoked it in moments like this.

And Soulrider's reputation was not merciful or sweet.

Father turned on his heel and slammed the door behind him.

"Continue," Sofia said after a moment, her voice unruffled. She reseated herself.

Even Father feared to anger a Sorcerer. For a man cursed with uncontrollable rage, he managed to find a modicum of control when his target might be more powerful than him.

Strange how even though I kept growing, my father's fists never became smaller. The maids would have reported by now that I'd ruined sheets with blood when I became a woman a week ago, and I wanted to avoid the beating.

"Remember, when you call your magic, that you need to limit the power you call by focusing on the effect. Less power makes a low-level standing effect continue even if you aren't concentrating on it. Here, come sit by me so I can see how you call the magic better."

Sofia spoke for any remaining magic father had left to listen. She could feel the subtlest magic, and her words were a warning to me and Rose to continue with the pretense.

Rose's skirts, pale blue silk threaded at the hem with lace with gold, fell over what open space remained.

"Let's practice Flare now," Sofia said.

I bit my lip. Flare would disrupt any effects Father had left in the room, and it was a basic spell. One that everyone needed to know. One that I did simply by existing.

The dancing twisting lines of Rose's magic, soft and silky like a hair ribbon, stampeded over me like a cat running after mice. The heaviness in the room lightened.

A few minutes later, the heavy thud of the front door echoed through the corridor.

Did I dare to crawl out from my hiding spot and find another? While the pale wood of the floor was cold and hard, there was a warmth being with my sister and Sofia, the people I loved.

The blue skirt moved, and Rose's head appeared upside down. "Come out!" she whispered.

She backed away, and I crawled out. She sat on the floor next to me.

"Happy Naming Day, Luna," Sofia said softly, her green eyes warm.

Oh! When I'd seen Father on the street from an upstairs window I'd forgotten.

"This is from Mother, me and Sofia," Rose added with a small smile. She handed me a small, wrapped package. When our fingers touched, her sun-kissed skin glowed against my pale hand.

"Thank you," I whispered, unwrapping it to find a delicate gold charm of a bird with wings spread, the symbol of freedom. A chain was threaded through a loop on the top of the bird's head.

"Put it on," Sofia encouraged, and I did, the charm sparkling in the light before I tucked it under my dress of unbleached linen. Canta did what she could, but Father gave her no money for clothing for me.

Since my mother had been executed as a witch and a curser, he'd taken her dowry in recompense for being tricked into marrying her. I was penniless, and lucky I got food and a roof. He told me this often, and mocked Canta for her weakness of

using her own money to clothe me in finer clothing than the servants.

The door banged open, and there stood Father.

No warning. Nowhere to run.

Before any of us could move, he had crossed the room, his hands like iron around my arm.

I bit my lip and swallowed my cry of pain as his fingers dug deep into my arm. Making a sound wouldn't stop him and would upset Rose more. He yanked me to my feet, past Sofia and Rose. Rose clutched Sofia, whose green eyes glittered with anger.

I tripped trying to match his longer stride and he dragged me several paces on the floor before I recovered my feet. I stepped on my hem, and the cloth ripped, tangling my steps further.

"Where are you taking me?" My voice broke as he pulled me outside. He'd threatened to sell me to a brothel when I became a woman, but I'd never thought he would actually do it.

But now I was a woman, and he could.

My bones creaked as he tightened his grip. "You're a woman now, Luna. I'm taking you to your husband."

He yanked me into his study and threw a small bundle of cloth at me. My hands trembling, I hurried to unfold it.

It was a dress similar to the one Rose wore, though the fabric was a little finer. I looked from the dress to him in time to have my ear boxed.

I yelped with pain.

"Hurry up! Dress! I can't have you looking like a pauper, even if you are one. And if I see you again, I'll have the value of every coin I had to spend on it out of your hide."

Dressing as fast as I would, I still wasn't quick enough and took another blow on my back. Then he grabbed my arm and dragged me to the courtyard.

The new shoes hurt as I tried to keep up with him, pinching my toes with unyielding leather. The heels clacked on the

rough stones.

Our old carriage awaited at the end of the walk. I didn't recognize the pair of horses hitched to it; they were fine and glossy and stamped their hooves impatiently. The de Spoleto coat of arms was plain on the door, inlaid in ebony, though the wood was scratched and unpolished. By the time we reached the carriage, I was limping from the pain in my feet.

Father shoved me inside, hopping in behind me. That was scary. He never sat in the carriage when he could ride. As it jerked into motion, I huddled in the opposite corner, watching him warily.

He leaned forward, his light brown eyes hard on mine, like a hawk on its prey. I pushed myself back into the thin dusty cushion.

"Make him happy," Father ground the words out.

I had no idea what exactly that meant. Make sure the cook prepared his favorite foods?

My mouth was dry as the carriage bounced over the stone road, jostling me hard enough I had to clench my teeth to keep from biting my tongue. Father's glare didn't waver from me, and it was hard not to shake.

Finally, we arrived at a towering mansion on Noble's Hill, where the wealthy aristocrats lived in Legnali. The little resort offered cool breezes and the sea in the summer, and cold and storms in the winter. Unlike the rest of the aristocrats, Canta, Rose and I lived here year-round. Father preferred Kalion, the capital.

Father's family, the de Spoleti, were old but not rich, a cadet branch of the Imperial family. We were poor compared to the luxury that the families in this part of town lived in.

The carriage had barely stopped before Father grabbed my wrist again and jumped out. My knee banged the step painfully, making me limp even more. He dragged me through the gate, past carved stone walls encircling the yard, and down a path leading to the house. By the time we reached the door I'd almost lost the fight against tears of pain.

The door opened, revealing a tall thin man with receding black hair looking down his nose at us. “Lord de Spoleto. Lady d’Alvarez is in. Follow me.”

He turned left immediately, and the next room over was a study. A rug from Unfrijan covered the floor, all jeweled color and sinuous twining lines. The walls were lined with shelves, all in a dark wood, filled with scrolls and books and interesting little knick knacks. A woman waited near a massive desk, which had nothing on it but a single feather pen. The wood gleamed with polish.

She was tall, as tall as Father, with smooth bronze skin and black hair swept up in what looked like hundreds of thin braids elaborately coiled on top of her head. While her face was angular and sharp, her pale brown eyes were warm as she smiled.

The rose silk of her elegant gown was embroidered with golden flowers that matched the hairpins securing her hair. I clasped my hands together, awkward in my new clothing. Since I was apparently already married, I didn’t need a new gown or a red veil to cover my hair for the ceremony.

I hoped Cantia and Rose would pack up my few belongings and protect them from being thrown out or burned as my mother’s had been. Her wedding veil was the only thing I had of hers.

“Lunetta. I’m Vala d’Alvarez, your new mother. It’s good to see you again, the last time we met you were a babe in arms.” Her voice was husky and rich and she walked forward and extended her hands to me.

Her perfume surrounded me, the sweet jasmine with the bitter notes of myrrh underneath.

“My lady,” I managed to reply as I took them, my dread giving way to cautious hope. If she was kind, perhaps this new life would be better. If this wasn’t a cruel trick, or my husband wasn’t a monster. Knowing Father, he probably was.

Where was my husband? Surely, he and his father would be present to greet me too.



“Marco is ill, and Benedetto is detained until this evening,” Lady Vala said kindly, as if reading my thoughts. Then, in a cooler tone, “Emilio. Thank you for bringing her. My steward will remit the bride price as agreed later today.”

The dismissal was obvious.

I flinched at his expression, then he nodded to her curtly. “Vala. May the absent gods keep you.”

“And you,” she responded.

After a moment, my father’s footsteps faded away. My feet throbbed in time with my heartbeat. I didn’t want to glance down, but I was afraid I was bleeding into my new shoes.

Vala pressed my shoulder. “Your rooms are upstairs. I’ll walk you to them.”

She would show me instead of handing me to a servant? I wasn’t sure what to make of it.

A few steps down the hall she paused, glancing down. “Foolish girl! You should have told me your feet were injured!”

She clapped her hands. A flurry of activity followed as servants converged, one picking me up and another easing the shoes off. My feet were bleeding.

At the sight, another ran to fetch the herb master down the street. Yet another started cleaning the splotches of blood I’d left when the shoes came off.

The grandeur of her home passed in a blur as I was rushed upstairs, very different from my home. When we reached my room, the servant settled me in a chair made of fine woods and deeply cushioned in blue velvet with golden trim. From where I sat, the attached bathing chamber was clearly visible. The opposite wall was covered by a huge tapestry depicting the founding of Kalion, the stitchery and color exquisite.

So much luxury!

A round man in a plain robe walked in, carrying a large black satchel. He bowed to Lady Vala, then said, “Young lady, I’m told you injured your feet. Would you show them to me?”

I nodded and tugged the hem of my skirt up, He knelt beside me, examining my feet. "Fetch me warm water and a towel."

He twisted his fingers, the natural moon-fueled shadow of his magic brightening to the warmer shade of a healing spell. I grabbed my magic, pulling it up so it wouldn't drink up all the energy without permitting it to heal my feet.

I twisted in my seat as he cleaned my foot, then applied the magic to my cuts. Despite my best efforts, my magic consumed part of his and he frowned, looking at my foot.

His expression made me nervous, and I glanced at Lady Vala. She was staring at my foot too, and a satisfied smile curved her lips.

"That will be all, herbmaster. My steward will pay you."

He rose, bowed and left.

"I'll leave you to get ready," Lady Vala said as two more servants, both young women, walked into the room. One of them carried a tray with a crystal bottle and glass, the other headed to the bathing chamber where I heard a rush of water.

The liquid in the bottle sparkled with magic. I drank the glass the servant gave me, feeling strange as my magic gobbled up whatever it was supposed to do. There was no way I could keep it from doing that when the magic went inside me.

"I'd like to bathe alone," I said when the tub was full, steaming, full of fragrant oils.

They waited at the door as I submerged into the warmth. The water washed away the dust and fear sweat. I closed my eyes, letting the water soothe my aching muscles, the scents of jasmine and another flower lulling my senses.

Perhaps I could invite Sofia and Rose and my stepmother to visit once I'd met my husband. Since I'd be pregnant then, and a member of the d'Alvarez family. Father would have no power over me. I could protect them.

If my husband wasn't just like Father. Lady Vala didn't seem beaten down like Canta was though, so I dared to hope.

When I emerged from the bathing chamber, wrapped in a huge towel that was soft as a cloud, a new dress and jewelry had been laid out. My other clothes were nowhere to be seen.

“The evening meal will be served soon. Do you want help dressing?” asked the older of the two women.

I nodded. These gowns, rich fabrics trimmed with ribbons and delicate flowers of lace, were even finer than Rose’s. Lacing on the back meant I would need help getting it laced up. I’d never worn something fitted like that.

The silk dress whispered around me. One maid’s quick fingers tucked it up and pinned it along the hem; it had been made for someone taller than me. Even so, it was beautiful.

The other maid combed my hair out and braided it up with quick efficiency, pinning it with jeweled combs.

The powder they dusted on my face made me sneeze.

Indoor sandals were kind on my feet as I walked down the staircase. When I came to the lower floor, Vala met me in the hall. “Beautiful.”

I followed Vala to the dining room where food was laid out on a side table. It smelled delicious and looked complex. Sauces and meat and bread and side dishes...Rose and I usually ate porridge and fruit, or bread and cheese. Elaborate meals were for adults.

But I was an adult now.

Watching Vala, I mimicked her choices and then carried my plates to the table. A slice of meat with a light sauce, rice, and a green dish I assumed was a vegetable. She passed over most of the food. I took more than she did. I was hungry enough to risk looking greedy or foolish.

The meat and sauce were very rich, the rice savory with a seasoning I didn’t recognize. The green dish was sour enough to make my mouth pucker.

Vala laughed at my expression. “It’s an acquired taste.”

I swallowed quickly and took a bite of the meat to chase the taste away.

“Are you aware of what is expected when Benedetto returns?” she asked when I was done chewing.

I shook my head. “That I should do my duty and make him happy.”

She set her goblet down carefully. “Ah, I was afraid your father raised you in the strict form. What will happen might be a little uncomfortable, but Benedetto will fulfill his duties swiftly and then he’ll be gone again.”

I waited for her to continue.

“He seeks retribution for his older brother’s death.” Vala glanced away, sipping her wine. “This quest keeps him from home. You’ll live with me and his father until you’re old enough to keep your own household.”

I nodded again. If something happened to Rose, I’d do my best to avenge her. Since her mother and mine had been married in the strict form, our father owned us until he passed us to our husband and could do whatever he wished with us. I was safe from him as long as my husband didn’t reject me, but Rose was still under Father’s hand.

His friends’ opinions influenced his decisions. He didn’t want to look bad in their eyes. It would lose him status. I’d always thought that’s why he hadn’t sold me to a brothel.

Dessert, sliced fruit in cream, was brought to the table and we finished eating in silence.

Lady Vala’s voice broke my chain of thought. “Go to your room and rest now, Lunetta. Benedetto will be here soon.”

I paused. “My Lady, once my husband comes home” I flushed, “may I invite my sister and her tutor to visit?”

She smiled at me. “Of course!”

The sun had nearly kissed the horizon, filling the dining room with dull golden light. Vala lifted a finger and a servant hurried forward to escort me upstairs. In my room, with the help of a maid who’d been waiting for me, I was unlaced and undressed, the jewelry put away in a small chest near the mirror.

The nightgown the maid pulled over my head was soft and white and shockingly transparent. Worry nagged at me, but the exhaustion of the day folded over me. My eyelids drooped as I climbed into my bed. I'd wake if footsteps approached my door.

The sound of the younger maid slipping into my room woke me, "He's here. You need to be above the covers so he can see you," she whispered, snapping her fingers to summon a tiny flame to light the bedside candles.

I moved the covers and sat up. She went to the wall and pushed the tapestry to the side, slipping out through a hidden door.

Vala's voice came clearly through the shut door to the hall. "All you have to do is what comes naturally. Just pretend she's another man's wife, you seem to have no problem lying with them." The tone was sharp and tart.

The door swung open, revealing my husband. He was even taller than his mother, with sharp golden eyes, black hair and tanned skin. His tunic didn't hide broad shoulders, and he wore a sword at his hip, even indoors. Leather gloves were clenched in his left hand.

His expression was annoyed and harassed; someone being nagged.

Despite what the servant had said, I tugged the sheet toward me.

The air chilled. His expression morphed from annoyance to disgust, lips thinning, his fury a presence in the room with us. He took another step in, staring at me, and I braced myself for a blow.

He was like my father. All my hopes crumbled.

"This is a child." He snarled, turning away as though the sight of me burned his eyes. "Dead gods, did you really think I'd fuck *that*, Mother?"

The door slammed behind him, hard enough the tapestry rippled in the breeze.



What should I do now?

## CHAPTER TWO

# LUNA

ANSWERING MYSELF WAS EASY. I SHOULD GET MY SISTER AND Sofia, before anyone could change their minds. Once they were here, I was sure Lady Vala wouldn't send them away, especially since she'd said I could invite them.

A few steps took me through the passage to my chamber. I opened the wooden chest, and pulled out the dress I'd arrived in.

At least I didn't need help putting it on!

A few moments later I found a pair of low boots that fit better than the ones father had given me.

From my walks with Sofia and Rose I knew enough of how Lenali was laid out to find my way home, though it would be a long walk. Even the unfavored daughter of my house would not be permitted to walk alone in the city, but I hoped we would all be forgiven once I was back at the d'Alvarez house.

I flitted quietly down the stairs and into the yard, then out the gate when the guard took a privy break. The cool wind made me shiver, but excitement warmed me. We'd all be together again soon, and in a better home with enough food.

I did need to be careful Father didn't see me, though.

The unlighted streets frightened me. The darkness pressed down, though the slim moon provided a little light when it rose. The noises of steps reminded me of the stories about ghouls who crept out at night and devoured those foolish enough to walk on the streets. Especially children, because they were tender.

I asked Sofia about it, and she'd answered ghouls couldn't easily live in Legnali because it flooded too much and so most people were given to the pyre, so there wasn't much for them to eat. Oddly, that didn't reassure me or Rose much.

The moon was well up by the time I crept up the cracked marble steps. I hoped Father was out drinking, or with one of his mistresses.

The absent gods didn't intervene for good or ill, according to the priests. If that were true, then chance hated me rather than the gods, for Father stood near the entry hall, staring at me.

Fear rolled over me, drying my mouth and I bent almost double as I bolted up the stairs, hoping he wouldn't be able to catch me on the risers. But his legs were longer than mine and he caught up with me on the landing. His hand twisted in my hair, yanking me back from the first step of the second flight.

"What did you do so wrong that your husband refused to take you?" he roared, his lean face flushed crimson with rage.

Before I could reply, he slapped my face open handed. My lip caught on my teeth, and I tasted blood. I screamed and threw my hands up to shield myself, and he shook me like a dog with a rabbit.

Staggering, I tried to grab the hand holding my hair and he punched me in the stomach. I wheezed, then the remains of that wonderful supper heaved up, on him and me. He stared down at his stained clothing, the red flush shading to purple.

Absent gods. He would kill me now, rather than just beat me.

Rose screamed and ran down the stairs, grabbing at his tunic. "Stop, please leave her alone."

In a flash, he backhanded Rose, sending her reeling. It was the first time he had ever struck her. Her mother Canta rushed down the stairs and grabbed Father's free arm, attempting to restrain him.

"Emilio, stop this madness," Canta said. Her thin voice was almost drowned out in Rose's sobs. Slender as a reed, she was no match for his strength, but her grip dimpled the cloth of his velvet sleeve.

Father threw me toward the wall, whirled around and shoved Canta backwards with all his might. I'd caught myself before I hit the wall, so Canta was fully in my view as she tumbled down the stairs. A dull crack rang through the room as she came to the bottom, and she lay very still, her gown hiked up almost to her thighs by the fall. I wanted to straighten them, I knew that she'd hate people seeing her like that.

Her head lay at a bad angle. Father raced down the stairs to her still form.

How would he find another wife after killing his first two? And what a foolish thought to have right now.

This was our chance. I grabbed Rose's hand, hauling her up from cowering on the floor, and ran upstairs. Sofia's bedroom door flung open as we reached it. Sofia stood there with a frustrated expression.

Her eyes rested on Rose's cheek, already swelling and red and purple. "This is harm to my ward. This breach of contract I can work with," she murmured.

"We have to go, now." I winced as I breathed. My ribs stabbed me with pain now that I'd stopped for a moment.

Sofia scooped up a small bundle wrapped in a shawl sitting on her trunk, took Rose's hand, and strode for the servant's stairs. The steps were narrow and steep, but this passage was unlikely to be blocked by father or anyone he might send for to tend my stepmother.

By the time we reached the servant's entrance on the main floor the stabbing pain in my ribs made breathing hard.

"Where did he take you?" Sofia asked.

"d'Alvarez. Benedetto is my husband," I gasped.

Rose put a gentle hand on my side and frowned. "I can try to heal you, Sofia taught me the spell."

"No, my magic will just eat it. I'm fine, and we need to get far away from here." I stared at Sofia, the adult.

She nodded in agreement. Then she pressed her fingertips on Rose's eyelids, and I saw a dim glow linger when she

withdrew them.

“Rose and I will lead, since we can see clearly. And we won’t run; that will both hurt you and attract even more attention. Link arms with your sister, Luna, and I’ll walk a step behind carrying this. Your mother’s wedding veil is in here, as well as your other belongings.”

Tears pickled under my eyelids. My mother’s red veil was the only piece of her I had left. Sofia and Rose helped as much as they could and saving that was so precious to me.

I murmured “Thank you.”

Arms around linked, Rose and I turned onto the street, still walking quickly.

Tears streaked Rose’s face, but she walked steadily. I had no comfort to give; Canta was dead and getting us all safe had to be the priority.

The uneven cobbled streets were nearly deserted as we walked the road, following Sofia’s quietly spoken directions. My side ached with each stride, the reminder of Father’s blows keeping me moving.

Rose trembled beside me, her face etched with fear and exhaustion. Sofia joined us, supporting both of us with her sturdy strength down that long walk.

By the end of it, I was staggering, and Rose could barely drag one foot in front of the other. The climb up Noble’s Hill felt endless.

In the light of false dawn the imposing shape of the walled d’Alvarez mansion finally loomed before us. I spotted a familiar face guarding the gate, the same guard who’d been at this post when Father brought me here.

His expression remained professionally neutral as we approached. “My lady. You’ve been missed. Are these guests?”

Absent gods be thanked, he’d offered me a way to get them in.

“Yes! This is my sister and her tutor. Open the gate.”



“Of course, my lady.”

Once we were safely within the gate, we collapsed against the wall, gulping in air.

“Would my lady like the house to be informed of her arrival?” asked the other guard.

“Yes, I would.” I straightened, pressing an arm against my aching ribs.

He nodded to the other guard and strode toward the house. After a few more breaths, Rose and I gathered our strength and faced the house. The walk to the door was as long as I remembered.

By the time we got there, the door was open, and a servant greeted us, his features laced with confusion and concern.

“My ladies. Rest here,” he said, ushering us to a low couch in the antechamber.

Sitting, the exhaustion and fear overcame Rose and she leaned against me and was asleep in moments.

The servant hurried off up the marble stairs.

Vala glided down the stairs a moment later, clad in a flowing robe, her hair long dark hanging loose down her back. “Luna, what happened? Where did you go? And why have you returned in the middle of the night with your sister and governess?”

“Lady Vala, our father... he was angry.” I kept my voice low, glancing down at Rose’s sleeping form. “He killed Canta, Rose’s mother. We had to leave; I didn’t know who he’d beat next. Please, we need your help. If we can’t find someone to protect Rose from him, I’ll have no choice but to disappear with her and Sofia. I know you’ve been kind, but my duty to her is as great as my duty to the clan d’Alvarez, even if I’m married in.”

Lady Vala held up a hand, her expression direct. “Say no more, Luna. Of course you can stay, and clan d’Alvarez will protect your sister from harm. I’ll speak with the seneschal and tell him to see that you’re properly settled while I make the

arrangements. However, I wish to point out that had you planned this and consulted me, it might have been a less perilous adventure for all concerned.”

Relief washed over me, tempered by the rebuke. “Thank you, Lady Vala. I’ll do all I can to repay your favor.”

Lady Vala smiled, but I couldn’t quite decipher her expression. It seemed kind, but there was a gleam of something in it that made the hairs on the back of my neck stir.

“Nonsense, Luna. You’re family now, my daughter by marriage. You’ll learn all that’s needed for your position while you’re here. And once we locate my son, you can attend to the important matters.”

I was grateful for the lifeline she had thrown us, whatever other strings it might hold. The d’Alvarez family was powerful enough to protect us even if Father went to the courts to try to get Rose back. “Lady Vala. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Lady Vala nodded graciously, then walked back upstairs. As if by magic, maids appeared to help Rose and Sofia and me up the stairs and into a room where a steaming bath stood ready.

Sofia and I stripped Rose out of her soiled garments and helped her into the steaming bath. Her small frame shivered as the warm water washed away the grime of the night, if not the fear.

Once Rose was clean and dressed in a soft nightgown we helped her into bed and she fell asleep again, looking like an exhausted kitten on the huge bed.

The tub was drained, I slumped onto a stool. The tub could be refilled at the pull of a chain, but my ribs hurt so much, and I was so tired.

Sofia hovered nearby, lifting my chin with a gentle touch. “I think I could use magic to clean you and it would work.”

I smiled at her wearily. “If you can, please do.”

She wiped her hand along the damp interior of the tub, water glistening on her fingers before she blew on it, murmuring a phrase in a soft voice. A warm mist surrounded my body and

my magic licked at it, but the water didn't quite touch me. I held my power in as hard as I could.

The dirt and blood floated off me into the water and I sighed in relief. Sofia flicked her fingers toward the tub and the dirty water splashed in it.

"Are you going to be alright?" Sofia asked.

I looked up, meeting Sofia's gaze. "Maybe. I hope so. I have to be, for her."

Moving to the side of the bed, I smoothed Rose's golden hair away from her face. She looked so peaceful, so innocent. I wished I could shield her from the cruelties of the world forever.

Lady Vala cleared her throat from the door, making me jump. "Sofia, may I have a word with you?"

Sofia bowed her head then followed Lady Vala out of the room. I lingered by Rose's bedside, watching the steady rise and fall of her chest, until curiosity got the better of me. Creeping to the doorway, I strained to hear the conversation.

"...impressive credentials," Lady Vala was saying. "I do find it odd a sorcerer's apprentice is tutoring Rose."

"I don't presume to question Soulrider's decision," Sofia said. "Rose is a talented child."

"Of course," Lady Vala said. "I'm offering you a position as governess to both Luna and Rose, in addition to the task your master has given you. You will oversee their lessons and ensure their further upbringing is appropriate to their class."

Sofia sucked in a sharp intake of breath. "I am honored by your confidence, my lady. I accept."

Retreating to the bed, I sat down heavily, my mind reeling. Sofia had a strange tone in her voice, one I'd never heard before. But I was so tired.

It seemed Lady Vala's generosity knew no bounds. But I couldn't shake the nagging worry that her kindness would come with a price. My father's house taught me that. Canta had been kind, and death repaid her for that.

I'd be strong for Rose. I'd repay what needed to be repaid.

A rustle of skirts indicated Sofia's return. "Sleep, Luna, I'll watch and make sure both of you are safe."

Sleep tumbled over me. When I woke, sunlight filled the room like a golden river, and I was long. A note lay on the covers next to me.

*Luna-getting clothing for Rose. Lady Vala requests you dress in the clothing provided and attend her downstairs when you wake. -Sofia*

The clothing consisted of a knee length sleeveless tunic and bands to bind the breasts. Sofia had described them as something that women athletes and entertainers wore, and though I'd never seen them before, they were simple to put on.

I did wonder why I needed to wear them and felt strange with so much of my body uncovered. I opened the door, and a maid lingering in the hall bowed to me.

"Please follow," she said.

She led me downstairs to a long room with mirrors lining the walls and a polished wooden floor. My ribs ached as I moved and my left arm was shadowed with purple and black bruises, but I'd felt worse after a beating.

Lady Vala was waiting, dressed in divided skirts and a tunic with fitted sleeves that allowed for ease of movement. She stood by an upright tube secured to the ceiling and floor that looked like it was made of stuffed leather.

After the maid left, Lady Vala picked up a pair of fans from a small side table and held them out to me. Their weight surprised me as I took them in my hands. They looked delicate, like fantasies of ebony sticks and gold-touched white lace.

“Women may not wear swords,” Lady Vala said, “but other weapons are not forbidden. These fans have been magically treated, to make them sturdy. The sticks and guards will not break, and the leaf has a razor’s edge.”

I ran my finger along the cool metal of the fan. “Can I truly defend myself with these?”

Lady Vala smiled, the predatory curl of her lips almost making me take a step back. “Absolutely. Today, you begin your first lesson. But with a normal fan, not these. Not yet.”

I squared my shoulders, meeting Lady Vala’s gaze head-on. “Why, my lady?”

She met my gaze. “You will someday bear my grandchild. And I’m going to see to it that you can protect him. Or her. I come from the Imperial bloodline, and many women and children have died when they depended only on loyalty and guards to protect them. So my mother taught me and now I teach you.”

Her words made sense. The world had tried to break me, and until now I’d had no real way to fight back. Now I could learn to fight, to protect myself and those I loved. And Heaven help anyone who stood in my way.

Lady Vala circled me, assessing my stance as I held the fans before she passed me another set, just as heavy but without an edge I could see.

“Please, call me Domina, there’s no reason to be formal.” Domina was the term for the lady of the house, used by family and servants. I wasn’t sure which category she was putting me into.

“Of course, Domina.” If it kept Rose safe, I’d call her anything she wanted me to.

Her arms were bare, and I could see they rippled with muscle.

“First, practice hitting this.” She indicated the stuffed tube. “Like this.”

I watched her as she struck fast and hard. “Will you teach me how to use other weapons?”

Lady Vala's expression hardened, a flicker of something dark. "Of course. Someday, you'll see your father again."

The words hit me like a physical blow, and my breath caught in my throat.

"The news today," Lady Vala said, "is that there was a terrible accident. Canta fell."

Rage surged through me. Of course. An accident. That's what they were calling it. As if my father's hands weren't stained with blood. Since Canta wasn't a citizen of Dimare, her death was nothing more than a tragic mishap.

I planted my feet firmly on the polished wood floor. The anger thrummed in my veins, a wild and reckless energy seeking release. "So I strike this as you did?"

A glimmer of approval shone in Lady Vala's expression. "Yes. As you hit, focus on your balance, your center of gravity. Imagine yourself as a tree, rooted deep and unshakable."

I followed her instructions. It was harder than it looked. Lady Vala guided me through the movements, her voice a steady anchor as I lost myself in the exertion.

An endless time later, my muscles burned with exertion, and bruises shrieked in protest. But beneath the exhaustion, a harsh determination had taken root.

With a certainty that echoed deep in my soul, I promised myself I would never be helpless again.

## CHAPTER THREE

# LUNA

### FOUR YEARS LATER

Despite the roaring fire, the air in Benedetto's chamber was cold. More so because I stood naked, shivering. Anxious nerves knotted in my stomach. Pulling my auburn hair forward, I tried in vain to cover my exposed breasts, but the strands barely reached.

Vala and Georgio d'Inari stood next to me. Since Benedetto was now tenth in line to inherit the emperor's wreath and our marriage had not yet been consummated, witnesses were required to affirm that I was whole and sound of body and mind. And that the act happened.

I wished we had done this when I was fourteen, without anyone watching. I had no idea how Vala had brought Benedetto home for this, but assumed it involved a great deal of pressure.

Both of them had already inspected me and pronounced me unmarred, though a midwife would confirm my virginity separately. Now we waited for my once again tardy husband.

The door slammed open and Benedetto stormed in. An angry frown slashed across his handsome face. Without acknowledging anyone, he stripped off his garments in swift, sharp motions, tossing them at a small chair in the corner opposite the bed. His broad, muscled shoulders and chest came into view, followed by a defined stomach that narrowed to slim hips.

I tried to avert my gaze out of modesty, but my attention kept straying back to his impressive physique. In moments, the only thing adorning his tan skin was the glint of a family seal ring on his right hand.

My cheeks flushed hot. The vulnerability of being bare before him, before the witnesses, made me want to sink through the elaborately woven rug and disappear. Is this truly necessary? People watching us while we, while we...

Benedetto's deep brown eyes finally met mine, dark with an emotion I couldn't quite discern - resentment? Impatience? His intense stare sent a shiver down my spine that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. I clutched my hair tighter against my chest.

This was my husband. This beautiful, intimidating man who could barely stand to look at me. I couldn't blame him. What man would want a bride forced upon him in an arranged political match when he could have his choice of lovers?

Hurt pride mingled with indignation in my chest. I didn't want him either, I wanted safety for my family.

Straightening my shoulders, I lifted my chin. I refused to cower before him, even if I had no choice in how we consummated our marriage. Within, I desperately hoped my boldness hid the nervous quaking of my knees and hands.

Absent gods, let this unpleasantness be over with quickly.

Vala approached me, her calm gaze searching my expression. Her slender fingers touched my shoulder and I had to fight the urge to flinch away.

"Lie back on the bed, dear," she said softly, but it was clearly no request. "And spread your legs so the midwife can examine you."

My face burned with humiliation as I walked to the bed and complied, positioning myself on the plush bedding and parting my thighs. I stared resolutely on the ornate ceiling, trying to pretend I was somewhere, anywhere else.

The midwife's weathered hands were brusque and impersonal as she inspected my most intimate area. A mortified breath



escaped when she spread me open. Tears of shame and anger pricked at the corners of my eyes. I'd learned the control to not let them fall, and I blinked rapidly to clear them.

I would not be seen as weak.

After an eternity, the midwife stepped back. "This woman is intact," she said matter-of-factly to the room.

I felt more than saw Benedetto move to the bed, the mattress dipping under his weight. His large hands gripped my hips, dragging me roughly up toward the pillows.

"I'll make it fast," he said tersely, already positioning himself between my legs. Hard muscle brushed my inner thighs and I tried to close them in reflex, despite knowing better.

Then he was pushing inside me, stretching and filling me. I bit my lip hard to stifle a pained cry at the burning intrusion. Benedetto didn't pause, just drove forward until he was fully seated.

I'd been beaten many times by my father. I'd survived weapons training with my mother-in-law. This intimate pain was somehow worse, though the injury was less. The discomfort bordered on agony, and I dug my nails in the sheets.

A few shallow thrusts and it was over, Benedetto pulling out and rising from the bed in one swift motion.

Without so much as a backwards glance at me or the stunned witnesses, he strode from the room, leaving me aching and empty in more ways than one. I curled onto my side, hugging my knees to my chest, grateful for the curtain of my hair hiding my face.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but still the tears came, silent and hot as they trailed over the bridge of my nose and dampened the silk bedding beneath my cheek. Never again, I thought bitterly, from this moment forward I was a wife in all ways and could not be set aside. A child in me bought a place for me and Rose.

"Rest, Luna," Vala said from somewhere behind me.

I nodded without opening my eyes, not trusting my own voice. The quiet rustle of skirts and click of the door latch told me I was finally alone. Slowly, I uncurled my aching body and sat up, wincing at the tenderness between my thighs.

Gingerly, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and stood, pulling the rumpled sheet around me like a cloak. I needed to cleanse myself, to wash away any evidence of my humiliation.

But as I took a tentative step toward the washbasin, I paused. Something was...missing. Frowning, I reached a hand between my legs and felt...nothing. No warm trickle down my inner thighs, no telltale wetness.

My breath caught in my throat as Vala's earlier words echoed in my mind. She had warned me of the mess, of how Benedetto's seed would fill me as he sought to quicken a child in my womb. And yet, there was no seed. No attempt at conception.

I sank back onto the edge of the bed, stunned. He did not want me, even for that. I recalled the expression on his handsome features, the way he had avoided looking at me, touching me any beyond the strictly necessary.

Repulsive, I thought numbly, that must be what he finds me. So repulsive he cannot even bear to plant his child in my body. A broken sound, halfway between a laugh and a sob, escaped my throat.

A soft knock at the door startled me and I hastily dashed the tears from my cheeks. "Come in," I said, hating the tremor in my voice.

Sofia slipped into the room. Her calm face shifted to quiet concern as she took in my red-rimmed eyes and the sheet clutched around me like a shield.

"Oh, Luna," she crossed to sit beside me on the bed. "Are you alright?"

I turned my face away, fresh tears sliding down my cheeks. "Why? Why must it be like this? So... cold and horrible..."

Sofia wrapped an arm around my shoulders, a quick comforting movement. The rare gesture helped the hurt

burning in my chest.

“It’s not always so, Luna. When two people care for one another, share a bond of affection or desire...it is something beautiful. Far different from a bargain being sealed.”

A shuddering sigh escaped my lips. Different. Yes, it would be different if my husband desired me, wanted me. If I were more than a repulsive duty to him.

“Rest now,” Sofia said gently, guiding me to lay back against the pillows. Her fingertips, blessedly cool, stroked my forehead, the gentle touch coaxing me into relaxing.

“Sleep, child,” she crooned softly. “Sleep without dreams...”

And as I surrendered to oblivion, one final thought flickered through my mind.

I would make him want me. Someday, somehow, I vowed, my husband would crave me. And then *I* would decide if I wanted *him*. No matter what it took.

Then weariness dragged me down into velvet darkness.

I startled awake, blinking in the bright sunlight streaming through my window.

This wasn’t my room. The events of yesterday replayed in my head, and I thumped back on the pillows. I should have gone back to my room. Judging by the angle of light, I’d missed my daily lesson with Vala on weapons and etiquette.

Sofia always visited before the lessons. This was very late for me to sleep. Rubbing sleep from my eyes, I sat up, wincing at twinges reminding me that I was still tender. I needed to get up.

Frowning, I slid from the bed, feet sinking into the plush rug. While I slept, someone had left my usual training garb on a chair and filled the pitcher with warm water. After cleaning myself and dressing, I padded to the door and peered out into the hall.

Since I’d already missed my lesson with Vala, I hurried down the corridor to Sofia’s chambers.

“Sofia?” I tapped lightly before pushing open the door.

Rose put a finger over her lips. She sat next to Sofia’s bed, Sofia lay with a damp cloth draped over her eyes.

My sister ghosted to my side. “Soulrider required her to do a ritual last night. This is the backlash.”

“To invoke a Name?” I asked.

Rose nodded.

I breathed, my voice a tiny whisper, “The last time she used valerian root and willow bark. Did you check the stillroom? They helped then.”

We hurried to the small alcove that housed Sofia’s collection of dried plants and tinctures, I rummaged through the shelves. To my dismay, the jars we needed were empty.

I glanced at Rose, biting my lip. “I can go to the apothecary and fetch more.”

“I’ll go with you.” Rose looked mulish. “Neither of us should go out alone, you know that.”

I knelt by the bed. “Sofia, I’m taking Rose with me to the apothecary to get herbs to help with your headache. Do I have your permission?”

“Yes,” she murmured. “Be careful.”

Rose followed me into the hall. “Do you need help lacing up?”

I nodded. It would be faster. I strode to my room, pulling a dress from where it hung, pulling my shift on. When I straightened it, Rose held the dress and I stopped so she could throw it over my head. It glided down my body, falling in heavy folds. I held the bodice in place as Rose laced it.

It was by no means as tight as fashion called for, but now I was clad decently for the streets.

We hastened together down the stairs only to draw up short at the sight of Vala gliding across the foyer. Inwardly I winced and forced a smile as she turned to us.

“Luna, I’m glad to see you up and about. Little Rose, is school over so soon?” she asked warmly. “Where are you both off to in such a hurry?”

I bowed slightly, giving her the respect due to my mother-in-law. “The apothecary. Sofia isn’t well, so we are going to purchase herbs.”

“You needn’t bother with that,” Vala waved a ringed hand. “I’ll send a servant. You girls shouldn’t wander about unescorted.”

“No,” I said, more sharply than I intended. Taking a calming breath, I amended, “That is, we’re happy to do it. Sofia is dear to us, we want to help.”

Vala’s eyes narrowed fractionally, but her warm smile never wavered. “Very well. But you’ll take a guard for propriety. Perhaps...” She tapped a finger to her lips, considering. “You might see if the fishmongers have any live torpedo fish. Applying one to the scalp can work wonders for a migraine.”

I’d heard that as well. We’d need a basket to carry them in though. I didn’t know how long they lived out of water, but perhaps Rose could use her magic to deal with that. “We’ll certainly look into that. Thank you for the suggestion.”

Grabbing Rose’s hand, I tugged her out the door before Vala found some way to make us delay for an escort. Vala’s words nagged at me as we passed through the gate and headed down the hill toward the market that nestled at its base.

Perhaps we should’ve let her send a servant. Was I putting Rose at risk, insisting we run this errand ourselves? I shook off the thought. The apothecary was very near, on the side of the market next to the hill. What could happen?

I glanced over my shoulder. One of the guards from the gate trailed us, hand resting on his sword hilt. Vala must have made a standing order we be escorted recently. The last time we hadn’t had a guard, a few months ago.

The sun-warmed stones did little to dispel the sudden chill that crept down my spine. What other orders were in place? Vala had always been kind, but I’d never been able to warm to her.

On some level it felt like the kindness extended to horses, or making sure a tool was well kept. Impersonal though appreciated on my part.

Biting my lip, I squeezed Rose's fingers and quickened my steps, eager to conclude our mission and return to the palazzo. The sooner we fetched Sofia's herbs, the sooner this inexplicable dread might pass.

As we hurried along the way we always took down to the base of the hill and turned the corner onto a narrow, shadowed street, my unease grew. I'd never thought about it before, but several alleys off this street led toward Subura, where poverty and desperation bred in equal measure. Glancing back, I met the guard's wary eyes and saw my own disquiet mirrored there.

"Luna," Rose said, her fingers tightening around mine. "Something feels off."

I quickened our pace down the street. "We'll be through in a moment."

No sooner had the words left my lips than six figures emerged from the last alley ahead of us, blocking our path. My breath caught as sunlight glinted off polished armor and bared steel. These were no mere cutpurses or back-alley thugs.

Confusion warred with fear as I pushed Rose behind me, my free hand fumbling for the fan lopped to my bodice. The people of Subura could scarce afford bread and oil, let alone arms and armor. Who were these men?

"Stay back," our guard said, unsheathing his sword and moving in front of us.

The tallest of the men laughed, a harsh, cruel sound that turned my spine to ice. "The girls. Hand them over and you may yet live."

Bitter realization crashed over me. This was no chance encounter. They'd come for us specifically. Who would want both of us? Who felt strong enough politically to challenge the d'Alvarez clan?

The men surged forward, blades flashing. Our guard met their charge with a defiant shout, steel ringing against steel.

I shifted into a fighting stance, angling myself to shield Rose. “Stay behind me.”

The odds weren’t good, but I didn’t want to run in case there were others stationed behind us. It also went against the grain to desert our guard. One of the stragglers shifted within reach and I slashed at him with the razor-edged fan, aiming for the underside of his arm. The area was lightly armored and bled freely if you hit it right.

He yelled as a tide of red flowed from his arm and I danced back, keeping myself between Rose and the others.

My heart hammered against my ribs. There was a strange feeling of freedom in this moment, rather than fear.

I pivoted, slashing at another thug trying to maneuver past me. The first had fallen to his knees, trying to stem the steady pulse of his life flowing onto the dirty cobblestones.

“Luna, what do we do?” Rose’s terrified words barely reached my notice over the thrum of blood in my ears.

The thug narrowly avoided my slash, backing away.

Vala had taught me to take advantage of the way a gown concealed my body, so it was harder to guess my next move. The downside was that it did hamper free movement.

Movement in the corner of my eye. I shifted my attention just in time to see our guard stagger, a crimson stain blooming across his chest. He crumpled to the ground, his sword clattering uselessly on the cobblestones.

“Dead gods rotting.” The curse ripped from my throat, raw and angry.

The leader stepped over his body, The leader of the pack smirked, twirling his blade with a casual menace. “Nowhere to run now, bitches. You hurt one of mine? You want to play? Let’s see what you’re made of, girl.”

He lunged faster than I’d anticipated. I barely managed to deflect his strike, the impact shuddering up my arm even as

the fan deflected it. Absent gods, he was strong.

Kill him fast, don't let him wear me down. Rose hung in the balance.

I countered with a slash of my own, aiming for the gap in his armor at the shoulder. He dodged, circling like a predator toying with its prey.

"Feisty. I like that. More fun to break."

The thugs chuckled, a loathsome chorus that only stoked the inferno raging inside me. I wouldn't let them touch her. Wouldn't let them snuff out her simple happiness in life like some cheap candle.

Snarling, I charged, a whirlwind of desperate strikes fueled by long hard lessons. He had the advantage of strength and reach, but I was fast and stronger than I looked.

The leader's eyes widened in surprise as I pressed the attack, driving him back a step. Then another. For one glorious, fleeting instant, I dared to hope.

Until his blade caught the fan at just the right angle, sending it flying from my grasp. It skittered across the ground, well out of reach, leaving me defenseless.

No. Not defenseless. Never again.

As he grabbed for my arm, I ducked back, snarling, "Rot you!"

Something deep within me answered, a rush of power that exploded from my body in a whip of darkness. It hurt and felt good at the same time, like a lifelong pressure being relieved, but needing to break the vessel that held it in.

The leader stumbled back with a pained grunt, clutching at his face. "Void-eaten witch,"

My next blow caught him in the face, and with a wet ripping sound, his nose slid completely off his face. He screamed as the tide of rot continued across his face.

I scooped up my fan, whirling as a piercing scream shattered the air. Two of the men had taken advantage of the distraction



to grab Rose. She kicked and thrashed in their grip.

Our father stood beside her, smiling at me. Only a fool would take that curve of his mouth as anything but the threat of pain. He wore a thick belt, close to a professional guard's in appearance, though the rest of his clothing were normal long tunic and light cloak.

Panic clawed at my mind, icy tendrils of dread snaking through my chest.

If I had to go through him to get to my sister, then I would. I ran forward. He raised a fist and I skipped to the side, skirts swaying, and slashed at his face with the fan.

I thought he'd dodge it entirely, intending to push him back so I could maneuver, but the edge of the fan nicked his cheekbone, a tiny trickle of blood running down his cheek.

Fast as an angry cat, he blocked my progress and snarled, "If you don't drop the fan and yield, Rose dies. You've used all the power in your tainted blood killing that fool. There's no way out, Lunetta. Moonchild."

Moonchild. A bastard conceived from demons of the dark moon.

He'd never gone that far before. Sadly, it had no power to hurt me.

I dodged around him.

One of the thugs held a knife to Rose's throat, his hand buried in her hair. She'd stopped screaming, her eyes huge with fear and pain.

Knowing my father, he met every word. I didn't want to drop the fan, but I was out of options.

It clanged as it hit the stones paving the alley. "If you touch me, the d'Alvarez will come for your head."

"We'll see about that. Hold her!" my father snapped.

Two of the remaining men strode to my sides, each grabbing one of my wrists in a crushing grip and pulling my arms far to the side.

My father undid his belt. As it kept on unwinding, I saw that he'd actually used a centurion's whip as his belt today, in preparation for what he meant to do. 4 lashes from that would lay my spine bare. I struggled, but I had no leverage, and the two thugs were braced and strong.

The whip hissed in the air before it struck, the thick sharp-edged cutting through the fabric of my gown and the light leather of my bodice as if they were wisps of fog. I jerked forward, gritting my teeth. I knew I'd eventually scream, but I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction for as long as I could.

Another blow fell, crisscrossing the first. My breath hissed between my teeth in something perilously close to a sob. The fabric of my gown flapped against my sides. Pain streaked through me, centered on the two stripes. Every movement hurt.

I panted in time with the pulsing pain, waiting for the third blow. He made me wait for what felt like hours before the third lash hit my back. Pain exploded down my spine, and I screamed. Rose's scream joined mine.

Father laughed.

In that pause, heavy metal-shod sandals clattered on the stones of the nearby street. The sound caught everyone's attention. Rose, dropped all her weight straight down, breaking free from her captor. She bolted for the head of the alleyway.

Lithe as a little deer, she dodged his attempt to recapture her and ran straight into a burly man stepping into the alley. He wore the tunic of a d'Alvarez house guard.

He caught her, shouting "They're here! Gaius is down!"

Sofia, face drawn with pain, walked into view. She wore only a belted robe and her silver-streaked dark hair fell loose down her back. I'd never seen her in public so undressed.

She pulled Rose into her arms and stared down the alley.

An unseen, unfelt wind stirred her hair. She said, quite calmly, "You harmed my student."

The cobblestones buckled, swallowing the men other than my father to their hips. Ghastly snapping noises and screams followed as the stones crushed the men, who thrashed and then lay still.

I took a careful step forward.

Father glared at Sofia. "Not today, failure."

She beckoned me forward. "By the contract, not until Rose is of age. Until then, enjoy the air you breathe, Emilio de Spoleto."

The word hissed in the alley, as if the stones echoed it.

Despite the agony of my back, I hurried forward to Sofia.

Rose hovered by me as Sofia turned to examine my back. "I can't heal it magically, but there are a lot of things I can do to minimize the scarring. You and you, pick her up and mind her back. Rose, go back with them. I need fresh lionheart and a few other medicinals that I don't normally keep. Take her to her room and lay her on her belly, I will be back as soon as I can."

The trip back to the d'Alvarez residence blurred in my mind with each spasm of pain. Despite the care that the two guards showed carrying me, each step jolted my back, and I drifted in and out of consciousness.

I came back to full wakefulness as a cool cloth was put on my back.

Sofia's brisk voice came from above me. "Hold still, I'm going to have to soak off the bits of your gown and your bodice out of the wounds to prevent infection. Once I have them free, I'll paint it with lionheart to keep it from festering. Be brave Luna. You'll live, and I can fix the rest."

"Drink this. "A cup touched my lips.

I drank thirstily. The brew was bitter enough to make me gag, with a strange floral aftertaste. But within a few moments the world started to float.

"Sleep, Luna," Rose whispered.

I trusted them, and I let the sleep take me.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# BENEDETTO

### 3 YEARS AFTER THE ALLEY ATTACK

I approached the gates of the converted fortress. It crouched among recently scythed grasses and harshly pruned peach trees. Once it guarded the Deadbridge, but a few generations ago it had become an asylum for the madmen and women of Kalion. Its smoke-stained gray stone walls and barred windows reminded me of an above ground dungeon.

The verdigris crusted gate creaked open when I shoved it. The stench of wet stone and decay from the nearby Volanta River hung in the air as I crossed the lawn.

Nine months had passed since I last passed this gate. A twisting knot of dread and resignation settled in my gut as the gloomy shadow of the building swallowed me. Far afield, I hadn't been able to visit Francesco in months.

Visiting him was like drinking a bitter brew recommended for its healing properties. Short term misery in hope of a reward that rarely materialized. Rather like visiting the family home, which I'd avoided for the past three years.

Memories of my wife's alluring scent, earthy and floral, like saffron, rose at the thought. Followed close by the fear in her large grey eyes. I shoved the thoughts aside, not without a flicker of regret. I had no ill feelings for her, but taking her innocence was the price demanded by my parents to continue my mission.

So I'd done it in a way to minimize the humiliation for both of us.

If fulfilling my duty as a husband, loveless though the union might be, granted me the money and resources I needed, I'd do it again. I'd done far worse than lay a quivering maiden in my time.

The funds released after I did my duty had gotten me to a port where I'd gotten clues as to where Moonshifter lived. Knowing the location of the sorcerer who shattered Francesco's mind thirteen years ago meant I was a step closer to my goal.

Francesco healed or the sorcerer spitted on my blade.

Some days, I couldn't remember which I wanted more.

I slammed the brass knocker hard against the door.

After the attendant manning the door scuttled off, I only had to wait a few minutes. Soon enough, the plump figure of the chief physician waddled into the small antechamber.

"Lord d'Alvarez," he greeted me, bowing his head. "We were not expecting you today. I trust your journey was pleasant?"

He reeked of camphor. While it wasn't an unpleasant scent in moderation, this was almost pungent enough to make my eyes tear.

"Pleasant enough," I said curtly. "Take me to my brother."

The physician motioned for me to follow. The narrow windows on the side of the hall by the river showed glimpses of sun on water until we reached the areas that housed those committed to care here. This was where the poor lived. Contrary to popular belief, the poor did run mad from time to time.

I paid, and paid well, for Francesco to have his room on an upper floor.

As we ascended the creaking wooden steps to the second floor, I steeled myself for the heartbreak of seeing Francesco. His was the third door in the hall, and at least this time, he wasn't screaming. Drawing a deep breath, I stepped through the door to my brother's chamber.

The room was as I remembered it, clean and comfortable, though shadows of writing on the walls showed despite persistent scrubblings. On his bad days, Francesco used whatever came to hand to write on the walls, and strange glyphs and symbols lingered.

Soft lavender scented the air, mingling with the sweet aroma of fresh flowers adorning a nearby vase. Sunlight streamed through the barred window, casting a warm glow on the crisp, clean linens of Francesco's bed.

Yet even these small comforts couldn't ease the knot of misery twisting in my gut at his imprisonment here.

Francesco sat hunched in a chair secured to the floor, his long dark hair wild and unkempt, his sharp eyes now vacant and haunted. The angular face we both inherited from our father was gaunt on him, the cheekbones almost sharp enough to cut.

It was as if the madness consumed him mind and body.

"Francesco," I said, squatting next to him. I kept my hand on my blade; he'd tried to take it to harm himself in the past. "It's me, Benedetto. It's good to see you again."

For a moment, he didn't react, lost in whatever hellish visions flitted through his haunted mind. Then, slowly, he focused on me, a flicker of recognition animating his features.

"B-Benedetto?" His voice sounded raspy from disuse. "Is it truly you? Not a memory?"

"Yes, I'm here." I clasped his hand. Thin, frail and bony. I'd ask what he was eating later. "I'm sorry I've been away so long."

Francesco leaned toward me, a feverish intensity overtaking his features. He gripped my hand with surprising strength, his nails digging into my skin.

"Listen to me," Francesco said, his hands shaking as he clenched them on mine with unexpected strength. "She's coming for you, brother. Moonshifter, she covets the dark moon's curses, and Ruin walks with you, searching for the Lord of Nightmares..." His words tumbled out in a frantic stream.

I listened intently, trying to piece together any sense from the fragments of his shattered mind. “Slow down, Francesco. Is this Ruin the person or the action?”

“She is destroyer of kingdoms, the bringer of desolation.” He shuddered. “Her journals told the secrets, the reasons for the gods’ absence, the lost magics...when I read them, my eyes turned to black gold, and dropped out of my head, overcome by the echoes of her rage...”

I’d heard rumors when I came to the capitol, whispers of a rare tome surfacing in Legnali, a place I normally avoided. A friend had mentioned it in passing, that it had already been sold to an unknown buyer. I’d asked the shop’s name. Antiquities & Rarities.

The sorcerer Ruin’s story was a tale everyone heard as a child, a cautionary fable about the dangers of unchecked sorcery. Some argued that the sorcerer didn’t actually exist. Others said when she raised her sigil and took her name, she left a trail of destruction in her wake, razing entire realms before vanishing into legend.

All that happened long ago, long before Kalion was founded, and no other sorcerer had awakened that name when they ascended. But if Francesco’s ramblings held any truth...if reading Ruin’s journal was part of what maddened him...

I needed to find that book. If it truly existed, it might hold the key to curing my brother’s condition, or perhaps lure Moonshifter to me too.

I’d give all I had to exact revenge on the sorcerer responsible for Francesco’s descent into madness.

My brother’s mutterings grew more urgent. “You must stop her, Benedetto. Before it’s too late, before she claims you too...the vixen and the wolf...one will save, one will damn...”

I squeezed his hand back, trying to offer some measure of comfort. “I will, brother. I swear it.”

My mind raced as I considered my next move. In my searches, I’d known Cassius, the owner of Antiquities & Rarities for a long time. He was tight-lipped about his clientele in the best of



circumstances. Getting information from him would require a deft touch.

And if deft didn't work, brutal was always an option.

Once I had the journal in my hands, I'd see if it furthered my goals. I'd chased ghosts and legends, delved into the darkest corners of the arcane in the past few years. What was one more shadow?

For Francesco's sake, for the salvation of my brother, I would risk anything. Even if it meant spitting in Ruin's eye.

Francesco clutched at my sleeve as I prepared to leave, the black cloth bunched in his sallow fingers. "Don't go, Benedetto. Please, don't leave me here alone."

His words made my chest tighten. I turned back, pulling him into a hard embrace. "I have to, Francesco. But I promise, I'll return soon. I won't stop searching for answers, for a way to help you."

He clung to me, his forehead pressed against my shoulder. I sensed the desperation in his grasp, the fear of being left to his cold, unforgiving madness.

The brother who gave me my first practice sword, who stole apples with me, all those memories rose in a flood as I gently disentangled myself from his hold.

I cupped his face in my hands, looking directly into his hollow eyes. "Trust me, brother. I will never abandon you."

Francesco stared at me for a long moment before he finally nodded, a glimmer of the man he was surfacing briefly. I squeezed his shoulder, offering a reassuring smile before turning to leave.

As I stepped out of the room, I paused by the attendant who closed and locked the door. Pulling out a pouch from my belt, I extracted several dragons, gold coins worth a month's wage for him, and pressed them into the man's palm.

"Continue caring for my brother as if your life depends on it," I commanded. "Because it very well might."

The attendant swallowed, nodding vigorously. “Of course, my lord. I’ll do everything in my power to ensure Lord Francesco’s comfort and well-being.”

Satisfied, I turned on my heel and strode down the hallway.

As I emerged from the building’s shadow, the sun’s warmth was like a mockery against my skin. The weight of years pressed down on me like a physical burden.

The cobblestone streets of Kalion bustled with life as I made my way back to the city center. Merchants hawked their wares, their voices rising above the clatter of shoes and clogs on the stones. Sedan chairs containing noblewomen strolled by, the curtains looped back so the occupants could window shop.

I cut through the crowd with purpose, turning over plans. The tome Francesco had mentioned, Ruin’s journal... it was the first potential lead I’d had on the direct cause of his insanity. If the rumors were true, if it truly contained the dark curses that had shattered my brother’s mind...

For every curse, there was a counter. I just had to find it.

It was possible Moonshifter had set Francesco to read it to see if it held mental traps for the unwary. My brother had been the sorcerer’s apprentice before he lost his mind.

I shook my head, pushing down the flicker of excitement that threatened to rise in my chest. Hope for a cure was a luxury I couldn’t afford, not until I held the answers in my hands.

Around me, the city pulsed with energy. Laughter spilled from taverns, mingling with the scent of simmering stews and beer. Children darted between the legs of the adults, their faces smudged with dirt but their eyes alight with mischief.

Out here, life went on, vibrant and chaotic and gloriously ordinary.

As I continued walking, unease prickled the back of my neck. The sense of being watched was unshakable. That was normal, since several of my distant cousins had met with accidents and nudged me far too close to the imperial wreath. I’d be glad when someone else inherited it and produced a dozen or two babes.

The buildings here were a mix of grand marble structures and crumbling tenements, a physical embodiment of the city's dual nature.

I contemplated my next move as I turned down a side street, the shadows lengthening as the afternoon sun dipped toward the horizon. Gambling and socializing at The Angry Octopus seemed like the best bet to gather information about the mysterious tome. The tavern's patrons were known for loose tongues and high-stakes gambling, a perfect combination for me.

Gambling debts could buy so many secrets, and I was a very good gambler.

The Angry Octopus came into view, the orange and blue namesake octopus painted on the wall above the door. I pushed open the heavy door and stepped inside, immediately assaulted by a wave of noise and heat.

The tavern was exactly as I remembered it - a rowdy, smoke-filled room with low ceilings and plaster peeling off the stone walls. A few sad frescoes, mostly faded and stained, depicted scenes of hunting and sports. The air was thick with the scent of spiced wine, roasted meat, and the acrid tang of sweat.

Tables were scattered haphazardly around the room, occupied by a motley assortment of patrons. One of the charms of this place was the mix of customers.

Rough laborers in soiled woolen tunics rubbed elbows with nobles in jewel toned silks, the boundaries of class blurred by alcohol and the lure of easy money.

I scanned the room. There were a few familiar faces, men I'd crossed paths with before. Here a merchant, there a minor noble, a gambler at one of the tables who still owed me money from our last encounter.

I made my way to the bar, the floorboards creaking under my boots. The barkeep, a grizzled man with a scar bisecting his left eyebrow, looked up as I approached.

"Benedetto," he said in greeting. "Been a while. The usual?"

I nodded, sliding a coin across the stained wood. Today I had no desire to be subtle; I wanted my answers quickly. “Who would know information on a recently surfaced rare book? A journal, supposedly once belonging to Ruin.”

The barkeep’s eyebrows shot up. He leaned in closer, lowering his voice. “Dangerous thing to be asking about. Folks who stick their noses in that kind of collecting tend to end up dead or worse.”

“I’ll take my chances,” I countered. “What have you heard?”

He shrugged, pouring me a measure of amber liquid, distilled by the wild tribes to the north. “Not much. Rumors, mostly. Gossip has it that the book was sold to a private collector, some rich bastard with a taste for the forbidden.”

I took a sip of my drink, the alcohol burning a path down my throat. “Any idea who?”

“No names,” the barkeep shook his head. “But I’d start with the merchants. They’re the ones who deal in rare goods and have money to burn and want to climb the ladder for position. Though I’d be careful, if I were you. Some things are better left buried.”

I smiled humorlessly. “That’s where you’re wrong, old friend. The truth needs to come out, no matter how deep it’s buried. And I intend to dig until I find it.”

Starting with a social climbing merchant wasn’t a bad idea. There were a lot of them, but I could start at the top. A book like that would cost a fortune.

I downed the rest of my drink in one swift gulp, the warmth spreading through my chest. I stood up from the bar, my gaze sweeping the room once more. Antonius, a journeyman for one of the richest merchants in Kalion caught my attention, and I made my way over to his table. He was engaged in a game of dice, his face flushed with the thrill of potential victory.

“Antonius,” I said, my tone casual. “It’s been a while.”

He looked up, surprise flickering across his features before being replaced by a practiced smile. “Benedetto, what brings

you to this fine establishment?”

I stared at the others. They shifted uncomfortably, then tossed the dice down and rose.

It was good to have a reputation for sudden lethal violence. People moved when you wanted them to.

Once we were alone at the table, I pulled out a chair and sat down, signaling to a passing serving girl for another drink. “Oh, you know, the usual. Drink, gamble, gather information. Speaking of which, I heard an interesting rumor about a certain tome.”

Antonius’s smile faltered briefly. “You know how rumors are, Bene. They’re often more fiction than fact.”

I leaned forward, my elbows resting on the table. “But every story has a grain of truth, doesn’t it? I’m particularly interested in this one. A journal, supposedly written by Ruin herself.”

He shifted in his seat, straightening his threadbare velvet sleeve with trembling fingers. “I may have heard something about that. But it’s not the kind of thing one discusses openly.”

I understood the unspoken request. I palmed several gold coins and dropped them behind his tankard, watching as Antonius’s fingers closed around them. They vanished.

“Word is,” he said, his voice lowered, “that that particular journal surfaced a few weeks ago. Caused quite a stir among certain circles. But it disappeared just as fast.”

My heart raced, the thrill of the hunt coursing through my veins. “Disappeared to where?”

Antonius shrugged. “That’s the thing. No one knows for sure. Some say it was bought by a collector, others claim it was stolen by a rival merchant. There are even whispers of sorcerer involvement, Soulriders or Moonshifter.”

I sat back in my chair, tapping my fingers on the wooden table. Sorcerers. It always came back to them, didn’t it? In specific, Moonshifter, the one who ruined my brother’s life.

“And the name of this collector or merchant?” I asked, ignoring Antonius’ subtle cues that he didn’t want to answer.

Antonius hesitated, his gaze flicking down and away. “I don’t have a name. But I know someone who might. A minor noble, Lord Orsini. He’s known to have a fondness for rare and forbidden texts.”

I smiled, the gesture sharp and predatory. “Lord Orsini. I’ll have to pay him a visit, then.”

I stood up, downing my drink in one swift motion. “Thank you, Antonius. You’ve been most helpful.”

Antonius nodded, his expression a mix of relief and trepidation. “Some secrets are better left undisturbed, Bene.”

I laughed, the sound harsh and humorless. “I’m afraid it’s far too late for that, my man. Far too late.”

I turned and made my way out of the tavern, my mind already plotting my next move. Lord Orsini. A name unfamiliar to me; he’d come onto Kalion’s social scene after I left. I’d gather information on the best way to pressure him.

The cool night breeze stroked my skin as I stepped out of the Angry Octopus, the sounds of laughter and thump of tankards fading behind me. I pulled my cloak tighter around my shoulders, heading for the rooms I rented when I was in town.

My mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, the information I had gleaned from Antonius swirling together with the fragmented ramblings of my brother. Ruin. Moonshifter. Whatever the Lord of Nightmares was. So many puzzle pieces, scattered and incomplete.

As I turned the corner, the atmosphere shifted. The street was unnaturally quiet, the shadows seeming to deepen and lengthen with each passing moment. Danger whispered to me sweetly.

I paused, my hand instinctively going to the hilt of my sword. A prickling sensation rose at the back of my neck as I scanned the street, searching for any sign of movement, any hint of danger. But there was nothing, only the eerie stillness and the soft whisper of the wind.

My senses were on high alert as I moved forward. Behind me then, the soft rustle of fabric, and the faintest scrape of a heel

on stone behind me. I whirled around with my sword in hand. But there was no one there.

I stood there for a long moment. A flicker of movement to my right alerted me and I slid into the chill moment of battle. I tensed, my hand instinctively readying my blade. Three figures leapt from the darkness, daggers glinting in the moonlight.

I shifted my stance, drawing on the power I sourced from the starlight. The world blurred as I teleported, appearing behind one attacker. My sword flashed, and he crumpled.

Another blink, and I was beside the second man. He barely had time to register surprise before my blade found his throat.

The third hesitated, fear widening his eyes. I let the starlight shimmer around me, a silent threat. He turned and fled, boots pounding on the cobblestones.

I let him go. Two bodies would serve as message enough to whoever hired them.

Using the fallen man's tunic to wipe my blade clean, I surveyed the area. This was no random attack. Someone had sent these men, someone who knew my movements.

But who? And why now?

I nudged the corpse with my boot, rolling him onto his back, and rifled his clothing, finding little of interest until my fingers brushed against a folded piece of parchment tucked into his belt. I pulled it out, smoothing the creases with a frown.

The de Spoleto family crest stared back at me, the intricate design unmistakable even in the dim moonlight. I scoffed, crumpling the note in my fist. This was too obvious, too clumsy. No one would carry such a blatant mark of their employer.

Which meant someone was trying to frame Emilio de Spoleto. But who? And more importantly, why?

He'd remarried since his second wife died, another outlander with a large dowry. His money grubbing made his peers laugh at him, and he resented it fiercely. As a father-in-law, he left a

great deal to be desired, but since he and my mother arranged the marriage, I'd have to live with him.

Unless I killed him. I'd entertained the thought a few times, generally when I had to interact with him.

I stood, casting a final glance down the street. The white stones embedded in the corners of the cobblestones caught the moonlight, casting a faint eerie glow across the scene. In the distance, I could hear the tolling of bells to mar the hour.

Pocketing the note, I headed for my rooms. The usual weariness of using my magic settled on me. I preferred not to use it, both because of the weariness and using my magic reminded me too much of the good days with Francesco. I'd send a message ahead to the wine merchant who rented me rooms when I visited Legnali. While there, I'd simply exercise care not to run into my mother, since my family was in residence there.

It was three or four days away by horse, so spending an extra day in Kalion to allow the messenger to arrive before me was in order. Provisioning would take that long, since I expected to continue travelling once I found my quarry.



## CHAPTER FIVE

# BENEDETTO

THE SUN WAS HIGH DAYS LATER AS I TOSSED MY HORSE'S REINS to a stable hand. I used this stable when I came to Legnali, so the beast would get good care. He deserved a day of rest; we'd made good time.

On foot, I headed for the narrow streets of Legnali's merchant quarter. Tightly packed buildings lined the wide streets, all active with business. The scents of garlic, leather and hot metal mingled in the air. Chickens, penned to be sold, squawked in their cage.

The small bookshop sat tucked between a blacksmith's forge and a wine merchant's stall. It bore no sign; only people who knew what it sold before arriving were welcome past its doors.

Inside, the shop smelled of old parchment, dust, and a hint of mildew combined with the aroma of marigolds. The plats were easily spelled to repel insects, and no bookshop wanted bugs eating the stock.

Floor to ceiling shelves lined the walls, bowed under the weight of ancient tomes and obscure manuscripts, plunging the room into dim shadows.

Behind the counter stood Cassius, a small, wiry man who always reminded me of a weasel. Pale skin, brown hair slicked back into an oiled braid, and a narrow nose gave the impression of watchful nerves.

I approached and placed a gold coin on the worn wooden counter. The bookseller's gaze darted to it, his thin lips curling into a faint smile.

“d’Alvarez,” he greeted me. Francesco had introduced me to this shop before he left for his apprenticeship; I’d known Cassius for nearly two decades. The man hadn’t changed at all in that time.

If the coin was there, he would sell any book or information to anyone. I appreciated that in him and made sure I had the coin available when I frequented his shop.

“I’m looking for information on a recent sale,” I said, leaning against a shelf. “A rare tome about the Sorcerer Ruin.”

Cassius hesitated. “You know I don’t talk about other customers.”

I caught his eyes. “This could help me cure Francesco.”

The words dropped like stones between us. He’d known Francesco and sold him the first book my brother used to study magic. I tried not to hold it against him, but Cassius was aware of my old anger.

“My memories of you and this place are why I don’t already have my hand on your throat, Cassius. Did you sell it?”

The old man shifted away from me fractionally. “It was a rare find. I sold it a few weeks ago.”

*Finally, the luck breaks my way.* After many dead ends, perhaps I was one step closer to finding my brother’s cure - and then making his old master pay.

I focused in on Cassius, coldly noting the bead of sweat that ran down his temple. “Who bought the book?”

The bookseller licked his lips, his eyes flickering from side to side. I could practically hear the gears turning in his head as he weighed his options.

*He’ll talk. They always do, in the end. I hope he doesn’t make me hurt him.*

I slid another coin across the counter, letting it clink against the first. The sound hung in the dusty air between us.

“Well?” My voice was low, dangerous. “You know what I’ll do if you push me.”

Cassius chewed on his lower lip. “This is for Francesco. And I don’t want to see your face in my shop ever again.”

“Talk.”

“A man,” he said. “Tall, built like a warrior. Paid in full with gold stamped from Kalion’s mint. I’ve heard he works for Tulliano Lucardi.”

*Lucardi.* The name rang familiar. A notorious social climber in Legnali, always grasping for more power and influence. I kept my expression neutral, not wanting to give away my recognition.

*Interesting. What are you plotting, Lucardi?*

I straightened, leaving the coin onto the counter. “You’ve been most helpful.”

The bookseller nodded curtly, leaving the coin on the counter. I turned to leave, mind racing with this new information.

Lucardi had the book. But why? What use did he have for this journal?

As I stepped out into the sunlit street, a renewed sense of purpose churned inside me. Taking the book from Lucardi should be a simple matter. Finding someone to read it might be a more complicated task, if I couldn’t...

*Hold on, brother. I’ll find a cure.*

I proceeded to my temporary residence in Legnali. The silk trader I rented from was always happy to accommodate me, even when I’d been short on coin. He held messages for me as well, since it was well known I didn’t reside at the d’Alvarez house when I was in town.

The two-room apartment had been furnished with fresh linens and aired. The faint scent of incense lingered in the air, a pleasant combination of sandalwood and rosemary. The merchant had left a stack of invitations on the ornate desk in my room.

I sat and flipped through them, amused by my peers and their fascination with scandal. And that fact that rumor ran faster than the swiftest mount. I’d only been in town a few hours.

Hosts loved having a rogue at their parties. It gave them something to gossip about. And I was happy to add fuel to the fire whenever possible. The smoke from that blaze helped conceal my true agenda.

Two invitations in the pile caught my interest. The first, a masquerade ball hosted by none other than Tulliano Lucardi. The heavy paper was inlaid with gold flakes, glittering in the light.

*How convenient of you, Lucardi. You've saved me the trouble of climbing your garden wall or seducing your wife. If you've gotten one recently, after all the looking you've done.*

The second invitation was a grand dance a week later. It would serve as a good distraction, a way to flirt and gather more information. The women always knew what was going on.

A smaller note bore my mother's seal. I tossed it aside without a second glance. I was not interested in her meddling or her reproaches. My little wife would be the happier for not interacting with me.

The sight of the seal triggered a flood of memories of Francesco and I as children. We were inseparable then, me running after him as soon as I could walk, always getting into mischief together. The time we snuck into the kitchens and nearly set the house on fire, or when we 'borrowed' Father's prized stallion for a midnight ride. Francesco's shout of laughter echoed in my ears, a sound I hadn't heard in far too long.

*I failed you.* Even though I hadn't known what the apprenticeship would do to him, I should have argued that dealing with sorcerers was too dangerous. Even at fourteen, I'd known that. From the lofty height of eighteen years, my brother had dismissed my worry.

My grip tightened on Lucardi's invitation. I would not fail my brother again, no matter what it took. If nothing else, the book would give me information I lacked. Perhaps Ruin could be summoned from beyond death to deal with Moonshifter.

I snorted at the flight of fantasy, then stood abruptly, the chair scraping against the wooden floor. Visiting a bathhouse and a cookshop should be my priority right now.

A few hours later, clean and fed, I strolled to the outskirts of the town, the salty sea breeze ruffling my hair. The sun beat down mercilessly, a familiar sensation, barely noticed.

The apothecary here was of Jesnani heritage, from the northern tribes that lived north of the Renhos mountains. He always had useful information, even if it wasn't about my target.

Jari's shop came into view, a small but well-maintained building surrounded by a wild garden. The scent of medicinal herbs hung heavy in the air, mingling with the tang of the ocean. Scarlet and emerald, Jesnani tokens hung from the trees and fluttered in the breeze.

He put them there to keep evil influences out, but they never stopped me.

I pushed open the door, a small bell announcing my arrival. Jari stood at a counter, grinding something in his pestle. He looked up from his work, his pale blue eyes meeting mine. He was tall, his skin sunburned an even dark pink. His skin looked even stranger surrounded by his hair, a light reddish blond.

A simple cotton tunic and trousers clothed his wiry frame, and his leather belt was adorned with the tanned scalps of his enemies.

No Jesnani warrior could marry without a collection of scalps. The tradition marked their victories.

"Back again, are you?" He wiped his hands on his apron, clean but stained by the plants and juices that were his work. "I thought your family being here would be the talisman to drive you away."

I laughed and approached the counter. "Not even that potent ward could keep me away. Have you heard any more rumors about where Moonshifter's lives now?"

Jari scratched his beard, his gaze drifting to the rows of drying herbs hanging from the rafters. "One of my cousins sent word.

Says a giant wolf, a maneater, hunts the Ygris Pass, up in the Renhos Mountains. Sounds like Moonshifter. White as snow, even in summer, with fangs as long as a spear.” He fixed me with a pointed look. “Or it could be bait.”

Of course information could be a trap. But this tidbit matched a few others I’d gathered recently.

Shoving down the excitement at a lead confirmed, I forced myself to remain calm.

“Thanks, Jari,” I said, tossing a small pouch of coins onto the counter. “For your trouble, though I won’t say no to more of your hangover sure.”

Jari nodded, pocketing the payment. He reached behind him and pulled out a handful of twists of paper. He packaged the hangover remedy in them, so you used as much as was needed each time. “I’ve seen your wife around town, d’Alvarez. She’s a lovely thing. Maybe you should find more hobbies.”

Flicking my fingers in dismissal of his words, I left the shop.

Odd he’d mentioned the girl. He wasn’t the type to find unripe fruit attractive.

Lost in thought, I nearly collided with someone. “Benedetto? Is that you?”

I looked up, startled out of my reverie. “Silas?”

Silas Valiades, an old acquaintance from school, stood before me. He was shorter than me, with curly light brown hair cropped short and a tanned complexion. His clothing, though subtly mended, was still well-made.

The Valiades clan had lost several ships over the past year, causing significant financial trouble for them.

“It’s been a while,” he said, a smile on his face but a glint of challenge in his eyes. “It’s been a bit of a day for me already. I need a fight to clear my head. If you’ve still got that famous speed, would you care for a friendly fencing bout?”

I didn’t hesitate. A good bout would help clear my head too. “Lead the way.”

Legnali had several training yards catering to the tourist population. We made our way to the nearest, only a short walk away.

Both of us stripped down to our shirts, stretching and limbering our wrists. I saluted him, raiding my blade.

“Ready?”

He grinned and saluted back, then circled to the left.

After a few easy strikes I fell into the familiar rhythm, muscle memory guiding my movements. Silas lunged, I parried, I feinted, he took the bait.

Pulling short of touching him, I shook my head, “Your guard was weak there.”

He snorted. “I let you through.”

I laughed and bowed. “So generous of you.”

But as the practice bout continued, Silas pressed harder, his strikes becoming more aggressive. I narrowed my focus on the flow of the fight.

Magic slid over Silas; he was using it to improve his speed. Not to a point where I needed to respond, but it was strange he was doing it in a friendly match.

I launched a quick attack, a low feint followed by a lunge at his chest. His move to parry my feint opened his guard and he barely recovered and dodge my deliberately slow lunge. Still, it maneuvered him until the sun was in his eyes.

Unless this turned into a killing match, I wouldn't use my magic.

“You've improved,” Silas panted, wiping sweat from his brow and squinting.

I grinned, disarming him with a flourish. “The world isn't kind to the slow.”

Silas retrieved his blade, a determined set to his jaw. We engaged again, blades clashing in a dance of steel. His smile faded, replaced by a grim determination.

Relaxed, I held my blade the inside line, my hand palm up, awaiting his next move. He lunged, aiming for my throat.

I parried, and stepped back into position, my expression darkening. "Careful, Silas. I don't want to kill an old friend."

Silas stepped back, breathing heavily. "Just testing you."

I studied Silas's face for any hint of his intentions. Why the sudden aggression?

"Thanks for the bout," I sheathed my rapier. "But I have other matters to attend to."

Silas nodded once, sheathing his blade as well, his expression unreadable. "Of course. Until next time, Benedetto."

We clasped forearms and walked in opposite directions. I filed the encounter away, adding it to the growing list of things that didn't sit right.



## CHAPTER SIX

# LUNA

MORNING LIGHT STREAMED THROUGH TALL WINDOWS, MAKING the long-mirrored room a dazzle of light. I inhaled the warm air, catching the scent of fresh wax on the floor and Sofia's delicate rose perfume.

Fan in hand, I drifted around Sofia, who held a knife at the ready. She'd volunteered to act as my sparring partner today, since Vala had sent word she would be busy this morning.

Rose, wearing a gown light and colorful enough to rival the flowers in the garden, sat by the door in a cushioned chair, focused on her embroidery. Her work basket sat next to her, trailing bright floss and ribbons. The gown I planned to change into after practice lay folded neatly at her feet,

Sofia moved forward, swinging the knife. I shifted a step, my steel fan slicing through the air in a flash to block it. Sofia was much faster than she appeared, but clumsier than me, telegraphing her attacks long before she made them.

On the other hand, as far as I knew, she had no weapons training.

It had taken me daily practice for years to hone my skills with the fan. The key was to make your movements fluid and unpredictable, like water. To beguile your opponent before you cut them to ribbons.

Sofia dropped back a few paces, her body coiled. She'd strike to the right next.

I glanced over at Rose, absorbed in her stitching. Her delicate features were a picture of serene concentration.

*I must keep them both safe.*

No matter the cost to me. Rose was too gentle for this world, and Sofia... Sofia was an enigma in many ways. Kind, yes, and protective, yet she held secrets like a deep still lake. And she would protect Rose if I couldn't.

Our father had avoided us in the aftermath of the beating. I wasn't entirely sure what had happened, but Vala and her husband had visited him, and then he'd been taken ill for some weeks. Hastily hushed gossip had it that there'd been a physical reprisal, but no one would talk about it around me.

Still, he was a threat to Rose, even chastised and living in the provinces.

I turned my attention back to Sofia as she made her attack. Once again, I skipped out of the way.

"You're really fast, Sofia," I said with a teasing smile. "But you're making it too obvious. I could dodge you in my sleep."

Sofia huffed a laugh, swiping at me again. "Maybe I want you to see me coming."

I spun away from her strike. "Ah, but where's the fun in that? Surprises are half the battle."

We continued our dance, my fan and her knife flashing in the sunlight. In the mirrors lining the walls, I caught glimpses of our reflection. Me, tall and athletic, dressed in a short tunic, arms and legs bare, my red hair up in a tight knot. Sofia, of average height and plump, in a sober brown dress and matching bodice.

Where I moved with practiced grace, Sofia stomped through the world with a determined solidity.

Did that determination come from being a 'failed' apprentice, or because of it? I knew that her position wasn't a punishment, more of a break from her studies at Soulrider's tower. Sofia didn't seem to mind.

As if sensing my thoughts, Sofia grinned at me, panting. "You may be all fancy footwork, but I've got a few tricks up my sleeve."

“Oh?” I paused and raised an eyebrow. “Do tell.”

Sofia winked. “You’ll see. When you least expect it. And now we are going to unexpectedly take a break.”

I shook my head and turned to Rose, who was watching us with a bemused expression from her cushioned chair by the wall. “You should join us, Rose. You’re terrible at fighting.”

Rose’s delicate features didn’t change in the slightest as her hand moved from under her embroidery, the flash of a small throwing knife piercing my eyes as she threw it expertly. It whistled past my ear, embedding itself in the wooden panel between two mirrors with a satisfying thunk.

I laughed. “Point taken.”

Rose smiled sweetly, her pale brown eyes twinkling with mischief. “Never underestimate a potential opponent, dear sister.”

*May you never have to kill, little sister.*

Rose’s quiet strength never ceased to amaze me. While I fought and wrestled with rage, Rose wielded kindness like a shield. Most everyone who knew her loved her.

“Since we have a clear floor, here, Rose, draw me the diagram I showed you yesterday,” Sofia said, pulling the knife from the wall.

Rose pulled chalk from her basket and started drawing. The diagram, large and intricate, grew in chalk and I moved to the wall to allow her to draw more easily. As she drew each symbol, Sofia had her pause and explain its significance.

Rose’s sunny curls bobbed as she worked.

“What ritual is this?” I asked.

“This ritual transports the person who drew it to the godplane. It’s used by powerful mages when they’re ready to call a sigil and take up a Name. If the person does it successfully, they are a Sorcerer,” Sofia said.

Rose’s nose wrinkled as she studied the complex patterns. I knew that wrinkle. My sister had no desire to be a Sorcerer,

even if she had the natural talent and power.

As Rose continued to work, I asked, “Isn’t that dangerous to practice? Could Rose accidentally take herself there by drawing it?”

Sofia chuckled. “No, it requires a tremendous amount of magic to energize. There’s no way to cast it accidentally. And the diagram must be perfect. I still practice it regularly. I’ve only reached the godplane a few times myself. My diagrams were flawed in the beginning, and these days, I often simply lack the power to activate it. And I’ve never managed to summon a Name.”

She looked at my sister fondly. “But Rose will have the capacity to energize the diagram before too long, I believe. Calling a name isn’t on the horizon for many more years.”

“It’s dangerous, isn’t it.” Rose looked up from her work.

“It can be, if the Name that comes to you is too powerful for you to control. That’s why you wait until you’ve achieved the fullness of your power and then call your Name.”

“So, you call, but the Name picks you?” I asked. “Moonshifter and Soulrider are Names, right?”

“Yes and yes. The simpler the Name, the greater the power it carries.”

“So someone whose Name is Creator would be really powerful? Are all names a description?”

Sofia shook her head. “Creator is a Name that you’d need the power of a god to contain.”

“What happens if you can’t contain it?” I asked.

“It destroys you,” Sofia answered simply.

“Why would I want to call a name then? If I don’t know if it will kill me?” asked Rose.

Sofia spread her hands. “A Name makes you powerful and then you can protect others and yourself. Think what life is like if you can’t protect those you love.”

Rose winced and a flicker of anger shot through me even as I had to admit the truth of her statement. Learning weapons and deception was my non magic way of taking a Name.

“And there’s no guarantee that if you call a Name will come. I’ve called a dozen times, and the ritual has always unraveled. That’s why people call me a ‘failed apprentice’.” Sofia’s eyes twinkled. “And how I ended here, doing a job I like.”

Rose, diagram finished, came over and hugged her.

“Do all Sorcerers source their magic from starlight, like you and Rose?”

To be honest, I didn’t like the idea of Rose as a Sorcerer, since as I understood it almost all of them became terrible people because of their power and how people treated them trying to curry their favor. But that was a problem for years from now, not today.

Sofia shook her head. “Starlight magic is an advantage, yes, because most people with it begin training early and learn to use their magic better. But any of the other sources— moon, sun, dark moon— can become a Sorcerer. The only qualifications are calling a sigil and a name.”

I lowered my voice, because what I was about to ask was in the worst of poor taste. “Could someone who sources from the Void?”

The Void was forbidden as a source. People were born to the other four, but sourcing from the Void meant that they forsook their original power and sought out the energies from the blackness and emptiness. I’d been told that one and all, learning to source from the Void drove the person insane.

Unshocked. Sofia regarded me with raised brows. “Of course. Having power and talent doesn’t guarantee that you’re sane. Sometimes madness helps with focus. Where a sane person might hesitate, a madman won’t.”

She left me a little shocked by her answer. Seeing it, she chuckled.

Just then, a young servant entered the room, bowing respectfully. “Lady Luna, the Lady Vala requests your

presence in her study.”

My heart skipped a beat.

*What could she want?* Vala’s summons were rarely a casual matter. “Thank you,” I said to the servant, keeping my voice steady. “Please inform Lady Vala that I will be there shortly.”

As the servant left, I turned to Rose and Sofia, trying to hide the unease churning in my stomach. “Duty calls, it seems.”

Sofia had already picked up my gown and shaken it out. A quick gesture, and a tiny whirlwind of chalk dust rose from the floor and solidified into a stick.

Rose stood, setting aside her embroidery and picking up my bodice. “Let’s get you into this quickly.

It only took a few minutes for me to be dressed so that if I needed to leave the house, I was ready.

Sofia stepped forward, placing a warm hand on my shoulder. “Good luck, Luna.”

I nodded. *Trust your instincts.* It was advice Sofia often gave me and Rose, and it had never led me astray. I’d keep it in mind.

With a deep breath, I straightened my shoulders and headed for the door, my footsteps echoing on the polished wooden floors. As I headed for the study, my mind wandered to Sofia’s reaction to Vala’s summons. The way her posture stiffened, her expression becoming even more unreadable... it was a change I had noticed before, whenever Vala was mentioned.

The rich scent of jasmine wafted over me as I stepped into Vala’s study, the warm breeze from the open windows rustling the gauzy curtains. Sunlight streamed in, casting a golden glow over the polished mahogany desk where Vala sat, her posture regal and poised.

She rose gracefully as I entered, her dress falling in precise elegant folds. A smile played on her lips. “Luna. Please, be seated.”

I settled into the indicated chair, the soft velvet cushion enveloping me. “Thank you, Domina.”

Vala's gaze swept over me, assessing. "You've done well, Luna. Your progress in your weapons training and in managing the estate affairs has been excellent. You've proven yourself a worthy member of the d'Alvarez family in many ways."

I inclined my head, a mix of pride and wariness swirling within me. "Thank you, Domina. I've had an able teacher."

Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes, but that was normal. "Thank you. And now, I have another task for you. One that will require all of your skills and charm."

I leaned forward slightly. "What is it, Domina?"

Vala's fingers drummed lightly on the desk, her nails gleaming in the sunlight. "It's a delicate matter, Luna. One that requires discretion and finesse. I trust you understand the importance of keeping this between us?"

I nodded, a knot forming in my stomach. "Of course, Domina. You can rely on my discretion."

*What could she possibly want from me?* I tried to quell the unease that crept up my spine. Why did I feel like I was about to step into a tangled web that concealed sharp knives?

Vala leaned back in her chair, her fingers steepled beneath her chin. "Benedetto is in Legnali," she said, watching me for the slightest flicker of reaction. "He's staying in a local merchant's home."

My breath caught in my throat. Benedetto. The name hung in the air between us, heavy with unspoken implications. I hadn't seen him in years, not since he walked out after consummating our marriage. I shuddered internally at the painful, humiliating memory.

"With Francesco gone and my husband Marco's health failing," Vala said, her tone cold and businesslike, "it's imperative that we secure an heir for the family. There are no others; Francesco preferred men and left no children."

I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly dry. An heir. The pieces clicked into place, and a wave of dread washed over me.

Vala fixed me with a stern look. “How comes to your bed is your affair,” she said bluntly. “But the paternity must be clear. If you can manage to persuade him to return home and end this ridiculous quest of his to avenge his brother, even better. He’s past thirty, and his father is ill. It’s time for him to take up his family duty.”

I felt a sharp pang of resentment. Even if it was the agreement, all my achievements were nothing against the need for me to seduce my husband and bear his child.

But it would be unwise to let my true feelings show. Vala, while frighteningly competent, was not the warm and kind person she projected the persona of. I forced a smile, inclining my head in acquiescence. “Of course, Domina. I’ll start immediately.”

Vala’s lips curved in a satisfied smile, while no emotions shown in her features. “See that you do, Luna. The future of our family depends on it. And remember to plan for all contingencies before you act. A proper plan ensures success.”

I rose from my seat, my legs trembling slightly beneath me. As I made my way out of Vala’s study, my mind and my heart raced.

*Benedetto.* After all these years, I’d never thought our paths would cross again. Certainly not like this.

I squared my shoulders. I had my task. And I would complete it, no matter the cost to my dignity or my heart.

If I failed in this task, Rose and I could all find ourselves cast out, at the mercy of a world that had little love for women without wealth or status.

A few minutes of discomfort. That was all it would be. And in return, as the mother of the heir, we’d have security. A future.

But even as I tried to convince myself, I could feel the weight of my last memory of my mother bearing down on me. I’d asked Canta once, and she said that I would have been almost four when it happened. And she’d awkwardly hugged me.

The frost in the air, the smell of the oils poured on the wood. My mother’s bloody face, the cords binding her to the stake.



The shaking of my nurse's hands as she held my body against hers as I struggled to run to my mother.

The sparks trailing from the torch in my father's hand as he lowered it to the wood.

Her screams echoing in my nightmares. Like me, her magic sourced from the dark moon, and people had claimed she cursed them. She'd been sentenced to burn.

And she still did in my dreams.

I would buy safety. Finding Benedetto would be the difficult part.

In my room, the stack of invitations on my desk caught my eye, and I moved toward them, my fingers trailing over the thick, embossed paper.

Parties, balls, and social gatherings. He would probably attend at least one while he was in Legnali. I'd also ask for the address of the merchant he was staying with.

Social gatherings were the bread and butter of the clans who administered Dimare for the emperor. That was where a person had to go to get any real information.

Of the stack, one invitation in particular stood out, the seal of the Tulliano family gleaming in the sunlight. They were new money, desperate for acceptance among the established families of Dimare.

And what better way to gain that acceptance than by throwing the most lavish parties in the city? Of all of these, this was the function Benedetto was most likely to attend.

I'd broken the seal on the invitation when a soft knock at the door startled me. I turned to see Rose enter, her brow furrowed with concern.

"What did Vala want?" she asked, perching on the edge of my bed.

I hesitated, the words sticking in my throat. But even if she was young, she was my sister, my confidante. If I couldn't trust her, who could I trust?

“Benedetto is here,” I said finally. “Vala wants me to... secure an heir...as quickly as I can.”

Rose’s eyes widened, her mouth forming a silent ‘oh’. Then, slowly, she nodded. “Do you think you can do it?”

I gave her a wry smile. “I’ll have to, yes?”

Rose reached out, her hand finding mine and squeezing gently. “You can do this,” she said, her voice filled with a conviction I wished I felt. “I’ll help.”

I nodded, swallowing past the lump in my throat. I glanced back to the invitations on my desk.

This was possible. When I squeezed Rose’s hand back, a genuine smile spread across my face since I spoke to Vala. “I think I know where to start.”

I held up the Tulliano invitation, the embossed gold lettering glinting in the sunlight streaming through the window. “This ball is in a few days. But before I go, let’s visit friends. Make a few social calls.”

My smile turned mischievous. “Gather gossip and perhaps... inquire about this notorious rogue’s movements.”

Rose’s eyes lit up, her own smile mirroring mine. “Oh, Luna,” she clapped her hands together in delight. “That’s brilliant! And it’ll be fun, too.”

“I am indeed,” I stood and moved to my wardrobe. “And you, dear sister, are the perfect companion for such an outing. I’ll bathe, change and then we will all go and visit some of your friends.”

As I rifled through my gowns, selecting a deep green silk that would complement Rose’s outfit, my mind raced with possibilities.

Benedetto was a mystery to me. A puzzle to be solved. What better way to solve a puzzle than to gather all the pieces?

I turned back to Rose, holding up the gown for her approval. “What do you think? Will this do for an afternoon of gossip and intrigue?”

Rose examined it, lips pursed, then nodded. “It’s perfect. You’ll look like a great lady, Luna. And while they’re all busy admiring you, and talking about you behind your back, I’ll be busy listening.”

I grinned in response to the impish expression on her face. “And that, my dear Rose, is why I know not to underestimate quiet women like you.”

She sighed. “Sofia should probably stay here, though. People will speak more freely in front of just me.”

I nodded. She was right. Nor would it take much persuading to get Sofia to stay here; she hated social events.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# LUNA

ROSE AND I STEPPED OUT OF THE D'ALVAREZ GATE INTO THE warm summer afternoon, followed discreetly by two guards. Wisps of white clouds drifted lazily across a clear, vibrant blue sky. I blinked in the bright sunlight as a gentle breeze carried the distant sounds of merchants hawking their wares and the clatter of carriage wheels over cobblestones. The streets of Legnali bustled with activity.

I wore the gown I'd selected. Rose looked radiant in a light blue dress trimmed with delicate lace, her golden hair pinned up elegantly. Two guards trailed a discreet distance behind us as we walked arm in arm down the street.

As we strolled, Rose chattered happily about the beautiful weather and the flowers blooming everywhere. I smiled and agreed.

We'd considered and selected the families we visited today based on their predilection for gossip. This was a reconnaissance mission, our best chance to find out who'd seen Benedetto and if anyone knew what parties he'd be at. If I played my cards right, I might even get a clue about what was going on with the de Spoleto family.

Rose and I had a tiny sister we'd never met.

We turned down a busy street lined with upscale shops on our way to our first target. Our guards followed at a measured pace just behind us, scanning the crowd while trying not to draw attention. I kept my expression pleasant but my senses alert as we made our way to the first estate on my mental list.

The de Vinci villa came into view when the road curved toward the hill. It was a grand estate surrounded by immaculate gardens, red, purple and yellow blooms in beautiful patterns. As we passed through the ornate gates, the heady scent of jasmine and roses enveloped us, a fragrant welcome.

We were immediately admitted, ushered to a sitting room where a slightly plump, fashionable woman with bright, sparkling dark eyes greeted us at the door with a broad smile. “Luna, Rose, how delightful to see you both. Please, come in.”

Lucretia de Vinci was the biggest gossip in Legnali.

Servants swiftly brought in trays of refreshments as we settled onto the plush sofas.

“You both look positively radiant,” Lucretia gushed. “I’m so glad you could visit. There’s so much to catch up on. I haven’t chatted with you in *months*.”

Rose smiled sweetly. “We wouldn’t miss a chance to see you, Lady de Vinci. You always have the most fascinating news to share.”

I nodded in agreement, and Lucretia preened.

“Please, try the sweetmeats. The honey-glazed pecans are wonderful; my chef has outdone himself.”

We settled on the small couch, and each took a different sweet.

“Has anyone new arrived to spend the summer?” Rose asked artlessly.

“You hadn’t heard? The Valenti brothers are causing quite a stir. So handsome, and both of them command legions,” Lucretia divulged with a conspiratorial wink.

As she prattled on about the handsome siblings and their rumored exploits, I listened attentively, sifting through her chatter for any useful tidbits. *Who are the de Valenti’s connected to? I’ll need to look into that.*

“And of course, everyone is buzzing about the upcoming social events,” Lucretia said animatedly. “The de Rossi’s

soirée next week is sure to be the talk of the town. Will you be attending, my dears?”

“We wouldn’t miss it,” I said with a polite smile.

A servant entered the room with a samovar and a collection of teas. Herbal, of course, but Lucretia was also fond of the expensive green teas, from very far away.

Lucretia poured, assuming Rose and I would desire the green tea.

We sipped as she regaled us with more tales of scandals and intrigues, I kept my attention on her, absorbing every morsel of information. Rose played her part flawlessly, engaging our host with her gentle charm while I absorbed each detail.

I smiled and laughed at the appropriate moments, maintaining my façade while my mind raced with plans and possibilities. The game was on, and I was determined to win.

A servant approached with a silver tray laden with fruit and tiny dumplings, the aroma of savory fillings. As she speared a dumpling, Lucretia leaned forward, her eyes sharp with excitement. “Have you heard about Tulliano Lucardi’s masquerade tomorrow night?”

I feigned polite interest, raising an eyebrow. “Really? Do tell.”

Lucretia grinned, relishing the opportunity to share her knowledge. “It’s going to be the event of the season. He’s sparing no expense, as usual. I hear he’s even hired performers from the Yeflad islands.”

Tulliano had always did have a flair for the dramatic. But Lucretia would not normally honor him by gossiping about him, so I braced myself for the coming revelation.

“Do you know who is expected to attend?” I asked, taking a delicate sip of my tea, its warmth spreading through my chest. It was very sweet, she’d used a lavish hand with the honey

Lucretia leaned in conspiratorially, her sharp gaze intent on my face. “Everyone, my dear. But here’s the juiciest bit. I even heard rumor that your husband is coming. Is that true? He

rarely shows his face at these events. I wonder what could have enticed him to come this time.”

My pulse stuttered, but I kept my expression neutral, hiding my reaction behind another sip of tea. So, it was confirmed that Benedetto would be there. This was the perfect opportunity.

Outwardly, I nodded my head demurely, a false smile playing on my lips. “Of course, we will be there. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

As Lucretia chattered on about the anticipated grandeur of the event, I began plotting my next move.

If Benedetto was attending, this was my chance.

With a graceful smile, I focused on Lucretia, determined to extract every last bit of useful information from her gossip. The tea in my cup had gone cold, but I barely noticed, my mind already whirling with possibilities and plans.

Tomorrow night. I would make it happen.

When other guests arrived, we made our excuses and left Lucretia’s home, stepping out into the late afternoon sun.

Our next stop was the de Bardi estate, a sprawling mansion with ivy-covered walls that seemed to whisper secrets of its own. This time, when the gates opened, Natalina de Bardi waved at us from her seat on a lawn chair. She was an elderly woman with a sweet smile and twinkling brown eyes that masked a shrewd, calculating nature.

The table next to her bore a pitcher full of water and sliced lemons.

“Luna, Rose, what a pleasure to see you,” she greeted us with breathless sweetness. “Please, sit and share a glass with me.”

Birds chirped in the nearby trees, creating a serene atmosphere that contrasted sharply with the tension coiled in my gut.

“That would be lovely, thank you,” I took a seat opposite her.

As servants hurried to bring more glasses and pour the drinks, Natalina launched into small talk, commenting on the summer

heat and the latest fashions. But I could sense the undercurrent of curiosity beneath her pleasant facade. Like Lucretia, Natalina always had a motive behind her questions, and I braced myself for the inevitable probing.

“I hear the Lucardi masquerade is the talk of the town,” Natalina said, her eyes sharp despite her casual tone. “Will you be attending, my dear?”

I smiled, choosing my words carefully. “Yes, Rose and I are looking forward to it. Tulliano always puts on quite the spectacle.”

“Indeed he does,” Natalina leaned forward slightly. “And I’ve heard some intriguing rumors about the guest list. They say your husband might make an appearance.”

My insides did a little dance at the second confirmation, but I kept my composure. “Is that so? Well, Benedetto does enjoy a good surprise.”

Natalina’s gaze seemed to pierce right through me, searching for any hint of weakness. “It’s been years since he’s shown his face at such events. One can’t help but wonder what could have drawn him out of hiding.”

More than you know. I thought grimly, but I simply shrugged, keeping my tone light. “Perhaps he grows weary of chasing shadows. Even the most devoted hunter needs a break now and then.”

Natalina’s smile widened. “Of course, my dear. Well, I’m sure it will be a night to remember.”

*You have no idea.*

I merely smiled in response.

“Tell me, Luna,” Natalina said casually, folding her hands in her lap. Her brown eyes twinkled with a shrewd glint that set me on edge. “I’ve heard a rumor that you are doing quite well in your position as Vala’s right hand. It must be difficult for you, balancing your duties with all the changes in the family, what with your father-in-law’s health failing.”



A prickle of irritation rose at her probing words, but I kept my tone light and even. “The Lady Vala has high expectations, but I’m managing. It’s all about learning the old ways.”

I took a sip of the chilled lemon water, letting the tartness dance on my tongue before swallowing.

Natalina’s forced smile widened. “Indeed. I wonder if your husband shares that same focus. He’s been spotted in Kalion only a few days ago, you know. Quite the mysterious figure, isn’t he? Always chasing after shadows.” She leaned forward slightly, her gaze intent.

I tilted my head, giving Natalina a demure smile even as my heart raced. “My husband is known for his persistence.”

The words felt hollow, but I couldn’t let Natalina see the truth behind them. Vala had given me general facts about Benedetto’s activities, just enough to deflect curious questions like these.

Natalina watched me closely as if trying to unravel my secrets. “I suppose we’ll see at the masquerade, won’t we?”

“We plan to attend, yes,” I tightened my fingers around the cool glass.

As we finished our drinks and rose to leave, I forced a smile, as we bid farewell to Natalina

Our final stop was the newly constructed mansion of Tulliano Lucardi. I’d never seen it before, and as we approached my eyes widened.

Gold leaf on the exterior columns? Really?

The mansion practically screamed “new money,” with its gaudy decorations and over-the-top architecture.

*Poor Tulliano. Always trying too hard to impress.*

Tulliano himself greeted us in the grand foyer. He was a tall, bulky man in his late middle age, with a slightly awkward demeanor that belied his attempts at sophistication.

Our guards had followed us, doubling as chaperones since there was no other woman present.

“Lady Luna, Lady Rose, welcome,” he boomed. “My sister is away from home.”

I plastered a smile on my face, nodding politely. “I’m sorry to have disturbed you, Lord Tulliano. Your home is quite... impressive.”

He beamed at the compliment, chest puffing out with pride. “Isn’t it just? Come, let me show you the drawing room. A new statue has just been delivered.”

As we followed him through the mansion, I cringed at the murals on the walls. Everything seemed designed to signal wealth and status, rather than any true sense of style or art.

We settled in the garden, sinking into the overly plush chairs. Tulliano immediately launched into a detailed description of his plans for the masquerade.

Tulliano grinned broadly, his eyes gleaming with pride as he gestured expansively around the opulent drawing room. “This masquerade will be the best ever in Legnali! It will be the most talked-about event of the season, mark my words. The entertainers will be the best, the food will be the best....”

I smiled politely, murmuring the appropriate words of admiration, and distracted myself by counting the number of times he said ‘best’.

Rose, ever the charmer, leaned forward with a dazzling smile. “You must be hoping to make quite an impression, Tulliano,” she said sweetly. “Looking for a wife among the old families, perhaps?”

Tulliano laughed nervously, his eyes darting between us. “Well, a man must secure his future somehow, mustn’t he? And what better way than through a good marriage and sons and daughters to carry the family name?”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes at his blatant ambition. As if any of the old families would consider him a worthy match. He was so desperate for their approval, he couldn’t see how transparent he was.

But I kept my expression carefully neutral, nodding along as if his words were the height of wisdom. “Indeed. A good match

is essential for any man looking to elevate his family.”

Tulliano puffed up with self-importance, clearly pleased by my apparent agreement. “Exactly, and with this masquerade, I’m sure to catch the attention of some eligible young lady. Perhaps even a de Spoleto,” he said, looking speculatively toward Rose.

A flare of protective anger sparked within me at the insinuation, but Rose just laughed lightly, her voice tinkling like bells. “Oh, Tulliano, you flatter me, but I’m afraid my heart is not so easily won. You’ll have to work much harder than that to persuade me.”

*Well played, sister. Put him in his place without bruising his fragile ego.*

Tulliano chuckled, but I could see the flash of disappointment in his eyes before he covered it with a jovial smile. “Ah, well, a man can dream, can’t he? But no matter. With so many beautiful women in attendance, perhaps the absent gods will aid me in finding my future bride.”

The conversation turned to more mundane matters of decorations and entertainment, and then to our need to return home, given that sunset was close.

We took our leave of Tulliano.

The sun had painted the sky in vibrant hues of orange and pink. Rose walked beside me, her steps light and graceful despite the long day of visits and conversations.

“That was interesting,” she glanced up at me with a thoughtful expression. “Tulliano is desperate for approval. He’ll do anything to make this masquerade a success.”

“He’s more ambitious than he lets on,” I kept my voice low so only Rose could hear. “This masquerade is his big chance to step up in society, to prove himself worthy of the old families’ attention.”

Rose seemed to sense my inner turmoil, for she reached out and gave my hand a gentle squeeze. “This will work out, Luna.”

A surge of love and gratitude for my sister squeezed my chest, for her unwavering support and loyalty. I returned the squeeze before letting go.

When we arrived home, I headed straight to my chambers. Sinking down at my vanity, I stared at my reflection in the ornate mirror, tired and discouraged.

The door creaked open, and Sofia entered quietly, her expression gentle as she took in my pensive state.

“What did you learn?” she asked, setting a tray of toast and chamomile tea on the table beside me.

I sighed, the sound echoing in the stillness of the room. “Benedetto will be at the masquerade. Tulliano has practically set a trap for him with all the attention.”

Sofia’s brow furrowed, her green eyes sharp with concern. “Rose told me the rest. Is it something you can do?”

I met her gaze in the mirror, my own hardening with resolve. “Yes. I need a baby from him. That’s Vala’s price for the family’s continued protection. And this is the only way I’ll get one.”

Sofia nodded slowly, her expression thoughtful. “Perhaps, since you’re both older, it will go better this time.”

I let out a humorless chuckle. “I doubt it. But I have no choice. I must do this, for Rose’s sake if nothing else.”

Sofia’s hand rested on my shoulder, a comforting weight. “Watch for opportunity, Luna. Sometimes it arrives disguised.”

I laughed at her despite myself. “Is that foreseeing, or one of the sayings you’ve had to memorize as an apprentice?”

She smiled warmly, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “A little of both.”

I returned her smile, feeling some of the tension drain from my body. I could do this. I *would* do this.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# LUNA

THE NEXT DAY, SOFIA, ROSE AND I PREPARED FOR THE masquerade. Lavender and rosewater scented the air as well as the vase of fresh flowers on my vanity. Sofia carefully sorted through the array of gowns laid out, while Rose frowned down at my jewelry.

I stood in my shift, auburn hair down in waves cascading over my shoulders. Sofia held up an understated deep blue silk gown. “This would be perfect, Luna. Sophisticated, not too flashy. You can blend in and observe without attracting attention, until you choose to move.”

Rose vehemently shook her head, needle in hand. “No, no, no, you need to make an impression. Wear the emerald silk. It’ll make your eyes almost green and highlight your hair. Benedetto won’t be able to look away.”

A small smile tugged at my lips. “You both make fair points. But tonight, I think standing out is key.”

I reached for the emerald gown, the shimmering fabric sliding between my fingers. Daring, with a low square cut neckline and fitted bodice that would hug my figure.

If I was going to confront Benedetto, I needed to look powerful, confident. He wouldn’t think of me as a child or a neglected wife dressed like this.

Rose selected a pair of delicate moonstone earrings that caught the light with an ethereal glow. “These will look perfect with the gown.” She held them up.

I put on the earrings, examining myself in the mirror. My fingers ran over a simple silver necklace resting against my collarbone. “No colored stones,” I said. “I don’t want to seem like I’m trying too hard. Some pearls in my hair, too, I think.”

Rose slipped a thin, silver bangle onto my wrist, giving me a playful smile. “For luck,” she said. “You’ll need it.”

I sat as she twisted my hair up in an elaborate braid, leaving some loose to flow down my back. She twisted my mother’s scarlet veil into my hair, too, and somehow its presence soothed worry inside me. Scattered pearl pins finished the hair.

I turned my attention to the mask, the final piece. Several options lay before me: an intricate gold one with scrollwork, a black satin mask trimmed with lace, and a silver filigree mask adorned with tiny emeralds. I’d attended many masquerades as Vala’s proxy, but none with this kind of pressure weighing on me.

Picking up the silver filigree mask, I held it to my face and examined my reflection. The delicate design enhanced my large eyes, making them even more striking.

“It’s perfect,” Sofia said. “You look like a queen of the night.”

As I secured the mask in place, a surge of confidence washed over me. *A mask can be a shield. Tonight, I’ll be whoever I need to be to get what I want.*

I adjusted the mask once more, ensuring it was firmly in place. The silver filigree felt cool against my skin, a tangible reminder of the role I had to play.

*No turning back now. Whatever happens, I must see this through - for Rose, for Sofia, for our future.*

With a final glance in the mirror, I turned to face my sister and our tutor and friend, ready to step into the night and the challenges that awaited me at the masquerade.

Rose stepped back, studying me with a critical gaze. “You look stunning,” she said, her words filled with pride. “He won’t be able to resist you.”

A swell of affection surged through me. I reached out, taking Rose's hand in mine. "Thank you."

Her fingers tightened around mine, a silent acknowledgment of the weight we carried together.

Sofia, who had been silently watching, stepped forward and placed a hand on my shoulder. "You've come so far, Luna. Whatever happens tonight, remember your strength. You're more powerful than you know."

A lump formed in my throat, but I swallowed it down and nodded. Sofia's words echoed in my mind, a mantra I clung to as I prepared to face the challenges ahead.

*I have to do this, for Rose, for Sofia, for our future.*

I pulled on a pair of delicate kid gloves, the emerald silk of my gown brushing against my fingers as I slipped them on. I adjusted my mask one last time, checking my reflection in the mirror. Everything was perfect.

Rose approached me, holding out my twin fans.

I slipped the loop of one fan over my wrist and hung the other from the place where my bodice met my skirt, the silk and lace concealing their true nature. Rose's fingers lingered on mine for a moment, her pale brown eyes filled with concern.

"Be careful," she said, her voice barely audible. "Don't do anything that might get you hurt."

Sofia stepped forward, holding out a small vial of perfume. "Lavender and jasmine. For luck and for courage."

I dabbed a bit of the perfume behind my ears, inhaling deeply. The scent was calming, grounding me in the moment.

"Thank you," I said. "Both of you. You've helped so much."

Rose's hand found mine, her fingers intertwining with my own.

Sofia asked, "Are you sure about this?"

I clenched the fabric of my emerald gown. "I don't have a choice, Sofia. This is what needs to be done."

Her expression softened, a mixture of understanding and worry. "Then may the absent gods keep you."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. *The absent gods. Hidden or dead, their powers lost to time. What good are they to me now?*

Sofia meant well.

I stood, the emerald gown whispering against my skin as I moved. The mask felt heavy on my face, a reminder of the role I had to play tonight.

Benedetto would find out he'd underestimated me.

I turned to Sofia, my resolve hardening like steel. "I will not fail. I cannot."

She smiled then, a fierce pride shining in her eyes. "Of course not. Show that fool what he's missed."

With those words ringing in my ears, I stepped out of the room, ready to face whatever the night had in store.



## CHAPTER NINE

# BENEDETTO

I STEPPED OUT OF THE CARRIAGE AND SURVEYED THE Tulliano Lucardi's mansion, a gilded monument to bad taste. It hulked above its gardens, looking simultaneously ostentatious and slightly embarrassed, as if the building itself knew it didn't fit well in Legnali. The sprawling grounds to the sides and behind the building were a labyrinth of shrubs and marble decorations, every ostentatious feature a testament to the man's wealth and desire for acceptance.

While I'd never been here myself, I'd heard all the gossip as I gathered information on my target.

Lucardi's father was a grain merchant, with a sideline in spices. He'd been lost with one of his ships when Lucardi was a boy, spurring the youth's interest in the supernatural. Apparently, he wanted to communicate with the dead.

While he had no gift for magic, his ability to guess what to send where made him tremendous amounts of money, catapulting him to the upper echelons, who promptly turned their backs and ignored him.

Except when they wanted an investment or a loan, of course. He'd even been offered daughters of a few minor clans, but he had his eyes set high. He wanted his children born to the upper classes. Not a foolish ambition, though most of the great houses denied him on principle.

The information I'd gathered about him made me reluctant to kill him, my usual means of dealing with those who dabbled in forbidden magic. I'd simply take the books and walk away.

The pebbled walkway leading to the house glittered in the torchlight. I stooped and picked up a stone. A small amethyst. Lucardi must have ordered small gems scattered in with the regular stone.

I didn't envy the servant whose duty would be to retrieve them at the end of the night.

The flickering light made the intricate carvings adorned the mansion's exterior almost come alive. They depicted the story of the first emperor's conquest of Kalion. By the main doors, a blaze of golden lanterns hung from delicate chains, their bright light a beacon.

The noise of laughter and conversation drifted out the door, mixing with the scent of wax and perfumes. The masked servant manning the door bowed to me as I approached.

I adjusted my silver-filigree mask. Time to do the required frivolous conversation and perhaps a dance before I got on with my task.

As I entered the grand ballroom, my senses were assaulted by dazzling excess. Crystal chandeliers hung from vaulted ceilings, their facets scattering light from miniature magical suns hung within them. The light was brighter than day in this room.

Near the wall, one musician turned his head, exposing the sweep of a pointed ear. Lucardi had hired fey to provide the music. This event that would be remembered; the man must have traded many favors for such a rare event. The fey did not often favor mortals with their music.

What had he traded for it? Suspicion, my constant companion, reared its head.

The lively melody playing made even my feet itch to dance. Laughter echoed from every corner as costumed guests in elaborate masks twirled across the polished marble floor. The air inside was even thicker with mingled scents of perfumed silks, spiced wine, and naked ambition.

I'd bribed one of the servants to find out where he kept his collection and found to my surprise, he simply put them in the

library, even his newest acquisition.

I scanned the room, marking the exits. Where might be a good path to slip out and find my way to the second floor and the library. Where might be a method for a quick exit if I had to kill someone in this room.

It paid to plan your escape route before you needed it.

I turned an instant before a hand gripped my arm. A familiar face, half-hidden behind a mask of burnished gold, was attached to the hand, saving him from my usual response.

“Benedetto, old friend!” Dario’s grin was wide, but his eyes held a warning. “Enjoying the festivities?”

I forced a smile. “As much as one can.”

Dario leaned in close, his voice low. “Careful, Bene. The emperor’s eyes are everywhere tonight. You know how it is, being third in line and all that. A murder last night doesn’t do much for anyone’s sense of security.”

“What murder?” I asked.

He leaned in closer. “You just moved up to fifth in line, Aurelius d’Orazio drowned last night during a pleasure outing when the ship sank in a sudden storm. Everyone is saying the storm wasn’t natural.”

“I wasn’t aware,” I said, my tone clipped.

Dario continued, undeterred by my tone. “And people started talking about your wife’s sister yesterday. Word is her governess is one of Soulrider’s apprentices. Which is strange, since she’s old and fat, not gorgeous like the others I’ve seen. Keep an eye out, friend. Make sure you know exactly who’s in your bed, and hers.” He punctuated his words with a wink.

I clapped him on the shoulder, my grip perhaps a bit too tight. “Thank you for the warning, Dario. I’ll keep it in mind.”

I made my excuses and slipped back into the crowd, my mind racing. Luna’s sister, being taught by one of Soulrider’s apprentices? It meant she had a real talent and could one day be a dangerous player in the game. Had my mother known about the talent before the wedding?

Of course not. The girl would not have been born yet when Luna and I had married, Luna had been but a babe. I'd found out from my mother later that she hadn't known until she was delivered to our home.

I had been aware, since I was ten, though it had never been important to me. The dessert afterward was more memorable than the ceremony.

My wife's relative was a problem for another time. Tonight, I had to focus on the task at hand. I scanned the room, my eyes searching for familiar faces, for any sign of weakness or opportunity.

In a world like this, information was power. And I intended to seize as much of it as I could before I exited here with the book.

The musical set ended, dancers retreating to their clumps of friends and relations. With a portion of the floor cleared, my attention snagged on a figure standing near a gilded mirror—a striking red-haired woman in emerald silk. The fabric shimmered as she shifted her weight, catching the light and throwing it back in brilliant flashes. Her mask was a delicate creation of silver filigree, accentuating her bright, piercing eyes.

There was something about her—her posture, the tilt of her head—that struck a chord of familiarity.

Curiosity burned in my veins. Who was she?

I approached her, cutting off another man with the same idea. Close enough to speak, her perfume was something floral and intoxicating. I bowed slightly, the gesture both respectful and intimate.

"You seem out of place," I said softly, my voice low enough that it barely carried beyond her. "Like a jewel among pebbles. A vixen among chickens."

She regarded me, tilting her head, the movement fluid and deliberate. "Is that so?" Her tone was light, but there was a sharpness to it, a challenge hidden just underneath the words. "And what does that make you, I wonder?"

I let a smile curve my lips. "A man who knows value when he sees it."

"Value?" She laughed, the sound sweet as silver bells. "You speak as if I'm a horse or a dog."

I took a step closer, drawn to that flash of fire. "Forgive me. I meant no offense. You're very unlike the majority of women I've spoken with at these events."

She tilted her head, studying me through the filigree of her mask. "I believe you're the fourth man who's told me that this evening."

"Ah, but I mean it," I replied, amused.

"I think every one of you meant it, without considering the logical conclusion." Her eyes sparkled with mischief. "That, perhaps, I am unique."

I felt a thrill run through me. This woman, whoever she was, was no ordinary court flower. She wasn't afraid of me in the slightest.

"Then we have something in common," I said, offering my arm. "Dance with me."

## CHAPTER TEN

# LUNA

“DANCE WITH ME.”

As his hand closed on mine, the other touching my waist lightly, it was clearly not a request. I permitted him to draw me closer, my instincts warring with the role I had to play.

*Why does he make my heart race? This might make bedding him easier, or infinitely more dangerous?*

The warm, calloused hand on mine sent a jolt of electricity up my arm, as he led me onto the dance floor. As the music swelled around us and we moved, I sensed others watching and speculating. Many of them, unlike Benedetto, knew who I was.

*Let them watch.* For now, I had to focus on the man before me, the husband I had to beguile. The dance had begun, and I could not afford a single misstep.

Rumor had it my husband was a wary man, preferring the chase to a woman who was openly interested.

He drew me close as we spun across the floor, his hand burning against the small of my back. The heat of his body, the power coiled in his muscles as he held me created an intoxicating and infuriating aura that drew me in, despite me knowing better.

“You dance well,” he said, his breath tickling my ear. “But you’re stiff. Relax and stop fighting me to lead.”

I bristled internally at the amusement in his tone. Following his lead in the steps of the dance, I glanced up at him through

my lashes. "Perhaps you should lead with more...authority, my lord. A firm hand might be needed."

Not for nothing had I listened to others flirting at functions I attended as Vala's proxy. For some reason, that comment seemed to work very well on men.

His grip tightened, pulling me flush against him. "Is that so?" His gaze raked over me, lingering on the curve of my lips, the challenge in my eyes. "I've been told I have an excellent hand on the reins."

*He's taking the bait.* I gave him a knowing smile, one I'd practiced in the mirror after watching another woman use it successfully. "Perhaps someday we can ride together. I'd love a demonstration."

He chuckled, a dark, rich sound. "Indeed. And I do so love to teach."

We moved together, our bodies perfectly attuned. It was like what I imagined flying would be like, thrilling with a pinch of danger.

Our eyes locked. His were a very dark brown, and the heat in his glance scalded me. It was a battle of wills to match his stare, a silent duel where I kept my expression steady and a little cool. Despite my best intentions, I wanted to lose myself in the moment, in him.

His hands tightened on my waist, keeping me close, and another frisson of heat ran through me. *Focus. Remember why you're here. Even if there's no love between us, this time he wants me.*

It was hard, so hard, to keep my expression distant and amused with his body pressed against mine, with him staring at me like he could see straight into my soul. I wanted to lose myself in him, to forget everything but the feel of his skin on mine.

No. I couldn't afford to yield to the moment. Not now. Not ever. People I loved depended on me.

"You're quite forward, aren't you?" With a light and airy laugh, I traced a finger through the air, along his jawline, close enough I could feel the warmth his skin radiated. "Pulling a

lady in so close, in front of all these people. As if I've granted you any right."

His lips quirked with a flash of amusement. "And will you give me that right, little vixen?"

*On my terms.* "Perhaps. If you play the game well."

"The game?" He spun me out and back in, my heavy silk skirts swirling around my legs.

"The game of power," I said. "Of control. Of knowing when to push..." I leaned in, my lips a hairsbreadth from his, "...and when to hold back."

His pupils dilated, desire warring with wariness in his gaze. "And which is this? A push or a pull?"

I smiled, slow and enigmatic. "That depends."

*Will you step into my trap, husband?*

The music flowed into a crescendo, the final notes hanging in the air. We each took a step back and he bowed, keeping his eyes on mine as he would an opponent at a duel.

This was it. The moment of truth.

I unfurled my fan, waving it gently so the breeze touched my throat and breast. His eyes followed the movement and lingered in an almost physical caress.

"Thank you for the dance. It was enjoyable."

He caught my free hand, his fingers tightening around mine. "The pleasure was all mine, my lady," he said, his eyes glittering with promise. "I hope to have the chance to...game with you further."

A roguish grin flitted on his face as he tugged me off the dance floor.

"Where are we going?" I asked playfully as he guided me away from the crowded ballroom, through the servant entrance hidden by a curtain and up a flight of stairs.

"Somewhere quieter." His eyes sparkled with heated mischief.



The first door up the second floor opened on an opulent library filled with row upon row of scrolls and books. The heavy scent of leather and parchment hung in the air, seasoned with the faint after scent of wax from the burned down stubs of candles. The shutters were half open, and moonlight spilled through a large window overlooking the garden.

The music from below wafted through the window as well, turning to another sprightly dance.

Benedetto shut the door behind us and latched it before facing me. "Now we're alone. Shall we dispense with the pleasantries?"

I took a step closer to him, my pulse racing. "What will replace them?"

The look he gave me made heat flood my body. I knew I should keep my wits about me, but being near him clouded my thoughts. I had to remember how coldly he'd taken me and then ignored me afterwards.

Benedetto cupped my face, pulling me close. Our lips met in a fierce, heated kiss.

After a moment's startlement when his lips parted, I copied him, the intensity of the moment driving away thought. My fingers tangled in his hair as he pressed me back against the bookshelf. I gasped, as the back of his hand brushed the exposed part of my breasts, teasing the skin just above the neckline.

"You're bold," I whispered, licking my lips. "But you don't know who I am."

He smirked. "Do I need to?"

My hand itched to slap him. While I knew men being faithful to their wives for very long was uncommon, it still annoyed me that he was acting like this with me, a stranger he met minutes before and known for only the length of a dance. I opened my mouth to respond, to reveal my identity just as the other shutter crashed open.

Three masked figures swarmed through the opening, drawing gleaming daggers.

Benedetto reacted instantly, pushing me behind him and drawing his sword in one fluid motion. "Stay behind me," he ordered.

I ignored him and stepped to the side where I could move freely, unfurling my fan. It also split us up as targets. The whisper thin painted silk concealed the razor edge of the fan until too late for those who attacked me.

One closed with me while another rushed Benedetto. The third moved to the heavy bookcase opposite us.

The blade of my opponent gleamed red with heat, charged with the sun's magic. My own nipped at it without my will, draining it as I parried the cut with my fan. It kept the silk from catching fire, at least. Benedetto flickered and vanished, reappearing by the bookshelf, driving his blade through the robber's unprotected back.

The maneuver left me alone to deal with two opponents. I skipped back, trying to get more room as the other also closed with me. My heel caught in my skirt, and I staggered, then threw myself flat to avoid the thrust that would have gutted me.

And ruined my dress, never forget that.

I continued the motion with a roll, kicking the shoe off, but taking a nick on my arm from the second opponent.

Benedetto appeared behind that one, his blade slicing through the man's chest, the point coming too close to me as well. I spun away as the other turned to meet him and took advantage of his distraction to cut his throat from the side, scrambling away to keep the blood from splattering me.

Vala was insistent that killing people not stain expensive garments.

My opponent staggered forward, then collapsed, a wide red stain spreading out around him. I twisted my handkerchief around my cut as Benedetto strode to a thick, leather-bound book the third robber dropped.

He picked it up, his eyes widening slightly. "*The Fall of Ruin*. Interesting."

My chest heaved as I caught my breath and stopped to clean my fan's edge on the clothing of the nearest fallen.

Who had sent these men? Why? Unease prickled down my spine. This complicated things immensely. I had to be more careful than ever now.

And how would Benedetto react to events?

"What is it?" I asked, tilting my head toward the book.

"A clue," he muttered, tucking the book under his arm. His brow furrowed. "We should leave."

I nodded, my mind racing. Why was that book important? And why had the assassins targeted us specifically? I had a sinking feeling it was connected to my true identity somehow. We had to move fast.

We slipped out of the library, dodging guests who were rushing toward the commotion, their faces a mix of fear and morbid curiosity. Benedetto grabbed my hand, his grip firm as he led me through a hidden servants' passage. The narrow corridor was dimly lit, the air musty.

"You're surprisingly familiar with this house," I remarked, slightly breathless as we hurried along.

He smirked over his shoulder at me. "I've been here before."

Of course he had. Benedetto was rumored to know every nook and cranny in Kalion and Legnali. "What just happened?"

"I assume they were after the book," he replied, speculative eyes on me. "I owe you for prompting me to seek that room out; otherwise I would have had to hunt them down later. Follow me."

But why? What secrets did those pages hold? And why did Benedetto want it? Frustration burned in my chest. I hated being in the dark, hated not having all the pieces to the puzzle.

My pulse raced as we ran down the dimly lit hallway, the muted sounds of the ongoing ball fading behind us. Benedetto moved with a coiled tension. I could feel the barely restrained emotions emanating from him, the set of his shoulders broadcasting frustration or anger.

We passed through a servant's door, down a flight of stairs, another door, and emerged into a quiet side garden, near the wall enclosing the mansion. The cool night air was a welcome relief. I paused to catch my breath, my heart still pounding from the adrenaline of the fight.

It wasn't my first, but normally I tried hard not to be in physical confrontations and then the attendant cleanup.

Benedetto turned to face me, his eyes glinting in the moonlight. "Now, sweet vixen, I believe we need to finish our introductions. I don't believe I caught your name."

"I thought you said you didn't need it, Benedetto?" I stated, my voice tinged with a hint of mockery.

He took my wrist, his grip almost painful. A storm brewed behind his darkened gaze. "I do. You're not like the others. Who are you?"

I laughed softly, tugging at my trapped hand. He didn't let go. My chin at a challenging angle, I lifted my other hand to my face and grasped the edge of my silver filigree mask. It caught the bright moonlight as I lowered it, revealing my face fully to him.

Benedetto paused, examining my face as I lowered the mask. His eyes widened after a moment, disbelief and confusion warring across his face.

"You recognize me. How flattering," I said lightly, trying to calm the thumping of my heart.

"Lunetta?" Benedetto's voice was strangled, barely above a whisper. His expression shifted rapidly from shock to disbelief, then to something harder for me to read.

"Indeed, husband."

He looked me up and down, as if seeing me for the first time. "What in the name of all the dead gods are you doing here?" he muttered. He shook his head as if to clear it. "You don't look like a frightened little mouse, more like the fox that chases the mouse."

“How flattering,” I said coolly. “I’ve changed, Benedetto. It has been years. Why shouldn’t I attend entertainments?”

Let him be intrigued. He needs to see that I’m not the girl he discarded so easily. I’m not someone he can dismiss anymore. And I need to parlay that to get him into bed as soon as I could, before he ran off on another one of his never-ending quests.

His shock melted into simmering rage, his jaw clenching tight. “You deceived me,” he growled, his voice low and dangerous. “What are you up to? Are you another one of my mother’s pawns?”

Since Legnali was populated by his mother’s pawns- her fingers were in every pie- I ignored his second question.

I lifted my chin, unflinching. “Deceive you? Is it my concern that you didn’t bother to look closely? You saw what you wanted to see. A pretty face. An amusing distraction.”

Stepping closer, I closed the distance between us. Placing his hand that still gripped mine against his chest, I felt the rapid thud of his heartbeat through the dark leather and velvet he wore.

“You didn’t know me then, Benedetto,” I whispered. “And you don’t know me now. But you will.”

His fingers tightened, the pressure bruising, but I didn’t flinch. “What are you playing at, Lunetta?” he demanded, his voice rough. “Why this charade?”

I gave him a slow, self-assured smile, one I’d learned from his mother. “It wasn’t a charade, Benedetto. It was a lesson. One you clearly needed. Now, ask me why I’ve done this.”

He snorted derisively. “Why are you here?”

Taking a deep breath, I met his eyes. “I want stability for my sister and Sofia. I’ll help you with your quest, but I need you to step up and take responsibility. Acknowledge me as your wife, with all the rights that entails. Lie with me. Get me with an heir, so your family continues. I’ll learn to run the household when your father dies, but I need a child to cement my position.”

Benedetto stared at me for a long moment, then finally released his vise-like grip on my hand. “You’re good with a knife.”

A fan, actually. I shrugged nonchalantly, confused by the non sequitur. “I’ve had a lot of practice.”

He frowned, clearly grappling with something. “I have a brother,” he said abruptly. “Francesco. I’m trying to find a way to undo what was done to him. He and his children should inherit, not me.”

My brow furrowed in confusion. “But... Lady Vala told me he died years ago.”

Benedetto’s expression turned stony. “She lied. And she’s been training you, molding you in her image.”

“Perhaps, but that doesn’t change the fact that I need a child to ensure your family’s protection. My sister depends on me.” I persisted. “I’ve been told your father might cast us out if you die without an heir.”

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Have you *met* my father?”

I couldn’t help but laugh softly. His father was a kindly man, but weak. “Yes. He’d do it if Lady Vala told him to. Her price for my family’s safety is a child from you.”

Benedetto stepped closer, his fierce gaze boring into me. “Then we make an agreement. So long as you want nothing else from me, I’ll fuck you. But you mean nothing to me and never will.”

I curved my lips in something that could be called a smile, if the viewer were generous. “Those are my feelings as well, husband.”

His brow raised, and he tilted my chin up. I stepped away from him, glancing down at my elaborate ball gown, hem torn and stained with blood spots.

Sighing, I brushed the skirt. “I need a change of clothes. We can enter through an upper window at the d’Alvarez house. The guards never watch it closely. And then we can each meet the other’s terms.”

A flicker of respect glinted in his eyes as he nodded. “Lead the way.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# LUNA

WE STROLLED TO THE WALL, AVOIDING THE MAIN STREET. Leaving by alleyway seemed a good idea, especially with the book tucked into Benedetto's tunic. With a practiced movement, I twisted my skirts and prepared to scrabble over the wall.

"Allow me." Benedetto grabbed my waist and hoisted me up. I twisted, grabbed the wall and jumped over. He followed a moment later.

He was very strong. His lean build was deceptive, and I frowned at the tiny thrill at how easily he lifted me.

The stones set in the corners of the cobbles flickered, giving a dim light. We kept a good pace for several streets as the sounds of the party faded behind us and quiet fell, the only sound the distant cries of seabirds from the harbor.

I walked beside Benedetto, my senses alert. Something felt off. It was too quiet for this early in the evening. A prickling instinct made me glance over my shoulder. Three men trailed behind us, trying to blend into the shadows but moving with purpose. Their eyes were fixed intently on Benedetto and me.

I leaned close to Benedetto and murmured urgently, "We're being followed. I think a lot of different people must want that book."

Benedetto brushed his lips on my fingertips. "I noticed. Let's see if they can keep up."

He abruptly veered left into another alley. I hurried after him, gathering my skirts. Benedetto sprinted to a rusted grate in the



stone wall and wrenched it open with a grunt.

The storm sewers. We were going to escape through the storm sewers. While it wasn't the rainy season, my shoes would never be the same.

"Would the vixen care to go to ground?" he asked with a mocking bow.

I rolled my eyes but didn't hesitate, ducking to step through the opening. "What, you thought I'd stop? Try to keep up with me, husband," I said as I disappeared into the darkness.

Benedetto chuckled behind me. I heard the metallic clang as he yanked the grate closed and wedged it just as our pursuers' footsteps rounded the corner.

A rough circle of stones cemented together with hard baked tiles above and below us. Unknown dried matter, the origin of which I did not wish to know, covered the lower tiles. In the dry season, at least, the smell wasn't terribly bad. Vala had made me use the system in the rainy season, when it was worth your life to enter the sewers.

My mother-in-law was not a patient teacher.

Shoes clattering on the tile, I led the way through the dank labyrinth of tunnels designed to channel rainwater to the sea. The air hung heavy around us, the sound of people wrenching at the grate a distance behind us. Dim moonlight filtered through intermittent grates just above my head, barely illuminating our path.

Benedetto ran just behind me, our footsteps loud in the stillness. Far behind us, the shriek of iron rang out as our pursuers forced the grate open again. Several voices bounced off the walls, growing louder as they gained followed the sounds of our flight.

Teaming up with Benedetto was a terrible idea. He enjoyed risk, and I did not. In a strange way, his company was also exhilarating. Years ago, when I ran with Rose and Sofia, I'd been scared to death for all of us. Now, my heart thrummed but I wasn't afraid. I'd never felt like this with anyone before.

Thank the absent gods it hadn't rained in the past few weeks. The water only reached our ankles in lower areas, instead of sloshing around our knees.

Benedetto took the lead from me, guiding us through the twists and turns with surprising familiarity. I struggled to keep up, my gown pulled up above my knees, but I refused to fall behind.

"You've been down here before," I said, a hint of accusation in my tone.

He glanced back with a grin that flashed white in the gloom. "Of course. It's a good place to hide when you've pissed off the wrong people or want to avoid a determined parent."

His or someone else's?

I shook my head, a wry smile tugging at my lips despite the danger. Of course he'd be familiar with this route. It fit his methods perfectly.

We rounded a corner and Benedetto skidded to a halt, holding up a hand. I nearly crashed into him. He cocked his head, listening intently. The sounds of pursuit had faded, but I knew better than to believe we'd lost them so easily.

"What now?" I said, my breath coming easily, despite the run.

Benedetto's eyes gleamed in the faint light, a mix of mischief and calculation. "Now we outsmart them. Follow my lead, little vixen."

He took off down a side tunnel, his movements swift and silent as a shadow. I raced after him, praying to the absent gods might yet be listening that his plan, whatever it was, would work.

If we got out of this alive. I was going to have a long talk with him about planning, and letting others know about those plans. Right after I slapped him for being overconfident.

The splashing of our pursuers' footsteps grew louder. I risked a glance over my shoulder and my blood ran cold. A glint of metal flashed in the dim light, a knife, wielded by one of the men hot on our heels.

“They’re faster than I thought,” Benedetto cursed under his breath, his usual bravado tinged with genuine concern.

“Split up? This tunnel leads toward the d’Alvarez estate. I know these passages like the back of my hand.”

Benedetto hesitated for a beat, his gaze locking with mine. In that moment, a flicker of something, worry, admiration, or perhaps both, crossed his face before he nodded curtly. “Don’t get yourself killed, Lunetta. I want to enjoy our discussion on whose hand is firmer.”

I flashed him a grin. “I look forward to it, husband. Try to survive as well.”

With that, I ducked into the side tunnel, my shoes clattering as I disappeared from view. I plunged deeper into the labyrinthine sewers.

*Absent gods, let this work.*

Time seemed to blur as I navigated the twists and turns. I’d trained long and hard, but even so, it became difficult to keep my breath from coming in ragged gasps. This had been an even longer run than the one I normally took. The sounds of pursuit faded behind me, but I didn’t dare slow down.

After what seemed like an eternity, my chest burning with strain, I spotted the exit I’d used countless times before. With a final burst of speed, I swung the oiled grate open and tumbled into the cool night air, stumbling to a halt on the well-trimmed grass behind the d’Alvarez estate.

The rolling lawn was dotted with structures and a few small groves of trees. The tiny, worn chapel to my left, and further on and closer to the house, the baths. Steam rose from the interior like a beacon of sanctuary.

The fires always burned there, costing a fortune but permitting bathing at any hour, day or night. And I desperately needed one at the moment.

I leaned against the wall near the swerve grate, quietly breathing in and out as I tried to calm my racing heart. I did it. Now it remained to see if Benedetto made it out.

The thud of rapid steps sent a jolt of fear through me, and I braced myself, ready to fight or bolt. A familiar figure emerged from the shadows, breathing hard but grinning from ear to ear as he regarded me.

“You really are smarter than your typical noble maiden,” Benedetto said, his tone equal parts teasing and admiring.

“Since I’m not a maiden, I’m not sure where you’re going with that,” I replied, but there was no real heat behind the words.

He sauntered closer, his gaze raking over me in a way that made my skin tingle. “We lost them, didn’t we?”

My pulse quickened for an entirely different reason. Damn him and my body for wanting him for no reason I could discern. I’d had him, and all it did was hurt. Why was I drawn to him?

“Yes. Thanks to quick thinking and my knowledge of the sewers.”

The corners of Benedetto’s eyes crinkled with a real smile. “We make a pretty good team, vixen. Admit it.”

I huffed a laugh, shaking my head. “You’re the one who needs to admit it, husband.”

Benedetto and I *did* make a good team. A dangerous, reckless, infuriatingly attractive team.

The thought sent a shiver down my spine, equal parts exhilaration and trepidation. *Absent gods, what am I getting myself into?*

We both looked down at ourselves then, taking in the clothing splattered with blood and mud as well as the pungent earthy odor of the sewers clinging to our skin and hair. Benedetto wrinkled his nose, his expression a mix of disgust and amusement.

“I think getting clean should be first on the evening’s list of activities,” he gestured to our disheveled state.

“I’m heading for the bathhouse. Feel free to use the men’s side.”

“Ah, yes, she still pays for it to be fired day and night, does she? What a pleasant thought, you, me, naked...” His tone was teasing, but there was an undercurrent of heat that made my cheeks warm.

“Clean,” I responded drily, trying to ignore the way my heart stuttered at the images his words conjured. Remembering the last time I’d seen him naked.

*And it hurt, remember? Stop fantasizing and deal with reality, woman.*

The heavy wooden door creaked as I pushed it open, releasing a gust of warm, herb-scented air that enveloped me like a perfumed embrace. Tendrils of steam curled up from the bathwater, obscuring the distant edges of the room and muffling the soft splashes of the other women as they moved languidly through the mineral-rich pool.

I stepped inside, letting the door swing shut behind me with a dull thud. The bathhouse was divided in two by a towering stone wall, the women’s sanctuary on one side, the men’s on the other. In the hushed quiet, broken only by the occasional drip of water or sigh of contentment, I could almost forget the world outside, with its tangled web of politics and treachery.

Shedding my sweat-stained clothes, I eased myself into the bath, inhaling sharply as the heated water lapped at my skin. I waded out until I was submerged to my chin, the warmth seeping into my bones and unwinding the knots of tension that had taken root between my shoulders. The earthy scent of lavender mingled with the brighter notes of eucalyptus, the fragrant steam cleansing my lungs with every breath.

As I floated there, suspended in that pocket of tranquility, my mind drifted unbidden to the trials ahead. The path I had chosen was a treacherous one, littered with obstacles and enemies at every turn. But in that moment, enveloped by the soothing waters, I could almost convince myself that everything would work out in the end. Almost.

Too soon, the water began to cool, and I forced myself to climb out, rivulets streaming down my pruned skin. I reached for one of the thin silk robes folded nearby, the fabric

whispering against my damp flesh as I tied it loosely at the waist. Drawing in a steadying breath, I squared my shoulders and made my way toward the doorway that led to the men's side of the bathhouse.

I wasn't entirely sure what I expected to find on the other side of that door. Part of me, the part that had been raised on tales of chivalry and courtly love, thought that I should want Benedetto to sweep me off my feet, to offer me pretty words and gentle caresses. But another part, the part that had learned the hard way that life was rarely so kind, knew better than to expect anything more than a quick tumble and a few coins tossed my way for my trouble.

I stepped through the doorway, the steam parting before me like a curtain drawn back to reveal the stage. And there he was, Benedetto, standing waist-deep in the water with his back to me. Even without seeing his face, I recognized the proud set of his shoulders, the arrogant tilt of his head. He was a man used to getting what he wanted, when he wanted it.

At the sound of my footsteps, he turned, a smirk already curling the edges of his mouth. "Well, well," he drawled, his eyes raking over me in a way that made my skin prickle with an odd mix of indignation and something darker, more primal. "Couldn't resist the temptation to sneak a peek, could you?"

I lifted my chin, meeting his gaze without flinching. "Don't flatter yourself," I retorted, my voice steadier than I felt. "I merely wanted to ensure you hadn't drowned in the weight of your own ego."

He barked a laugh at that, though there was little humor in the sound. Wading closer, he cocked his head to the side, studying me with an intensity that made my breath catch in my throat. "Is that so?" he murmured, the water rippling around his thighs as he moved. "Or perhaps you're just desperate for a chance to get a child in your belly. Afraid you're running out of time?"

Fury sparked through me at his words, bright and hot. Deliberately, I leaned back against the wall, my fingers going

to the knot that held my robe closed. With a deft twist, I let the silk fall open, baring my skin to his hungry gaze.

“Well,” I purred, a mocking smile playing about my lips, “I suppose I can spare a minute or two. Seeing as you’re known for being more of a sprint than a marathon.”

He sputtered at that, his eyes widening before narrowing into slits. In two strides he was on me, his hands gripping my waist almost hard enough to bruise as he hauled me up against the solid plane of his chest.

“Careful, little Dove,” he growled, his breath hot against my cheek. “You’re playing a dangerous game.”

And then his mouth was on mine, crushing, demanding, his tongue delving past my parted lips to lay claim to every secret hollow. I kissed him back just as fiercely, my nails biting into the muscles of his shoulders, determined to give as good as I got.

We stumbled backward, Benedetto’s hands roaming over my body with a roughness that bordered on desperation. But even as my own desire rose to meet his, I kept my back pressed firmly against the wall, unwilling to let him see the scars that marred my skin, the evidence of a past I would just as soon forget.

In the hazy cocoon of steam, Benedetto’s fingertips skated over my skin as if relearning every curve and hollow. Each feather-light touch burned like a brand, igniting sparks that danced along my nerve endings until my whole body felt electrified, yearning. A soft moan escaped my lips as his hand dipped lower, delving into the aching heat at the apex of my thighs.

Slowly, deliberately, he walked me backward along the edge of the pool, never breaking contact, his gaze locked onto mine with an intensity that left me breathless. In the gentle sway of his hips, the careful press of his fingers, I sensed an unfamiliar tenderness lurking beneath the surface of his desire, a vulnerability he kept hidden behind his proud, fierce mask.

My back met the cool stone of the wall, a shiver racing down my spine that had little to do with the temperature. Benedetto's body pinned me in place, the hard planes of his chest and stomach melding against the soft curves of my own.

As his touch grew bolder, more insistent, I felt my control unraveling like a spool of thread pulled taut. My heart hammered against my ribs, the rushing of blood in my ears nearly drowning out the ragged cadence of my breathing. Heat unfurled in my belly, spreading outward until every inch of my skin flushed with wanting.

When his fingers finally pushed inside me, I gasped, my head falling back against the wall as pleasure crested and broke over me in waves. Benedetto swallowed my cries with his kiss, his tongue stroking against mine in a rhythm that matched the urgent thrust of his fingers.

In that suspended moment, the rest of the world fell away, narrowing to nothing more than the slide of skin on skin, the mingled scent of our arousal, and the pulsing need that bound us together. I shattered apart with his name on my lips, my nails scoring crescent moons into the flexing muscles of his shoulders.

As the aftershocks of my climax rippled through me, I became aware of small details that seemed to etch themselves into my mind with startling clarity. The way the water lapped gently at our entwined bodies, steam rising in gossamer tendrils. The hitch in Benedetto's breathing as he whispered a hoarse command for me to hold on. The almost reverent brush of his lips against my temple, a gesture both tender and fierce.

In that fleeting, crystallized instant, I understood that this joining of our bodies was more than just a physical act. It was a communion of sorts, a silent acknowledgment of the scars we both bore, visible and invisible. A wordless promise to stand together against the gathering storm, no matter the cost.

Benedetto gripped my hips as he lifted me, bracing my back against the wall. I wrapped my legs around his waist, drawing him closer, deeper, until I couldn't tell where I ended, and he began.



We rocked together in a symphony of sighs and gasps, the echoes of our coupling mingling with the soft lapping of the water against stone. Each thrust drove coherent thought further from my mind, until all that remained was sensation, bright and sharp as the edge of a knife.

When Benedetto finally reached his own peak, his release pulsing hot and wet inside me, I felt a curious sense of triumph mixed with an aching vulnerability. In the trembling stillness that followed, as our heartbeats slowed and our breathing evened, I allowed myself to imagine, just for a moment, that this could be something real, something that lasted beyond the temporary pleasure of flesh.

But even as the thought formed, I pushed it away, burying it deep. In the world we inhabited, there was no room for such soft, fragile dreams. They would shatter like spun glass against the cold, hard reality of our lives.

So instead, I untangled my limbs from his and reached for my robe, wrapping the thin silk around myself like a shield. Benedetto watched me with an unreadable expression, his eyes dark and fathomless in the wavering light.

“This doesn’t change anything,” I said, my voice sounding hollow to my own ears.

He inclined his head, a wry twist to his lips. “Of course not,” he agreed, though I thought I detected a flicker of something that might have been regret in his gaze. “We both know the rules of this game.”

And with that, I turned and walked away, the memory of his touch lingering on my skin like a brand, a reminder of all the things I could never allow myself to want.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# BENEDETTO

THE COOL STONE FLOOR PRESSED AGAINST MY BACK, STILL damp from steam. My breathing came fast and ragged. Luna's sweet scent wrapped around me, like saffron and some other exotic flower I couldn't name

Why did I do this without thinking? Unwanted emotions tightened my chest at the thought. This was not part of any plan.

For over a decade, since Francesco went mad, revenge and the quest for a cure had consumed me. No distractions, no room for anything else. Least of all a wife who stirred up feelings I'd long buried. Women were fleeting amusement, a momentary escape, not...this. Whatever this might be.

I pushed myself up abruptly and stood. Luna glanced at me, brow arched in question. I forced a smirk and a mocking expression, looked down at her with manufactured contempt.

"That's enough," I said. "I need to clean up properly. The last thing I need is a woman's scent clinging to me."

Luna laughed, a low, throaty sound that caught me off guard. She propped herself up on one elbow and gave me a wry smile.

"Given your charm, Benedetto, I don't think that's something you need to worry about."

Her words sparked a flash of irritation mixed with reluctant amusement. I watched as she stood and tied her robe securely around her waist. She was quick with her tongue, which made me harden again.

It *had* been a while...

No. I couldn't let this continue. Not least because she was a pawn in a game she couldn't hope to win.

"Charm is irrelevant," I said flatly. "I have more important matters to focus on."

Luna's smile didn't waver but did gain an edge like a dagger's. "Of course you do. The great Benedetto d'Alvarez, consumed by his grand quest."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Mock all you want, but it's the only thing that matters. I won't be distracted from my purpose."

"Even by your *wife*?" She raised a brow.

"Especially by my wife," I said. My purpose was revenge, not hearth and home. Especially not at my family's whim.

Luna shook her head, auburn waves tumbling over her shoulders, a few strands clinging to her damp throat and forehead. "You're a fool, Benedetto. Revenge won't bring you peace."

"I'm not looking for peace," I said. "I'm looking for justice. For my brother."

She met my gaze and searched mine. For a moment, something flickered there, pity, perhaps, or understanding. But it vanished as quickly as it came.

"Justice," she said. "Is that truly all you want?"

I turned away from her, jaw clenched. *Yes*. It was all I'd ever wanted. All I'd ever need.

But even as the thought formed, I knew it was a lie. Because deep down, in a place I rarely acknowledged, there was a part of me that yearned for something more. Something I could never have, not while the ghosts of my past still haunted me.

*Enough. Focus on what matters. Revenge. Justice. Nothing else.*

I strode toward the door for the men's hot baths, not looking back at Luna.

“Get cleaned up,” I said over my shoulder. “We have work to do.”

Her laughter followed me out, mocking and strangely alluring all at once. *Damned woman.* I turned and stalked toward the house. *She’ll be the death of me yet.*

The warm water enveloped me as I stepped into the bath. I scrubbed at my skin, trying to wash away the lingering sensations and scents from my encounter with Luna. Despite my best efforts, my thoughts kept wandering back to her.

I remembered how she’d kept her robe on, never fully disrobing. It was a small detail, but it nagged at me. Why didn’t she take off the robe? Probably just a woman thing, a mole or a scar on her back. It didn’t matter.

Still, it was curious. What was she hiding?

I shook my head, forcing the thought aside. I couldn’t afford distractions.

Anxious to be on my way, I finished bathing quickly. As I dressed, I strapped my sword to my hip, the familiar weight grounding me. For a moment, I considered returning to the merchant’s house where I’d been staying. But I hesitated.

Competent assassins would have already marked that place. And killing a bunch of people tonight would only delay me.

Instead, I decided to spend the night at the family home. It was safer there, and I could use the time to rest and gather information at breakfast. My mother always had her ear to the ground when it came to court gossip and political maneuverings.

I exited the bathhouse, the cool night air a welcome respite from the lingering heat within. Luna scrolled ahead of me, her arms full of clothing, heading toward the main house. She didn’t turn around, but I could hear laughter in her voice as she said, “Running back to hide behind your mother’s skirts?”

I snorted at the absurdity of the statement. “I’d rather deal with her than with a group of idiots sent to kill me. Unless you’ve done something to anger her?”

She threw a smirk over her shoulder. “I’m not that suicidal.”

Entering through the front door at this hour would wake the household and invite an inquisition from my mother, and I caught up with Luna as she approached the old oak tree that grew beside one of the second-story windows.

That tree had aided Francesco and me on a number of late-night adventures.

The tension between me and my wife was almost palpable, an uneasy truce with neither of us willing to speak first. As we paused at the base of the tree, Luna prepared to climb, trying to ensure she was covered with the robe as she clambered up.

She shot me a look under her lashes and frowned.

Unable to resist, I said lightly, “You look like you’re thinking too hard. Regretting your life choices already, or just sulking because you can’t keep up?”

Luna’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, absolutely. I lie awake every night worrying how I might fall behind the great Benedetto d’Alvarez. It’s a deep, consuming fear.”

She was sharper than I gave her credit for. I almost wished... no. Better not to think about it.

As she climbed, it was obvious that she’d taken this route before. Her movements were graceful and practiced. A flicker of curiosity sparking within me. There was much more to Luna than what she let others see, and despite my best efforts, I found myself wanting to unravel all her secrets.

*Focus, Benedetto. You have a mission, a purpose. You can’t afford distractions, especially not in the form of a young woman with a sharp tongue and haunting eyes.*

I followed her up the tree, the rough bark biting into my palms as I pulled myself onto the window ledge. Luna had already slipped inside, and I could hear her soft footsteps padding on the floorboards within.

This night had changed something between us. The banter, the shared experience, the fleeting moments of understanding... it was a dangerous path for me to tread.

But then again, I'd never been one to shy away from danger. And it had been a long time since any woman piqued my curiosity.

Safely in the room, Luna ghosted to the door and flicked a stray strand of hair out of her face. Her voice was softer than the hush of morning rain. "Tell me, Benedetto, do you always have this effect on people, or is it just me who finds your company so utterly exhausting?"

I raised a brow and kept my tone casual but with an edge, matching her quietness. "Only on people who are too weak to handle a challenge. If you find me exhausting, Luna, maybe you're simply out of your depth."

Luna snorted. "Out of my depth? I was out of my depth when I was fourteen, forced into a marriage with a man who couldn't even recognize his own wife when she was standing right in front of him. Now I know exactly what I'm doing."

My smirk faltered for a split second. "Well, you were a child then. You've done well."

*Scald the moon, why did I say that?* I shouldn't be engaging with her like this, letting her get under my skin.

Luna's eyes blazed with anger, her whisper-soft voice sharp. "Don't patronize me, Benedetto. I've survived things you can't even imagine."

She was right. I didn't know the full extent of what she'd been through. Nor did she know my scars, so we were even in that.

I forced a smirk back onto my face. "Is that so? Well, why don't you enlighten me then, Luna? What great trials have you endured that make you so strong?"

*Keep pushing her away. It's better for both of us. I can't afford to let anyone close, not now, not ever.*

I leaned slightly closer, my eyes gleaming with challenge. "Careful, Luna. You're starting to sound like you think you can handle me. That's a dangerous thought."

She met my gaze head-on, not backing down an inch. "Maybe I'm not just thinking it. Maybe I know I can."

For a heartbeat, the air between us crackled with unspoken tension. The words were biting, but there was an undercurrent of something else, something neither of us wanted to acknowledge. It was a moment of raw, electric attraction, hidden beneath layers of animosity.

*Void eat you, woman.* Why did she have to be so damn stubborn, so infuriatingly alluring?

I forced a lopsided smile, shaking my head. “You know, it’s almost charming how fiercely you fight back. Like a fox pup barking at a wolf.”

Luna rolled her eyes, but the ghost of a smile flitted across her lips. “And it’s almost charming how you keep underestimating me. Almost.”

Damn it, she was impossible. Maybe that was why I couldn’t seem to look away.

I glanced at Luna, catching the determined set of her jaw in the faint moonlight streaming through the window. She was tougher than I gave her credit for.

She slipped out the door, heading for the opposite wing of the house. The rooms kept for me on the rare occasions I visited were only a few steps away. Down the hall, Luna turned. For a moment, I paused, watching her silhouette disappear into the shadows. *What are you hiding, Luna? What secrets do you carry beneath that sharp tongue and fierce spirit?*

Shaking my head, I entered my chamber, the familiar scent of leather and steel enveloping me. I stripped off my sword and boots, my thoughts still lingering on the woman down the hall. *She’s a distraction. A complication you can’t afford.*

The book I wrapped in a silk shirt. I’d left it here the last time I visited, just in case. It was enchanted to obscure scrying, so whatever was wrapped in it was almost impossible to find. Worn, it didn’t have the effect, since it didn’t completely cover the wearer.

It had cost a pretty penny, but worth it now.

Task complete, even as I lay down on the bed, staring at the ceiling, I couldn’t escape the memory of her eyes, the way

they'd blazed with challenge and something else, something that made my pulse quicken. Scald the moon, I was in trouble. Real trouble.

Sleep eluded me, my mind churning with thoughts of Luna, of the quest ahead, of the revenge I'd sought for so long. *Tomorrow. Tomorrow, I'll focus. I'll put her out of my mind and do what needs to be done.*

The lie I told myself left a burn in my chest. Luna had gotten under my skin, and there was no going back. *Absent gods keep you, Luna. Far away from me. Because I have a feeling we're both going to need all the help we can get.*



The morning sun lit the dining room with a molten pale golden glow. I sat at one end of the table, the scents of herbal tea filling my nostrils and the taste of fresh bread in my mouth. Mother sat across from me, her sharp eyes assessing. Father slumped in his chair, his face grey and tired.

He'd been ill for many years, even before Francesco left to seek his apprenticeship. He dipped his bit of bread in the tea, watching me with hollow eyes.

Mother leaned forward, a sly smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "I heard something intriguing this morning from my maid. Tulliano Lucardi left town last night. Urgent business, apparently. Headed straight for Kalion."

I narrowed my eyes. "Did he say why?"

She shrugged. "I've no idea. It isn't technically my business. But it's obvious something spooked him. He left in a hurry, with only a small entourage."

Kalion? What could have dragged him there in such a rush? This could be the lead I'd been waiting for. Especially after we took the book.

"Interesting," I kept my voice neutral. "Very interesting."

Mother's smile widened, showing perfect teeth. "I thought you'd find it so."



I reached for a piece of flatbread, tearing off a chunk and dipping it in honey. *Lucardi in Kalion. It might be connected to Francesco. To the curse.*

"I suppose I should pay a visit to Kalion myself," I said, popping the bread into my mouth. "See what all the fuss is about."

Mother nodded, unsurprised. "Of course. It would be wise to investigate."

Father stirred, blinking at me as if just realizing I was there. "Benedetto," he said. "When did you arrive?"

A pang of sadness mixed with frustration shot through me. *He's getting worse.* "Last night, Father. I had some business to attend to."

He nodded vaguely, his attention already drifting. Mother's lips tightened, a flash of something crossing her face before she smoothed it away.

"Well," she said briskly, "if you're going to Kalion, you'll need supplies. I'll have the servants pack you a bag."

I inclined my head in thanks, my mind already racing ahead. Kalion. Lucardi. The book. It was all connected. Anticipation thrummed through me, the thrill of the hunt, the promise of answers.

My thoughts turned to Luna. Would she insist on coming? I pushed the thought away. *Focus. She will do what she does, and you'll react then.*

But even as I finished my breakfast, my thoughts kept circling back to a pair of fierce gray eyes and a sharp tongue, to a body made for sin.

After breakfast, I strode into the courtyard, warmth and humidity already rising, promising another day of scorching heat. The grooms had my horse ready, a sleek black stallion named Biter, because he did. As I approached, I saw a bay gelding with a white blaze on his forehead already saddled, a familiar figure astride it.

Luna. She sat tall in the saddle, her auburn hair braided back, a long red veil twisted through it. She wore practical riding clothes, leather breeches and a linen shirt, but she still managed to look every inch the noblewoman.

I stopped, folding my arms across my chest. "What are you doing? How did you know I was leaving?"

She rolled her eyes. "It's not like it wasn't obvious how you and your mother get along. I figured you'd be gone before breakfast. As for knowing where you're going, it's not like you ordered the grooms to keep it a secret."

I scowled. "You're useless in a fight, and you should stay here to see if you're pregnant. No point dragging you across the countryside."

Her smile was thin and sharp. "It'll be a week or two before I find out if your seed took, Benedetto," she said. "And if I'm not, I'd prefer to be in a position to try again before I turn forty."

*Damn her.* I bit back a laugh. "You'll slow me down. I'm not going to wait for you."

"Good," she said. "I'd prefer not to wait for you either."

I studied her for a long moment, weighing my options. I could try to force her to stay, but I had a feeling that would only make her more determined. And loathe as I was to admit it, having her along might not be the worst thing. She was clever and observant, and I could use an extra set of eyes.

It was not like I could even protect her. Maybe after learning how the world really worked, she'd head back here without argument.

I swung up into Biter's saddle, the leather creaking beneath me. "Fine. But don't expect me to coddle you. We ride hard and fast."

Luna just smiled, a glint of challenge in her eyes. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

"You feel safe leaving your sister and nursemaid here?"

Luna's expression flickered, a hint of uncertainty passing over her features before she masked it. "They'll be fine. Your mother's household is secure, and Rose has Sofia to look after her."

I shrugged, not entirely convinced but unwilling to discuss the point further. *If something happens, it's on Luna's head, not mine.*

Clicking my tongue, I urged my steed forward. Luna fell in beside me as we rode out of the courtyard, the clattering of hooves against cobblestones echoing in the early morning air.

We rode in silence, cutting across the countryside, the only sound the steady rhythm of our horses' hooves against the earth. I kept my eyes forward, my mind already racing ahead to Kalion and what I might find there.

Lucardi was running scared. But from what? Or who?

It was a question that had been eating at me since I first heard the news of his abrupt departure. Lucardi was a cautious man, not prone to rash decisions. For him to leave so suddenly, without even a proper entourage... something had to have spooked him badly.

I glanced over at Luna, riding tall and proud beside me. The early morning light played across her face, casting her features in a soft glow. There was a determination in the set of her jaw, a fire in her eyes that I recognized all too well.

"You realize this isn't going to be a pleasure trip," I said abruptly, breaking the silence between us. "It's not too late to go back."

Luna met my gaze, her chin lifted in that infuriatingly defiant way of hers. "I'm well aware. I'm not here for a pleasure trip."

"Then why are you here?" I said. "What do you hope to gain from this? There's no guarantee you'll get pregnant on this trip either."

For a moment, Luna was silent.

"I'm here because I refuse to wait anymore. I'm here because I'm tired of being treated like a pawn in everyone else's

games. And I'm here because..." She hesitated, as if weighing her next words carefully. "Because I think there might be more to you than just a ruthless mercenary out for revenge."

I stared at her, caught off guard by her words. *She thinks there's more to me? She has no idea who I really am, what I've done.*

But there was a flicker of understanding in her gaze that unsettled me. It was as if she could see right through me, past all the layers of anger and bitterness and pain, to the man I used to be. A man long dead.

Dangerous thoughts for the girl. She'd learn.

I tore my gaze away from Luna's and focused on the road ahead. "Just try to keep up. And don't get in my way."

And with that, I spurred my horse forward, leaving Luna to follow in my wake as we rode down the road to Kalion. The way stretched ahead, dusty and sunlit, with the distant silhouette of the Renhos Mountains on the horizon. We rode in silence for the first few miles, the only sound the rhythmic thud of hooves and the occasional call of a bird overhead.

I kept my pace fast, pushing the horses but not enough to harm them. I glanced over occasionally, expecting to see Luna struggling, but she matched my speed, her face set in determined concentration. *She's tough. But we'll see how long she can keep this up.*

I urged my horse into a gallop. The wind whipped past my face, stinging my eyes, but I didn't slow down. I was curious what her reaction would be.

To my surprise, Luna kept pace, her horse's hooves pounding the earth in perfect sync with mine. Her auburn hair streamed behind her like a banner, and there was a fierce, exhilarated gleam in her eyes that I admired.

I slowed my horse to a canter, then a trot, and finally a walk. Luna pulled up beside me, her face flushed and her breathing slightly labored, but there was a triumphant smile on her lips.

"Had enough yet?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

She laughed, a bright, defiant sound. “No. You can rest if you need to, old man.”

I shook my head, annoyance blending with amusement. “We’ll see about that. There’s still a long way to go.”

There were dangers on this road. Bandits, thieves, wild animals... I’d probably have to protect her, whether she liked it or not.

And if I had to, back to Legnali she’d go.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# LUNA

THE SUN RODE LOW ON THE HORIZON BY THE TIME BENEDETTO called a halt. I dismounted and tended Dawn. My horse had a lot of stamina, but it had been a long day. I took extra care with his grooming, wincing from the aches in my muscles as I removed his tack.

A sweet-tempered animal, Dawn didn't protest being tied for the night. I did move him further from Benedetto's stallion when the other horse laid his ears back and bared his teeth.

I didn't want to admit it, but this was a longer ride than I was used to. Tomorrow would be painful. My solace was that Benedetto hadn't ridden that much recently either, so he'd be in pain too.

I'd packed salve expecting something like this.

"It's going to be a cold camp tonight," Benedetto said gruffly.

"You've decided it's going to be an uncomfortable evening. How surprising. " I'd packed bread, dried meat and cheese anticipating that decision. for just such a decision as well.

He looked frustrated for a moment, my reaction not what he expected. When I pulled out my rations, he shook his head and chuckled. "Clever girl. Did you bring salve as well? I'm willing to help you spread yours if you'll return the favor."

The pot was in my hand as he spoke. "Once you show me you brought some as well, since we're being equal shares."

He laughed again, genuine amusement lightening his features. After eating and tending our aches, we settled into our separate

bedrolls.

I took first watch, scanning and listening under the bright stars for any signs of danger - predators or bandits. The wind sighed through the grass, almost hypnotic, nor was it quiet. Foxes barked, the snarl of a big cat at a distance, the hush of wings above us from night flying birds combined in a tapestry of nocturnal life.

Despite darkness and uncertainty, it soothed me. When my shift ended, I woke Benedetto and gratefully sank into slumber myself.

Then I stood alone on another plain, an endless vista of tall grass rippling green in the wind. My breath misted in the chilly air. The ground beneath my feet felt unstable, like the surface of a frozen lake that might crack at any moment.

And then it did, and I fell forever, a scream bubbling in my throat, until I landed in desolation. All around me was covered in gritty white dust, the sun blazed down from an angry blue sky. Ruined houses stood within eyesight as I climbed to my feet, unhurt by the long fall.

A regal woman appeared before me, her silver-streaked chestnut hair swept up in a crown of thick braids. Shorter than me, and fine-boned, with a rounded face and a piercing blue gaze filled with uncanny wisdom.

An immediate sense of connection washed over me, strange yet undeniable.

“Who are you?” I asked.

She smiled at me, a flash of merriment that made my heart clench. I couldn’t remember the smile, but it made me feel... loved but alone. Like I’d lost it before I could remember it.

“I’m your grandmother, Luna. My name is Olivia. I’ve come to teach you about your magic.”

Confusion and anger swirled inside me. “Why now? Why not my mother? Why not when I cried and prayed to the absent gods for anyone to help me?”

Her sigh rustled like autumn leaves. “Being dead makes communication difficult. Walls barred me, wards rooted in the buildings where you lived. This is the first you’ve slept in the open, my dear. The only reason I can do this is because our family has a bargain with Nightmare, a pact that allows us to pass on our teachings through dreams if there’s no other way.”

A swirl of darkness formed nearby, a chill breeze blowing over both of us, and my heart quickened. Unreasoning fear quivered under my skin. “A bargain with Nightmare? Why would they have done that?”

“It’s not a simple gift, Luna. It’s a burden, one our line has carried for generations. Your magic is tied to the dark moon, the power of disruption. Potent, unpredictable, in need of guidance.”

*She bears the scent.* The voice came from everywhere and nowhere, filling the sky and ringing from the ground. I staggered.

Olivia spoke sharply. “So? You promised my forebears this. Sniff around for traces of Ruin’s scent but stop interfering with my granddaughter.”

With the fear pulsing inside me I had no idea how she could talk like that. Possibly being dead helped.

The fear eased as the darkness solidified into a humanoid form wrapped in shadow. “I shall.”

Olivia gestured and a soft, feathery darkness emanated from her hand, swirling like smoke. “Pay attention to me, Luna, we haven’t much time. The disruption caused by your magic doesn’t have to be all or nothing. You’ve been using it like a hammer when it can be a scalpel. When other magic touches you, you reflexively dispel it. But if you control your power, you can use it for other purposes.”

Fascinated, I watched as she manipulated the dark mist, making it dance and ripple without extinguishing the faint light around us.

I tried not to pay attention to the tall dark figure circling us in an unsettling glide.



“Feel the magic here. This place is pure magic. When you contact it, instead of unleashing your power all at once, control it. Shape it.”

Hesitantly, I closed my eyes and focused. The familiar cold tingling of my magic gathered in my fingertips. Tentatively, I let a thin tendril of dark moonlight slip from my hand, concentrating on forming it into a fluttering ribbon in the air.

I brushed it against the white dust hanging in the air, which shivered and then faded into nothingness.

When I opened my eyes, Olivia was smiling at me approvingly. “Well done. You’re learning.”

Another wind blew, smelling faintly of roses, and the tall shadow figure spun, moving rapidly towards its source. “Where are you?”

The plains rocked and shattered and the force of the cry. Nothingness wrapped me and a sharp jab to my ribs jolted me to full awareness. I groaned, blinking against the harsh morning light. Benedetto loomed over me, already dressed and ready to go, a smile playing on his lips.

“Rise and shine, sleeping beauty. We’re saddling up.” He nudged my side again with the toe of his boot. “Sorry, guess you missed breakfast.”

“Since chewing on bread and cheese takes so much preparation,” I said, shoving myself upright and rubbing my sore legs.

He just shrugged. “You’re the one who decided to sleep in.”

As I saddled my gelding, my mind raced. That dream had felt so real, my heart still pounding from the last jolt of fear.

Was that part a dream? Or something more?

What my grandmother had said about the wards wasn’t entirely correct, I’d traveled with Vala over the years. But she seemed to believe it to be true, seemed sincere.

I knew that most old buildings of the nobility had wards to keep spies from snooping by magic and keep out ghosts, but

inns didn't. Why had she not been able to contact me then? What had prevented her?

I glanced over at Benedetto, considering for a moment whether to confide in him. No. This felt too personal.

By midmorning we'd reached the outskirts of the Drakewood. It covered half a province, lands set aside to remain wild by the first Emperor during his conquest.

"This is a shortcut. I'd rather not use the main road," said Benedetto as we left the road and rode along the outskirts of the forest. After several hours we started on his 'shortcut', a slender track that we'd have to lead the horses on.

The forest transitioned from plains to thick woods within a few hundred feet. Oaks, thorn trees, ash and elm- all of them old. The wood was also magically potent, harvested only at the emperor's order.

The ancient trees towered above us as we found the track. It was thin enough that we both dismounted. Leading the horses was better than catching a branch to the chest and falling.

Benedetto led, and I watched, amused at the dance between him and Biter. The stallion was determined to bite, and Benedetto equally determined to duck it. I wondered how the horse had gotten the habit and why Benedetto put up with it.

Movement stirred the underbrush before a rabbit ran across the track. It had a rack of horns like a small deer. Strange creatures lived here, I'd heard

The most famous were drakes, small, winged creatures. Generally they grew to the size of a small dog. People called them dragons when they grew larger than horses.

Beneath the thick cover of leaves, the air was cooler, heavy with the earthy aroma of moss and greenery. Thin shafts of sunlight pierced the dense canopy every so often, casting dappled shadows across the forest floor. The soft clop of our horses' hooves mixed with the rustling undergrowth and the occasional bird call.

"Have you heard the stories about this place?" I asked, breaking the stretching silence between us.

Benedetto snorted derisively. “What, the ones about drakes attacking travelers? Those are just tales to frighten children.”

“Maybe,” I said, tracking movement off the track. “Stories often have a foundation in truth, however long ago.”

He scoffed but didn’t argue further. As we continued walking the horses, my thoughts drifted back to the dream, my grandmother’s words echoing in my mind. The dark moon’s power of disruption. Could I really learn to control it like she said? My fingers tingled, itching to try conjuring that ribbon of dark moonlight again.

But not now, I needed to keep my attention on our surroundings.

I needed to keep my magic hidden, just as I always had. Even if a part of me longed to explore this new knowledge, to test the limits of what I could do. For now, those desires had to wait. This evening, I promised myself. Soon.

A sudden whistle cut through the air. Before I could react, a volley of arrows rained down around us. My horse reared up with a terrified whinny, nearly pulling me off the ground. I clung to the reins, adrenaline bringing a metallic taste to my mouth.

“Void eat you,” Benedetto cursed, his sword ringing as he drew it from its sheath. Darkness enveloped it as he called his magic, illusions to conceal us and mess with their aim.

He slashed at an arrow, deflecting it mid-flight with uncanny speed. “Stay close,”

Leather clad figures emerged from the underbrush, at least a dozen of them, their faces hidden behind crude masks. Bandits. *Scald the moon.*

I reached into my sleeve, and pulled out my fan, snapping it open with a flick of my wrist. The razor-sharp edge glinted in the dappled sunlight. I was not helpless.

The bandits closed in, most of them focused on Benedetto. They carried an assortment of rusted swords and daggers and approached warily. My husband was very good at fighting, but numbers could bring him down.

I caught the glint of magic sparking to life in one bandit's palm - a spell.

*Oh no you don't.*

Instinctively, I thrust out my hand, letting a blast of dark moonlight erupt from my fingertips. It struck the bandit square in the chest. The spell in his hand sputtered out as he flew backwards, crashing into a tree with a sickening crunch.

*Control it*, my grandmother's voice echoed in my ears. *Shape it.*

I gritted my teeth, reining in the wild surge of magic that threatened to pour out of me unchecked. A smaller, more concentrated ribbon of darkness coiled around my wrist like a snake, ready to strike.

Biter screamed and reared, lashing out with his hooves. One caught a bandit in the chest, and the stallion moved to continue stomping on him. The other bandit moved to close with us, away from the angry horse.

Beside me, Benedetto moved like a whirlwind, seeming to vanish and reappear at will as he cut down bandit after bandit. Starlight magic, I realized with a jolt of surprise. *He sources starlight magic, not moon magic like I thought. Teleporting takes a lot of energy and skill, too. I thought he was untrained. Vala always said so.*

Rose had gotten a tutor because untrained starlight mages were dangerous to themselves and everyone around them. How had Benedetto managed to live so long untrained?

A hulking brute of a man lunged at me, his jagged blade slicing the air. I ducked under his swing, lashing out with my fan. It carved a deep gash across his throat. Blood sprayed as he fell, gurgling.

Dawn whinnied and bolted, heading deeper into the forest.

I spun to face the next attacker, but pain lanced through my thigh, sharp and hot. I hissed through clenched teeth. Damn it. A knife had grazed me, leaving a thin line of crimson welling up on my riding pants. The bandit grinned, thinking he had me.

Not today. Ignoring the burning in my leg, I surged forward, burying my fan to the hilt in his chest. His eyes went wide with shock. I wrenched the fan free, letting him crumple.

*Gods, let that be the last of them.* I spun to face Benedetto.

The other bandits lay scattered on the forest floor, some dead, others groaning in pain.

Benedetto wiped the blood off his sword and cast a sidelong glance at me.

“You’ve got the footwork of a cow,” he said dryly. “Or maybe you’re drunk. Either way, you should go home. This is dangerous work.”

I scoffed. “If I ever need your praise, Benedetto, I’ll cut it out of you myself.”

He bowed. “You’re welcome to try.”

Insufferable ass. I couldn’t deny a flicker of admiration for his skill. Maybe he’d spar with me, and I could learn something new.

I tied a strip of cloth around the wound, tightening it as I applied pressure. “It’s a scratch.”

“We should move before scavengers come,” Benedetto answered.

“Agreed.”

It took an hour to catch up with Dawn, who’d finally stopped in a small clearing to crop grass. A honey candy brought him to my side, and mending the rein took only a few minutes.

We moved on, trying to make up for lost time. As the adrenaline of the fight and finding Dawn faded, I limped more and more. When the sun dipped close to the horizon, we stopped to rest. I winced as I checked the wound on my thigh. It was a shallow cut, but it hadn’t closed because I had to use that muscle to walk, which kept opening it.

Taking care of Dawn took longer than usual, and I petted him and gave him scratches to calm his remaining nerves.

Benedetto took even longer cleaning the blood off Biter's hooves and legs.

"That's why you put up with the biting, isn't it? He's a warhorse?" I asked as I kindled a small campfire.

"Partly. And partly because temperamental creatures are more interesting." A mocking smile curved his lips as he worked. "A reason to keep you around too, though I think Biter's the smarter of the two of you."

I rolled my eyes at him, raising my middle finger. "Void eat you, Benedetto."

Absent gods take him, he was an ass. *I can't let him get under my skin. Pretend you aren't annoyed.*

He laughed, the sound echoing in the quiet of the forest, the mirth telling me I hadn't hidden the irritation. I turned away from him, pulling out dried marigold to steep in the heating water to prevent infection and willow bark for a different tea to ease the pain. Quiet fell as I focused on tending to my wound.

As I wrapped a bandage around my thigh, my mind drifted back to the revelation during the fight. Starlight magic. Why would he hide that? What else was he hiding? The questions swirled in my head.

"I'll take the first watch," I said.

"Fine." Benedetto settled by the fire, reading more of the book we'd taken from the library. He spent time every evening reading it, usually with a dark frown.

"What's in it?" I finally asked.

He regarded me. "Rituals, notes. It's almost like Ruin was creating a final spell and was putting the pieces of it in here. I can't figure what the purpose of it was, though. Lucardi's left notes in it, as well, mostly on other locations he's seen these rituals and spells in books. Probably searching for missing pieces. When I see him, I'll be sure to ask how he contacts Moonshifter, since there was a letter from the sorcerer folded in the front page. With instructions for our friend on what research to do, no less."

From Benedetto's tone, Lucardi might not enjoy that conversation.

Benedetto tucked the book into his tunic and went to his bedroll. In moments he slept.

With the forest shrouded in shadows, I sat with my back against a tree, listening. My thigh throbbed dully, but I pushed the pain aside.

Suddenly, I heard a soft rustle next to me. I looked up to see a small drake emerging from the darkness in the roots of the tree. It was no bigger than a large cat, with pale iridescent scales that shimmered in the moonlight.

My breath caught in my throat. So beautiful! I closed my fan in my hand, just in case.

The drake sniffed the air, then took a cautious step toward me, making a little sound like it was saying, "Pip, Pip."

I extended my off hand slowly, hardly daring to breathe. The drake nuzzled my palm, making a soft wuffling sound.

A rush of joy filled me, an unexpected connection clicking into place I couldn't quite explain. Maybe the children's stories that drakes were friendly and bonded with humans were actually true. I smiled, as the drake settled beside me, its warmth seeping into my skin.

I stroked its scales gently, marveling at their smoothness. The drake looked up at me with intelligent eyes, seeming to understand my every movement.

"You're a beautiful creature, aren't you?" I said, careful not to wake Benedetto. The drake made a soft trilling sound in response.

I wondered what brought you here. Was he drawn to magic, like the legends said? Could he sense the power within me?

As if in answer, the drake nuzzled closer, its tail wrapping around my wrist like a reassuring touch. A sense of peace washed over me, a feeling of belonging I hadn't experienced in a long time.

The horses didn't stir. Given Biter was a wary animal, that meant the little drake was good at stealth.

I cleared my throat and said, "Benedetto. We have friendly company. Do not jump up and try to kill him."

His eyes snapped open, and he sat up smoothly, blinking as he focused on me and then the drake.

"Only you, Luna. Go to sleep. I won't be able to do that with this creature nearby until we know it's friendly."

Not giving him a chance to reconsider, I pulled up my bedroll. The drake snuggled into me, and I fell asleep in a breath.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# LUNA

PIP PERCHED ON A NEARBY BRANCH AS I SADDLED UP MY horse, the cool morning mist clinging to my boots. In better light, its scales shimmering blue and white and silver. He regarded me with bright eyes whose color echoed his scales, though with a swirl of red in them. I paused and stroked his head and Pip nuzzled into my hand.

Benedetto paused in adjusting his saddle to stare at us, surprise naked on his face. “I don’t know how you’ll want to handle this. Drake usually only bond with the Imperial family, or people with powerful magic. I felt yours during the fight, you’re strong, but do you want everyone to know that?”

I glanced at him, unable to resist a smirk. “I can say he just has good taste.”

Benedetto rolled his eyes. “Or that it’s as foolish as you are.”

At his words, Pip mantled his wings, leaned forward and hissed, showing tiny sharp teeth. Well, that was interesting. I suppressed a smile. Seemed like I wasn’t the only one who didn’t appreciate my husband’s attitude.

Curious, I asked Benedetto, “Do you know how to tell male from female drakes?”

He shrugged. “From what I’ve heard, they decide when they mature. For now, ‘it’ or ‘they’ are probably best. Or just call it by name.”

“So Pip gets to choose which they’ll be,” I said as I took the leading rein. I wonder what Pip would pick when they grow up. If they grew up. My heart clenched at the thought. I was

already more attached to the little creature than I cared to admit. Losing them would be like losing a piece of myself.

I shook off the maudlin thoughts and clicked my tongue. It was time to move. Kalion awaited, a place I'd never been, with all its secrets and dangers. And right now, with Pip at my side and the open road ahead, I could almost believe we had a chance at something like freedom someday.

We walked single file, the trail winding through the last stretch of the Drakewood. Pip continued making little chirping sounds, so I decided to officially name them Pip. It suited their tiny, energetic presence.

As we traveled, I pulled a piece of bread and dried fruit from my saddlebag.

"Lunch on the move," I said dryly, taking a bite. "You sure know how to treat a lady."

Benedetto looked over his shoulder, eyes glinting with amusement. "You wanted to come along. I didn't promise luxury."

He paused, then said, "Also, was a lady with us I didn't know about?"

I shot him a look, but bit back a retort. It was fine. I ignored the dull ache in my leg from the wound I'd sustained. I'd dealt with worse than a few days of rough travel. Compared to the memories of the suffocating confines of my father's house, even this arduous journey felt like a breath of fresh air.

Suddenly Benedetto stopped. He looked over his shoulder, holding his finger to his lips, then beckoned me forward. I moved as quietly as I could, leaving Dawn's leading rein on my wrist, but letting it play out as far as it could.

To our right, through a thin stand of trees, I saw a clearing. In that clearing, a creature stretched, then flexed its wings. A lion's body, with an eagle's head and wings. It would have looked foolish, but instead the two melded with a breathtaking power and beauty.

Biter snorted and the creature spun to face us, then took flight. I breathed a sigh of relief. A griffin was a fearsome fighter,

and I was glad it decided to flee rather than fight.

“So beautiful,” I murmured.

Benedetto smiled down at me, then flinched and jumped away as Biter’s teeth almost closed on his arms.

“You’ll find beasts like that in the more remote forests. They aren’t timid, but it’s better to avoid fighting if you can. Hellhounds have a nasty venom, for example, and leave bad burns. Hope you never meet an aggressive one.”

I nodded. I didn’t point out that only an idiot would get into a fight with a hellhound.

As the morning wore on, the ancient trees thinned, shafts of sunlight piercing the canopy more frequently. Then, as we rounded a bend, the forest abruptly ended and the shortcut opened up, giving me my first glimpse of Kalion in the far distance.

I sucked in a breath. The capital city was vast, surrounded by imposing walls of white marble that gleamed in the morning light. Towers rose like sentinels, their tops crowned with banners bearing the Imperial dragon sigil. The gates were enormous, wide enough for ten men to walk abreast, reinforced with iron and adorned with intricate carvings depicting the empire’s history, victorious battles, scenes of prosperity, and the unmistakable shape of a dragon flying above.

*Dragon.* I glanced at Pip, perched on my shoulder. When a drake grew larger than a horse, it was called a dragon. I wondered if Pip would get that big someday. A tiny part of me shivered in joy at the thought of riding dragonback, soaring through the sky.

It was a magnificent sight. I took in the city sprawling before me. I’d never seen anything like it. How many people lived there? Hundreds of thousands? More?

I realized I was staring, my mouth slightly open, and quickly shut it, hoping Benedetto hadn’t noticed. The last thing I needed was him mocking my country bumpkin reaction to the

grand city. But as I sneaked a glance his way, I saw his gaze was fixed ahead, his jaw set with determination.

He wasn't there to sightsee. And neither was I. We each had a mission, one that could mean life or death for those we loved. As awe-inspiring as Kalion was, I couldn't afford to lose sight of that.

Squaring my shoulders, I mounted and urged my horse forward, falling into step beside Benedetto,

A few hours later we approached the city gates. Whatever awaited us within those tall walls, I was ready to face it. I had to be.

For Rose's sake, and for my own.

Benedetto chuckled, the sound low and amused. "Try not to look too impressed. Beggars will swarm you if you look like you're from the country."

I scowled at him, my cheeks heated. "It's not every day you see a city this size."

He leaned closer, lowering his voice. "And just so you know, you'll need to find your own room. I'm not sharing mine with you."

My sweet, insincere smile would have been used to flavor the morning's porridge. "Oh, don't worry. I'm sure I'll have no trouble finding a room. I don't run out of coin at the drop of a hat."

I paused, tilting my head. "Though you might need to find someone who wants to share with you to save on expenses. It'll be a struggle with that... charm of yours."

*Two can play at this game.* A flash of annoyance filled in his gaze. If he thought he could unsettle me with his arrogance, he would be wrong.

As we rode through the gates and entered the market district, the city came alive around us. So many people, all jostling each other and moving and shouting.

And so many smells, not all of them pleasant.

The gate we passed led straight to the market. Vendors lined the streets, shouting their wares, fresh fruit, spices, silk scarves that fluttered in the breeze. The smells of roasting meat, spiced drinks, and the distinct tang of the sea filled the air, covering the odor of so many people living close together.

This city seemed like it was a living thing, pulsing with life. I could spend weeks just exploring the streets.

I didn't have weeks. I was here for a reason and had to work for Benedetto's cooperation. I tore my gaze away from a display of glittering jewelry and focused on the road ahead.

"Where to first?" I asked Benedetto, raising my voice to be heard over the clamor of the market.

He glanced at me, his expression unreadable. "We'll stable the horses, then find lodging. After that..."

The words trailed off, Benedetto's gaze turning distant. "After that, we start looking for answers."

I nodded, my pulse quickening. Everything was so different from Legnali here.

"Benedetto, is that really you?" a voice said as we made our way through the crowded market.

Benedetto's face shifted from wariness to annoyance to something softer as a man strode up to us. He was a few inches shorter than Benedetto, with a well-groomed beard and wavy black hair. He was dressed in fine but comfortable clothes, his eyes twinkling with genuine warmth.

"Lorenzo," Benedetto dismounted and greeted him with a rare, genuine smile. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Lorenzo's eyes flicked to me, widening slightly in surprise. They rested on Pip and widened further. "And who is this lovely lady? Your wife has grown up to be a lovely woman, Bene."

He had a nickname? I'd never heard it used. I filed it away for future reference.

Before Benedetto could respond, I smiled a bright smile, sliding off my horse's back.

“Luna,” I said sweetly. “Luna d’Alvarez, my lord. And yes, it’s true, at long last, we’ve found each other and travelled to Kalion.”

Lorenzo laughed heartily, clapping Benedetto on the back. “I never thought I’d see the day, Well, you must both come to my home. I won’t hear of you staying in some cramped little room, not when there’s plenty of space at our place.”

Laughter bubbled in me. This was an unexpected opportunity. Both a place to stay where we could be intimate and where we could gather information to further Benedetto’s quest.

“We’d be delighted,” I ignored Benedetto’s pointed look. “Lead the way, kind sir.”

Lorenzo grinned and turned, motioning for us to follow. As we walked, I leaned closer to Benedetto, lowering my voice. “Seems like you have a kind friend. What should I know?”

Benedetto sighed, his gaze fixed ahead. “Lorenzo and I go way back. He’s one of the few people I trust in this city. But don’t get too comfortable. I don’t stay in one place for long, usually.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know that. But there’s no harm in enjoying a bit of hospitality while we’re here, is there?”

Benedetto didn’t reply, but I could see the tension in his jaw.

Lorenzo led us through the streets to his home, a beautiful villa near the hills that held the palaces and the estates of the very wealthy. It was a place of understated luxury, with a courtyard garden filled with blooming flowers and shrubs and a small fountain.

When Lorenzo led us to the courtyard, a petite woman with flashing dark eyes and a beaming smile stood up from the bench.

“This is Palma, my wife,” said Lorenzo, pecking her cheek affectionately. This is Benedetto d’Alvarez and his wife, Luna.”

Palma swept forward, turning her bright gaze to me. She was about my height and build and wore a simple yet elegant

gown, her hair perfectly coiled into an intricate braid. She took my hands in hers. Her touch was warm and welcoming, her smile genuine. “Welcome, welcome, you look like you’ve had quite a journey. I’ll have the bathhouse readied for you both.”

Benedetto opened his mouth to object, but Palma cut him off with a stern look. “Don’t you argue, Benedetto d’Alvarez. You’ll stay with us tonight, and that’s final.”

I couldn’t resist a smug smile, casting a sidelong glance at Benedetto. “Well, if you insist.”

Palma led me up a sweeping staircase to a guest room filled with a selection of dresses in various styles and colors, so I had something to wear of my choice once I bathed. I realized with a twinge of embarrassment that my traveling garments were hardly appropriate for visiting the upper class. I’d had little time and no amount of space for baggage, and I’d assumed I would hire a seamstress to put together clothing when I arrived in Kalion.

That’s what happened in the stories I read anyway. I knew Vala ordered her clothing from a dressmaker who created them very quickly.

The room was bright and airy, with a large window that overlooked the garden. Palma carefully ignored Pip until it hopped onto the bed, preening and nudging her.

“May I?” she asked, a hand hovering.

“It looks like Pip wants you to pet it,” I answered. “Is there etiquette on dealing with drakes? I’ve never seen one.”

Palma laughed. “Nor I! They’re very rare. How did you...?”

She waved her hands as if implying I’d conjured Pip out of thin air.

“He came to us in the Drakewood and didn’t leave.” I couldn’t help but smile as Pip leaned into Palma’s gentle strokes.

“As for etiquette, you’re not supposed to really mention a drake, since it’s a symbol of magical power. That’s why it was surprising, since Bene didn’t mention you were a, um, unusually powerful and well trained.”

I gave her a mysterious smile. “No worries. And Pip likes attention, feel free to pet it whenever it seems to want it. Which is most of the time.”

As I sorted through the dresses, Palma chattered away, giving me a rapid-fire rundown of the latest gossip. “Oh, and have you heard? There’s been a spate of mysterious deaths in the Imperial family. They say it’s some sort of curse,”

I listened carefully, filing the information away. “A curse, you say. How tragic.”

Palma nodded, her dark eyes wide. “Yes, and some say it’s related to dark magic. But who knows with these things? The court is rife with rumors.”

*Dark magic?* It could be connected to everything happening with Benedetto’s search, given it was his family.

I selected a dress in a deep, rich red-purple, the fabric soft and luxurious against my skin. As I bathed, Palma continued to talk, filling me in on the ins and outs of Kalion society. I listened with half an ear, my mind racing with the implications of what she’d said about the Imperial deaths.

If there was dark magic involved, Benedetto could be in more danger than he realized. I frowned. If he was in danger, so were Rose and I.

Clean, I emerged from behind the screen, the dress fitting me like a second skin. Palma clapped her hands in delight. “Oh, Luna, you look stunning, That color suits you perfectly.”

I smiled, twirling for effect. It was a little short, but nothing that couldn’t be fixed with lace and a few pins. “Thank you, Palma. You’re too kind.”

She waved a hand, dismissing my thanks. “Nonsense, my dear. It’s my pleasure. Now, let’s go down and join the men for dinner. I’m sure they’re cooking up mischief and need supervision.”

I followed her out of the room, my mind still churning with questions. What was happening? Who was behind the deaths? And how could I use circumstances to my advantage?



I didn't have the answers yet, but I was determined to find them.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# BENEDETTO

LEANING BACK IN MY CHAIR, I SWIRLED THE RICH RED WINE IN my glass. The small study was dimly lit, the scent of burning cedar infusing the air. Lorenzo sat across from me, his expression uncharacteristically serious as he leaned forward.

“You need to take this seriously,” he said, keeping his voice low.

I nodded, my face expressionless. “Why? I’ll be gone on my own business and someone else will grab the emperor’s wreath. I don’t want it, Lorenzo. That’s if the gossip is true.”

Lorenzo shook his head, his gaze level. “It’s more than gossip, Bene. This isn’t just bad luck or isolated incidents. De Felice, de Ricci, even the de Pavone family, they’re all connected by blood to the emperor. And they’re dropping like flies. Both those before you in the line of succession, and those behind too. If you don’t watch the game, you could join them.”

I studied him closely. He was genuinely worried. And Lorenzo was not easily spooked. If he was this concerned, I needed to take care.

I set my wine glass down on the polished wooden table between us. “What are you suggesting, Lorenzo?”

“I’m not suggesting anything...yet. But you have to admit, it’s mighty strange. Noble families with imperial blood suddenly dying off one by one? Something’s not right. Someone who’d like to see you on the throne. And we both know who I’m talking about.”

Mother.

I drummed my fingers on the chair's armrest, mulling over his words. The implications were troubling, to say the least. If she was targeting those close to inheriting from the emperor...

"Have you spoken to anyone else about this? Shared your suspicions?" I asked, fixing him with a penetrating stare.

Lorenzo shifted uncomfortably. "No, of course not. You're the only one I trust with this, Bene. But you need to decide what you're going to do before it's too late."

*Before I'm next.* I filled in silently. With each death, I was moving up in the line of succession, getting closer to a throne I never wanted. One that would paint an even bigger target on my back for those who wanted the prize for someone else.

I rose to my feet abruptly. "Leave it with me. I'll do some discreet talking, see what I can do. In the meantime, keep this to yourself. Dead gods only know who could be listening."

Lorenzo nodded grimly as he also stood. "Watch your back, Bene," he said. "I've got a bad feeling about all this. A real bad feeling."

*That makes two of us.* I clapped him on the shoulder, but I kept my expression neutral as I walked him to the door. A cold unease settled in my gut. The game had just gotten a lot more deadly, and I needed to figure out the rules to protect my wife, even if I didn't keep her.

I stepped out of the study, the door clicking shut behind me with an ominous finality. The hallway stretched before me, dimly lit by flickering sconces. Faint strains of women's voices in conversation and laughter drifted from the distant dining room, a jarring contrast to the grim conversation I'd just left.

Pausing, I ran a hand through my hair, Lorenzo's words echoing in my mind. *Systematically removing the emperor's bloodline.* The implications settled like a lead weight in my chest. If he was right, this was no mere political ploy. This was a calculated extermination. And with each death, the noose tightened a little more around my own neck. It could come down to accept the throne or die.

*Luna.* Her name flashed through my thoughts, bringing with it a strange twist of concern. She was tangled up in this now, whether she realized it or not. Her father's imperial blood, diluted as it might be, put her in the crosshairs just as surely as my own lineage did.

And any child she might bear by me...

I shook my head, pushing away the unwanted worry.

Straightening my shoulders, I strode down the hallway. I had appearances to maintain, a role to play. My carefully crafted facade was our best defense.

But even as I prepared to join the party, my mind raced with questions.

Why was she making her move? And being so blatant about it?

The answers remained frustratingly out of reach. But one thing was certain - I couldn't do this alone. As much as it galled me to admit it, I needed allies. And loath as I was to drag her into this dangerous dance, Luna might just be the unexpected partner I needed to navigate this dance.

*Absent gods keep you.* The irony of the blessing was not lost on me. Because if I couldn't find a way to outmaneuver my mother, even the gods themselves wouldn't be able to save me from the fate that awaited.

With that chilling thought, I plastered on a smile and stepped into the dining room, ready to play my part in the grand charade.

I straightened my borrowed coat and adjusted my cuffs. My fingers were steady, but there was a tightness in my jaw. I needed to push the conversation with Lorenzo out of my mind for now. The dinner party was filled with people who would scrutinize my every move and expression, especially how close I was now to the throne. I had to be on my guard.

*Be the mask, Benedetto. No one here can know what's going through your mind. Play the role they expect and figure out the rest later.*

As I turned to head toward the dining room, I nearly collided with Luna. She had just stepped out of a nearby room, her gown a deep burgundy that complemented the flickering candlelight. She was momentarily caught off guard, but she recovered quickly, offering me a coy smile.

“Did you get lost, Benedetto?” she asked lightly, tilting her head as she looked up at me. “Or were you just hiding from the party?”

I gave her a tight smile. “Just gathering my thoughts. But I see you’re enjoying yourself already.”

Luna’s smile widened, her grey eyes gleaming with amusement. “Oh, I am. Your friends are quite charming. One of the ladies was just telling me about the last time you were here. Something about a fight over a game of cards?”

She was digging, I realized, feeling a mix of annoyance and reluctant admiration. The lady in question had been quite happy with my attentions after the fight, and upset when I dropped her, having obtained the scrolls I’d wanted.

Was she jealous?

I forced a laugh, the sound hollow even to my own ears. “Ah, yes. A little disagreement between friends. Nothing to worry about.”

Luna raised an eyebrow, clearly not buying my deflection. “If you say so,” she said, her tone laced with skepticism. “But I do hope you’re not planning on starting any fights tonight. It would be a shame to ruin such a lovely party.”

I gritted my teeth, my patience wearing thin. “I assure you, my vixen, I have no intention of causing a scene.”

*At least, not the kind you’re thinking about.*

Luna studied me for a moment. I met her stare unflinchingly. Finally, she nodded, seemingly satisfied with what she found.

“Well then,” she said brightly, looping her arm through mine, “shall we join the festivities? I’m sure our absence has been noted by now.”

I allowed her to lead me into the room, my mind still churning with the implications of Lorenzo's warning. My mother was probably systematically removing the other branches of the emperor's bloodline. And her opposition would be coming for me and mine.

The words echoed in my head again, a grim reminder of the danger that lurked in the shadows.

As we neared the dining room, the sound of laughter and clinking glasses grew louder. I straightened my shoulders, preparing to step into the role of the brooding, menacing nobleman. But even as I donned my mask, I feared the real threat was far closer than anyone realized. And with Luna by my side, the stakes had just gotten even higher.

Luna smiled at me.

"You've adapted quickly," I said. "Almost as if you were born for this life."

Luna gave a soft laugh, her gaze meeting mine. "I could point out I was born to this life, *husband*. I've lived with your family since I was fourteen. My blood's as good as yours, as they measure it. Even if I wasn't trained when I was young, adapt or die, isn't that what they say? I learned that lesson a long time ago."

She was a survivor. A pang of something that might almost be respect filled me. But that didn't mean I trusted her. Though trust had nothing to do with sex, either.

Was she plotting with Vala? Though she'd been open and explicit about what she wanted from me.

"Shall we, my lady?" I offered her my arm.

Luna raised an eyebrow, clearly recognizing the performative gesture. "You're quite the actor, Benedetto."

I smirked down at her, my eyes cold. "You have no idea."

We swept into the dining room, a picture of marital harmony. The long table was laden with delicacies, the scent of roasted meats and spiced wines filling the air. Guests milled about,

their jewels glittering in the candlelight, their laughter ringing out over the gentle strains of music.

After getting drink for both of us, I led Luna to a seat by the wall, pulling out her chair with a gentlemanly air. She settled into it, arranging her skirts with a practiced hand. I took my place beside her, nodding greetings to those nearby.

*Play your part.* I lifted my glass in a toast to the room at large. *Frown, brood, snarl. Let them see only what you want them to see.*

Even as I slipped into the familiar rhythm of polite conversation and political maneuvering, my mind was elsewhere.

*Fourth in line for the throne. How many of them would like to see me dead before I get any closer?*

With Luna by my side, I had to be more careful than ever.

I trusted no one. Not even my own wife. Especially not my own wife.

My mother was one for hard lessons, and I'd been an apt pupil. My brother's fate had been my graduation.

To cure him I needed to survive. I met Luna's gaze beside me. *Survive, take your revenge. Free Francesco. Nothing else matters.*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# BENEDETTO

THE DINING TABLE DAZZLED WITH OPULENCE WHEN WE WERE called to it. Crystal glasses glinted in the candlelight, silver cutlery gleamed against fine linen, and platters of sumptuous food filled the air with savory aromas. Whole roasted peacocks refeathered in their colorful plumage perched alongside steaming meat pies and delicate fish dishes. Stern-faced de Metteil ancestors gazed down from gilt-framed portraits lining the walls, silently observing the gathering below.

Laughter and lighthearted chatter still floated through the air, but beneath it ran an undercurrent of tension, nervous energy thrumming in every voice. My gaze fell on Luna across the table from me, her head tilted attentively as she listened to Palma, a charming smile gracing her lips. Pip strutted proudly on the back of her chair, preening under the guests' admiring glances.

She looked like she belonged here. Her father had callously abandoned Luna and her sister in Legnali for most of the year, far from the circles of social life. The shameful scandal of how he mistreated his wives after taking their dowries still lingered.

Luna grew up in the boonies, yet my mother trained her well. This poised young woman is worlds apart from the child I married.

At the head of the table sat the guest of honor, Alexis Cosmelis, the emperor's esteemed advisor. A thin, elderly man, his sharp, observant eyes missed nothing. He wore



elegant but understated clothing, every movement imbued with deliberate grace and thoughtfulness.

“Lord Cosmelis, such an honor to have you grace our table,” Palma gushed. “We are most humbled by your presence.”

“The honor is mine, Lady Palma,” Alexis said. “House de Metteil’s hospitality is unparalleled. And I must say, your lovely guest is a most charming addition.”

Luna inclined her head demurely. “You are too kind, Lord Cosmelis. I am still finding my way in this world, but House de Metteil has welcomed me and my husband as one of their own.”

I bit back a scoff. *Finding her way? More like conquering it.* A surge of some foreign emotion caught me off guard. Pride? Respect? Dead gods rotting, when did that happen?

Luna’s knowing gaze met mine for a fleeting instant, a secretive smile playing at the corners of her mouth. In that moment, an unspoken understanding passed between us. We both wore our masks well.

As the evening wore on, I watched with a mix of irritation and grudging admiration as Luna charmed the guests effortlessly. She laughed at all the right moments, asked insightful questions, and seemed genuinely interested in the stories people told her. It was clear she was playing a role, but damn, she played it well.

Cosmelis leaned in close to Luna, speaking quietly. I noticed the way his eyes lingered on her, a thoughtful look crossing his face as if he were trying to puzzle her out. Why was Cosmelis paying so much attention to her? A spike of possessiveness surprised me. What did he see that I was missing?

“I hear you hail from Legnali, Lady Luna,” Cosmelis said. “A charming coastal town. I’ve spent many a summer there myself.”

“Indeed, my lord,” Luna said. “Though I fear my experiences there were quite different from yours. Legnali is a different place when the wealthy summer guests depart.”

Cosmelis raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Do tell.”

Luna's smile turned wistful. "Let us say that Legnali has many faces, not all of them as picturesque as the vineyards and hills. But it taught me resilience and adaptability, lessons I carry with me always."

*Resilience and adaptability.* The words echoed in my mind. How much of Luna's past did I truly know? The scandal of her father's behavior, whispers of her mother's fate... What had her life been before we married?

Cosmelis nodded, his expression inscrutable. "Valuable lessons indeed. Ones that will serve you well in navigating the complexities of court life."

"I am learning more every day, with the help of my kind hosts," Luna demurred.

*She plays the game well. A game I hate.*

As Cosmelis turned his attention to another guest, I caught Luna's eyes. But in that fleeting moment, I saw a glimmer of the real Luna beneath the polished veneer. A fierce, determined woman forged by the fires of adversity. A survivor, just like me.

And though I would never admit it aloud, a part of me marveled at the woman she had become. A far cry from the frightened child I briefly met, Luna navigated our treacherous world with a grace and cunning that both unnerved and captivated me.

Lorenzo caught my eye from across the table, raising an eyebrow as if to say, "*She's good, isn't she?*"

I gave him a tight smile, lifting my wine glass in a mock toast. *Too good. And it's getting under my skin.*

When the party wound down, I excused myself, among the last of the guests to prevent suspicion. I made my way upstairs to my private chambers, my mind already shifting gears, focusing on the task ahead.

In my room, I swiftly changed into darker clothing, a dark red tunic and breeches that would blend into the shadows. Dark grey or red blended better than black. I strapped my sword to my hip, the familiar weight a comforting presence. Glancing

out the window, I took in the moonlit city sprawled before me, feeling the rush of anticipation that always preceded a raid.

*Time to hunt. To get answers.*

As I stepped into the hallway, I nearly collided with Luna. She stood there, dressed in a simple riding dress and a black cloak, her auburn hair twisted up into the red veil. A pack hung from her hand, and her eyes glinted with determination.

“Going somewhere?” she asked, her tone light but her gaze sharp.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m heading out. And no, you’re not coming with me. Remember the wound on your leg?”

Luna folded her arms across her chest, arching an eyebrow. “It’s healed, thank you for your concern. And I am coming.”

Of course she would insist. This woman was going to be the death of me.

“Fine,” I said. “But if you get killed, it’s your ass. I’m not slowing down for you.”

Luna tossed her head. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

I admired her determination. She was either incredibly brave or incredibly foolish. Or perhaps a bit of both.

“Let’s go,” I turned on my heel. “We’ve got a long night ahead of us.”

We slipped out of the house like shadows, blending into the night. The streets of Kalion stretched before us, a labyrinth of narrow alleys and winding paths. We stuck to the shadows, moving with a swift, silent purpose.

The city was different at night. Quieter, more dangerous. Like a sleeping beast waiting to pounce.

The air was cool against my skin, carrying with it the faint scent of the sea. Moonlight glinted off the white stones embedded in the cobblestones, casting an ethereal glow that guided our way.

“Where are we going?” Luna asked.

“You’ll see,” I said, my gaze scanning the rooftops for any sign of movement. “Just keep up and stay quiet.”

She nodded. I admired her courage, even as I worried for her safety.

She was not prepared for this. Then again, whoever was?

We moved deeper into the city, the grand marble buildings of the wealthy giving way to the cramped, ramshackle structures of the poor. Here, the shadows seemed to press in closer, the darkness more oppressive.

This was where the real Kalion lay. Behind the glittering façade, beyond the reach of the empire’s law.

“Stay close,” I said to Luna, my hand resting on the hilt of my sword. “And be ready for anything.”

She nodded, her expression determined. And together, we plunged into the heart of the city, ready to face whatever dangers the night might bring.

We reached Tulliano Lucardi’s grand mansion, a large structure that loomed before us like a fortress. The man had homes like this in all the major cities of Dimare. He had more money than sense.

High walls surrounded the property, topped with iron spikes that glinted menacingly in the moonlight. A heavy gate barred the entrance, flanked by two stone lions that seemed to watch our every move.

I signaled for Luna to follow me as I approached the wall, my fingers finding purchase in the rough stone. With a deep breath, I climb, my muscles straining with the effort.

I reached the top of the wall and paused, glancing back to see how Luna was faring. To my shock, she was right behind me.

When I touched down, she landed silently beside me in the courtyard, a triumphant grin on her face. I stared, my mouth hanging open in disbelief, not expecting her to know how to scale a wall like that. “Where did you learn to do that?”

She shrugged, smoothing her skirts back into place. “I had a good teacher.”

A surge of possessiveness rose up within me, hot and bitter. Who had Vala paid to teach her? How many men had spent time with my wife, teaching her skills like this?

I pushed the thought aside, forcing myself to focus. “Let’s go,” I said gruffly, leading the way across the courtyard.

The mansion was huge with its white marble façade glowing in the moonlight. Elaborate carvings adorned the walls, depicting scenes from ancient myths and legends. It was a display of wealth and power, a testament to Lucardi’s ambition.

He bought this place to prove he belonged among the elite. I curled my lip in disdain. But no amount of gold could buy true nobility.

I crept up to one of the windows, peering inside. The room beyond was dark, the furniture draped in white sheets like ghostly figures.

“Looks like no one’s home,” I glanced back at Luna. “Lucardi must have left in a hurry.”

She frowned, her brow furrowing in thought. “Do you think he knew we were coming? That you know he’s in communication with Moonshifter?”

I shrugged, my mind racing with possibilities. “Maybe. Or maybe he’s just running scared, like the coward he is. He might have other enemies, too. Rich men don’t get that way by random kindness.”

I tried the window, surprised to find it unlocked. With a grunt, I heaved it open, the hinges creaking in protest.

“After you, my lady,” I said with a mocking bow, gesturing for Luna to enter.

She rolled her eyes but climbed through the window, her movements swift and silent. I followed close behind, my senses on high alert for any sign of danger.

The house was eerily quiet as we moved from room to room, our footsteps muffled by thick carpets. The air felt stale, as if no one had breathed it in days.

“Look,” Luna said, pointing to a half-packed bag on the floor. “He must have left in a hurry.”

I nodded, glancing at a desk in the corner. One of the drawers was slightly open, papers scattered haphazardly across the surface.

*What were you working on, Lucardi? And why did you leave it behind?*

I rifled through the papers, scanning the words in search of anything useful. Most of it seemed to be mundane business correspondence, but one letter caught my attention.

“Luna, look at this,” I held up the letter. “Someone had warned Lucardi that we’re onto him.”

Luna was already moving to the next room. “We need to keep searching. There might be more clues.”

I followed her, my frustration mounting with every empty room we encountered. It was clear Lucardi had been thorough in his departure, taking anything that might incriminate him.

*Damn it. We’re always one step behind.*

Luna placed a gentle hand on my arm, her touch sending a jolt through me. “We’ll find him, Benedetto. We just need to keep looking.”

I met her gaze, surprised by the determination I saw there. She was stronger than I gave her credit for.

“You’re right,” I took a deep breath. “Let’s keep moving. Lucardi can’t hide forever.”

We made our way to the rooftop, the cool night air a welcome respite from the stuffy confines of the mansion. The city stretched out before us, a glittering tapestry of lights and shadows.

I took a moment to orient myself, then pointed to a nearby rooftop. “That way. We can cross over to the next street and circle back to the house.”

Luna nodded, hiking up her skirts without hesitation. “Lead the way.”

We leapt from one roof to the next, the tiles clattering beneath our feet. The wind whipped through my hair, carrying with it the faint scent of jasmine from the gardens below.

I glanced back at Luna, expecting to see her struggling to keep up. But to my surprise, she was right behind me, her movements graceful and sure.

She'd been holding out on me. Where did she learn to move like that?

Luna caught my eye, a small smirk playing on her lips. "Surprised?"

I shook my head, turning my focus back to the rooftops. "Just impressed. You're full of surprises, aren't you?"

She laughed, the sound carrying on the wind. "You have no idea."

We reached the end of the row of houses, and I paused to catch my breath. The city was quiet now, the only sounds the distant barking of dogs and the soft rustle of leaves in the breeze.

We needed to regroup. Lucardi was gone, but there had to be a way to find him.

I turned to Luna, ready to share my thoughts, but the words died on my lips. She was standing at the edge of the roof, her cloak billowing behind her like a pair of dark wings. The moonlight cast a silvery glow on her face, highlighting the determination in her eyes.

She was beautiful. The realization of that thought hit me like a punch to the gut. And brave. And far too good for this life.

I shook my head, pushing the thought away. There was no time for distractions, not when we had a mission to complete.

"We should head back," I said, my voice gruff. "Regroup and plan our next move."

Luna nodded, turning away from the edge. "Lead the way."

We dropped down into a shadowed alley. My heart was still pounding from the chase, adrenaline coursing through my

veins. Luna was breathing hard beside me, her cheeks flushed and her eyes bright.

“You did well tonight,” I stepped closer until we were mere inches apart. My voice was low and rough, my lips brushing against hers with each word. “If you’re not too tired, you could come to my room.”

Luna smirked, tilting her head. “Are you inviting me because you’re feeling generous, or because you’re feeling something else?”

Desire coiled in my gut. “You know why.”

She held my gaze. “Perhaps I do. But I want to hear you say it.”

I leaned in, my hand cupping her cheek. “I want you, Luna. I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you tonight, moving through that crowd like you owned it. Like you owned *me*.”

She drew in a sharp breath, her pulse jumping beneath my fingers. “Bene...”

I silenced her with a kiss, my mouth claiming hers with a hunger I couldn’t control. She responded instantly, her arms winding around my neck as she pressed herself against me.

This was madness. She was my wife, but I barely knew her. I couldn’t trust her.

My body didn’t care. It only knew the feel of her, soft and warm and eager in my arms. I deepened the kiss, my tongue sweeping into her mouth, and she made a small sound of pleasure that shot straight to my groin.

I broke away, breathing hard. “Not here,” I said. “Come back with me. Let me take you to bed.”

She looked up at me, her lips swollen from my kisses. “Yes,” she said. “Take me to bed, Bene. Make me yours.”



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# LUNA

THE HALLWAY WAS DIMLY LIT, THE FLICKERING TORCHES casting shadows that danced across Benedetto's angular features. Heat radiated off his body as we stood there, facing each other, the air between us crackling with barely restrained desire. His dark eyes bore into mine, filled with a hunger that made my breath catch in my throat.

Benedetto's hand rested lightly on my hip, his fingers curling possessively into the fabric of my dress. I could feel the strength in his grip, the coiled power waiting to be unleashed.

"Well?" he murmured, his voice a low, rough growl that sent a shiver down my spine. "Are you coming in, or was that just for show?"

I hesitated, my heart pounding against my ribcage like a caged bird desperate to break free. I knew what this was—a moment of weakness, a chance to forget the chaos that ruled our lives and lose myself in his arms. But it was more than that. This was an opportunity, a means to an end. If I wanted to secure my future, I needed his child growing inside me.

I met his gaze head on, my chin tilted up in defiance. "I'm not a fool, Benedetto," I said quietly, my words carried on a shaky exhale. "I know what this is. But yes, I'm coming in. I'll take every chance to conceive that I can get."

Something flashed in his eyes—surprise, respect, perhaps even a grudging admiration at my boldness. He gave a curt nod and pushed the door open, stepping aside to let me enter first.

The room was swathed in shadows, the only illumination coming from the moonlight that filtered through the gauzy curtains. It painted everything in shades of silver and gray, from the rumpled sheets on the bed to the sparse furnishings scattered about.

Benedetto closed the door behind us, the latch clicking into place with a sound that seemed unnaturally loud in the pulse of silence. I could feel him behind me, the heat of his body seeping through the thin fabric of my dress and igniting a fire in my veins.

He stepped closer, the warm rasp of his breath ghosting over the sensitive skin at the nape of my neck. It made me shiver, goosebumps rising on my flesh. His fingers brushed my shoulders, trailing across my collarbones with a feather-light touch.

“You can still leave,” he whispered, his lips hovering just beside my ear. “Last chance to run away.”

I turned to face him, my pulse racing as I looked up into his shadowed features. Even in the dark, his eyes glittered with banked embers, twin pools of liquid heat that threatened to consume me.

“You want me to leave?” I challenged, injecting a note of sharpness into my tone.

His gaze raked over me, taking in every inch, from the rapid rise and fall of my chest to the determined set of my jaw. When his eyes finally met mine again, they were hooded, heavy with desire and something else—something raw and almost feral.

“No,” he admitted hoarsely, the single word scraping out of his throat. “I don’t.”

The confession hung in the charged air between us for a single, breathless heartbeat. Then the coiled tension snapped, and Benedetto yanked me against him, his mouth descending to claim mine in a fierce, bruising kiss.

There was nothing gentle about it, no sweet brush of lips or tentative explorations. I matched him with equal fervor, my

fingers digging into the hard planes of his shoulders as I pulled him impossibly closer.

The kiss was flavored with pent-up frustration and simmering anger, a need to unleash the chaotic emotions that had built up between us. Every slide of his lips, every nip of his teeth, every stroke of his tongue was a silent battle, a push and pull for dominance that left me weak and wanting.

My hands slid down the front of his shirt, mapping the sculpted ridges of his chest. Even through the fabric, I could feel the heat of his skin, the thrum of his heartbeat beneath my palms. I pushed impatiently at the garment, desperate to feel him without barriers.

Understanding my unspoken demand, Benedetto broke away just long enough to yank the shirt over his head and toss it aside. The reveal of his bare torso made my mouth go dry, my gaze drifting hungrily over the roped muscles and scattered scars that decorated his golden skin.

He reached for me again, his fingers going to the fastenings of my cloak. With a few deft movements, he unfastened it and let the heavy fabric slither to the floor in a whisper of silk. Then his hands were at my shoulders, undoing the clips that held my dress in place with an urgency that bordered on desperation.

As he worked the closures, I traced the raised edges of a scar that slashed across his ribs, feeling the way his abdominal muscles tensed and quivered beneath my touch. The vulnerability of the moment, the intimacy of exploring his body, made something ache deep in my chest.

Benedetto loosened the final clip and paused, meeting my gaze with an unreadable expression. Then, slowly, deliberately, he peeled the dress away, baring me to his heated perusal.

I stood before him in nothing but a thin shift, the delicate fabric doing little to conceal the curves it barely covered. His eyes raked over me, taking in every inch of exposed skin with a hunger that made me flush.

After removing the rest of our clothing, he scooped me up into his arms and carried me to the bed. We tumbled onto the

mattress in a tangle of limbs, our mouths finding each other again as our hands roamed with frantic urgency.

He settled his hips between my thighs, the hard press of his arousal against my core making me groan. His warmth made me ache with primitive need.

“Please,” I whispered against his lips, not even fully sure what I was begging for. “Benedetto, please...”

He answered with a deep, powerful thrust, sheathing himself inside me to the hilt. The sudden fullness, the exquisite stretch and burn of his possession, tore a ragged moan from my throat. I arched against him, tilting my hips to take him even deeper.

Benedetto set a relentless pace, driving into me with a force that shook the bed frame. Each fierce pump of his hips pushed me higher, winding the coil of tension tighter in my core. I clung to him as he ravaged my body, my nails scoring thin red lines down the flexing muscles of his back.

It was fast and rough and was spurred on by desperation and raw animal need. There was no room for tenderness here, no place for soft caresses or sweet words. This was a frantic race towards release, a battle to use pleasure to obliterate the demons that haunted us both.

My climax built, the pressure expanding outwards until my entire being was focused on the place where we were joined. Benedetto seemed to sense how close I was, because he changed his angle slightly, hitting a spot inside me that made stars explode behind my eyelids.

“That’s it,” he growled, his voice a dark rumble against my ear. “Let go, Luna. Come for me.”

His words were my undoing. With a hoarse cry, I shattered in his arms, my body convulsing as ecstasy ripped through me in violent waves. Benedetto followed me over the edge with a guttural groan, his hips stuttering as he emptied himself deep inside me.

We collapsed together in the aftermath, slick with sweat and struggling to catch our breath. My heart pounded against my

ribs as if it wanted to escape my chest, and every nerve ending felt raw and exposed.

As the haze of passion slowly began to clear, I became aware of the intimacy of our position. Benedetto's weight pressed me into the mattress, his face buried in the crook of my neck as his chest heaved against mine. For a stolen moment, it almost felt like we were lovers instead of reluctant allies.

But I knew better than to indulge in that fantasy. This had been a means to an end, a calculated risk to improve my chances of bearing the child that would secure my future. I couldn't afford to let sentiment cloud my judgment.

With an unsteady exhale, I gently pushed at Benedetto's shoulders, needing to put some distance between us. He rolled off of me with a soft grunt, settling onto his back beside me. For a long moment, we both just stared up at the ceiling, lost in our own swirling thoughts.

The silence stretched between us, heavy with unspoken words and unacknowledged emotions. I knew I needed to say something, to find a way to navigate us back to safer ground. But my tongue felt thick and clumsy, my brain still fogged with the lingering haze of pleasure.

In the end, it was Benedetto who broke the quiet. "When will you know?" he asked gruffly, his gaze fixed resolutely on the ceiling. "If it worked, I mean."

I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the twinge of disappointment his dispassionate tone sparked in my chest. "In a few weeks or so," I replied, forcing my voice to remain steady. "When my bleeding time comes. Or doesn't, as the case may be."

He grunted an acknowledgment, the sound devoid of any real emotion. I risked a glance in his direction, trying to read his expression in the faint moonlight. But his features were carved from stone, giving nothing away.

I shifted slightly, wincing at the unfamiliar ache between my thighs. It was a tangible reminder of what we'd done, of the line we'd irrevocably crossed. In the passion of the moment, it

had been easy to ignore the consequences. But now, in the harsh light of reality, doubt began to creep in.

Sighing, I rolled onto my side and propped myself up on one elbow. Benedetto lay beside me, one arm thrown across his eyes, his chest rising and falling with slow, even breaths. My gaze traced the network of scars that marred his golden skin, each one a silent testament to a history of violence and pain.

Unable to stop myself, I reached out and gently traced the ragged edge of a particularly brutal-looking mark just below his ribs. Benedetto tensed at the contact, his arm falling away from his face as his eyes snapped open to meet mine.

“Why Tulliano Lucardi?” I asked quietly, my finger still resting on his scar. “Why are you hunting him with such single-minded focus?”

Benedetto’s jaw clenched, a muscle ticking in his cheek. For a long moment, I thought he wouldn’t answer. But then he exhaled heavily through his nose, his gaze sliding away from mine to fix on the ceiling.

“It’s not just about Lucardi,” he said, his voice low and rough. “It’s about my brother. Francesco.” Benedetto’s eyes took on a faraway look, as if he was seeing something beyond the confines of the room. “He was cursed by a sorcerer, driven mad by dark magic. And I believe Lucardi is connected to the one responsible.”

I frowned, my brow furrowing as I tried to make sense of his words. “What do you mean, connected? How?”

Benedetto’s lips twisted into a humorless smile. “That damned book he acquired, the one we were after tonight. It’s the kind of rare, forbidden tome that sorcerers would kill to get their hands on. Lucardi must have procured it for one of them, as payment or a favor owed.”

He shook his head, a bitter chuckle escaping him. “Sorcerers never give up anything so valuable without a steep price. And the timing...it lines up too closely to when Francesco first started showing signs of madness to be a coincidence.”

I mulled over this new information, trying to reconcile it with what little I knew of Francesco's affliction and Benedetto's quest for vengeance. It was a tangled web, one that seemed to grow more complicated with each revelation.

"You say you don't care if your family line dies out," I pointed out, unable to keep the challenge from my voice. "Yet here you are, risking everything to avenge your brother. It seems a bit hypocritical, don't you think?"

Benedetto's gaze snapped to mine, his eyes flashing with sudden anger. "You don't understand," he growled, pushing himself up to sit. "No one else is doing a damn thing about it. They're all too preoccupied with their own petty power struggles to seek justice for Francesco or put an end to this madness."

I sat up as well, refusing to be cowed by his ire. "But he's family, Benedetto. Surely that counts for something, even in a family as fractured as yours."

He let out a derisive snort, running a hand through his disheveled hair. "Family," he spat, as if the word left a foul taste in his mouth. "What has family ever done for me, or for Francesco? They'd sooner sweep his condition under the rug and pretend it never happened than lift a finger to help him."

The bitterness and resentment in his voice made my heart ache. I knew all too well the pain of feeling betrayed and abandoned by those who were supposed to love and protect you. After all, my own father had burned my mother alive for her moon magic when I was just a child. The scars on my heart would never fully heal.

"Not all family is like that," I said softly, reaching out to lay a tentative hand on his arm. "I haven't given up on my sister, or on the idea of building a new family someday. One founded on love and loyalty, not just blood and duty."

Benedetto stiffened at my touch but didn't pull away. He stared at me for a long moment, his expression unreadable.

An awkward silence settled between us, heavy with all the things left unsaid. I could feel him withdrawing, his walls

slamming back into place. The brief moment of openness and vulnerability had passed, leaving us once again as guarded adversaries rather than lovers.

Sighing inwardly, I slid off the bed and began gathering my clothes. There was no point in lingering, not when the chasm between us yawned so wide. I dressed quickly, feeling Benedetto's eyes on me but refusing to meet his gaze.

Only when I was fully clothed and had my cloak wrapped securely around me did I turn to face him. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, a sheet draped loosely across his hips, watching me with an inscrutable expression.

"I should go," I said quietly, hating the note of uncertainty in my voice. "It's late."

Benedetto inclined his head, his eyes hooded and distant. "Until next time, then."

I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the pang of longing those words evoked. There could be no "next time," not in the way I secretly yearned for. This had been a means to an end, a cold transaction to better my chances of escaping my father's clutches. Nothing more.

Squaring my shoulders, I gave him a curt nod. "Until next time," I echoed hollowly. Then I turned and walked out, forcing myself not to look back.

As I stepped into the darkened hallway and pulled the door closed behind me, I nearly collided with a servant girl hovering just outside. She jumped back with a startled squeak, her eyes wide and guilty.

I narrowed my gaze at her, taking in her flushed cheeks and the way she wouldn't quite meet my eyes. She'd been eavesdropping, spying on our private moment. The realization made my stomach churn with unease.

Before I could say anything, the girl bobbed a hasty curtsy and scurried away, disappearing around the corner. I stared after her retreating back, a cold sense of dread unfurling in my gut.

If the servants were listening, then someone else knew what was going on. On the other hand, they had always



eavesdropped, and the servant would be beaten for it. I'd be vigilant but I won't report her unless she did it again.

By the time I reached my chamber, I felt as if I were sleepwalking, my limbs heavy and my mind fogged with fatigue. The events of the night replayed in my head as I collapsed on my bed—the raid, the deaths, my reckless gambit with Benedetto. It all swirled together into a dizzying cacophony as I sank into a restless slumber.

I dreamed of the barren plain Sofia had once described, an endless expanse of cracked earth beneath a starless sky. The air hung heavy and oppressive, carrying the cloying scent of decaying roses entwined with something sharper, more metallic. Like blood mixed with perfume.

An eerie stillness permeated the landscape, broken only by the mournful sighs of the wind. It felt ancient, this place, as if it had existed long before the world I knew. A remnant of a forgotten time, now inhabited only by ghosts and shadows.

Through the wavering heat haze, I glimpsed a figure in the distance. Tall and gaunt, clad in black robes that fluttered around its skeletal frame like the ragged wings of a carrion bird. It seemed to beckon to me, spindly arms outstretched, bony fingers curling in an unspoken summons.

Compelled by a force I didn't understand, I stumbled forward, my bare feet sinking into the sunbaked earth. The wind snatched at my hair and clothes, carrying snatches of whispered words that danced just beyond my comprehension. Fragments of a language I felt I should know but couldn't quite grasp.

As I drew closer to the figure, the whispers grew louder, more insistent. They wove around me like an icy current, rippling across my skin and making the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. I fought to make out actual words or phrases, but it was like trying to hold the wind - each time I thought I had it, it slipped through my fingers.

The figure's black robes seemed to absorb the weak light, giving the impression that it was a void in the shape of a man. The bones of its face, half-hidden by a tattered hood, were too

long, too sharp to be human. Eyes like pits of liquid darkness stared out from sunken sockets, piercing me with an inhuman hunger.

I opened my mouth to call out, to demand answers, but before I could make a sound, a gust of wind slammed into me from behind, nearly knocking me off my feet. I whirled around and gasped at the sight that greeted me.

Pip, my beloved dragon, hovered in the air above me, his scales gleaming like polished onyx. He was far larger than in life, his massive form blotting out the empty sky. His wings, fully extended, stirred up whirlwinds of dust and debris as they beat against the unyielding air.

A wave of dread rose up within me as I met Pip's eyes, glowing with an otherworldly light. There was knowledge in that gaze, ancient and terrible. A warning of dangers yet to come.

This was no ordinary dream, I realized with a sickening lurch of fear. It was a message, a portent of some looming calamity that even Pip, with all his draconic wisdom, could not fully shield me from.

Pip let out a bone-shaking roar that reverberated through my body like a physical blow. Then he dove toward me, his powerful wings propelling him forward at impossible speed. I instinctively raised my arms to shield my face as he swooped down, bracing for an impact that never came.

Instead, I felt the lightest brush of scales against my skin as Pip's claws carefully encircled my waist. With a mighty surge of his wings, he lifted us both into the air, the ground falling away beneath my dangling feet.

I craned my neck to look back at the dark figure still standing in the distance, unmoving as it watched our ascent. A chill ran down my spine as I felt the weight of its gaze on me, cold and calculating. Assessing.

As if in response to my unease, Pip tightened his grip, pulling me close to his chest. I felt the steady thrum of his heartbeat against my back, strong and reassuring. But even that small

comfort couldn't fully banish the icy tendrils of fear coiling in my gut.

Something was coming. Something dark and terrible, lurking just beyond the edges of my understanding. And I had a sinking suspicion that it had something to do with the shadowy figure from my dream and the arcane tome Benedetto sought so desperately.

I clung to Pip as he carried me away, my mind racing with questions I didn't know how to answer. How much of this dream was symbolic, and how much was literal truth? What did the figure want from me? And most chilling of all - was I already too late to stop whatever wheels had been set in motion?

Anxiety sat like a lead weight in my stomach as the dreamscape around me began to blur and fade, signaling my slow return to waking consciousness. I wanted to rail against it, to demand that Pip give me more answers, more guidance. But the dream was already slipping away like water through my fingers.

As the last vestiges of sleep fell away and I found myself blinking up at the canopy of my bed, one final thought crystallized in my mind with painful clarity. Whatever was coming, whatever dark forces were aligning against us...I had a terrible feeling that none of us were truly prepared to face it.

But ready or not, I knew the confrontation was inevitable. All I could do was try to steel myself for the battles ahead and pray that when the time came, I would be strong enough to protect those I loved from the coming storm.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# LUNA

SITTING IN THE GARDEN AT THE CENTER OF THE DE METTEIL villa, my cup of sweet and tart hibiscus tea next to me on the stone bench, I enjoyed a rare moment of peace. The warm morning light drew delicate scents from the chamomile and mint growing in drifts by my feet, accented by the jasmine blooms from the surrounding bushes, creating a soothing impression on all the senses.

That peace shattered like a dropped plate when a servant cleared her throat at the entrance and said, “Lady Natalina de Bardi to see you. Are you home to visitors?”

To refuse would be rude, but I was tempted. “Of course, I’m home, escort her here. Bring tea for her as well.”

In point of fact, the visitor was being rude in seeking me out rather than Palma, and I’d mention that if she annoyed me. Few things annoyed people more than being schooled on manners, myself included.

Natalina entered with a bright, charming smile, her tall, broad frame dressed in an elegant gown the color of wine, a deep purple red. It suited her warm complexion.

Her brown eyes swept over me, assessing my gown, the simple necklace clasped around my neck, and possibly the perfume I wore. “Lady Lunetta, my dear, what a pleasure it is to finally meet you.”

I rose to greet her, masking my curiosity. “Lady Natalina, I didn’t expect a visit. Would you like some tea?”

“Certainly!” she smiled as I offered her the cup from the tray of the servant who accompanied her.

I indicated the bench as I sat down again. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

Natalina waved a hand dismissively, settling onto the worn stone bench as though she’d known me for years. “Oh, call me Natalina. I couldn’t resist checking in on you and Benedetto. I’m an old friend of your mother by marriage, Vala, you see. She speaks so highly of you.”

I smiled politely. An old friend of Vala’s? The sweet scent of danger suddenly joined the garden’s perfume.

“Please, call me Luna.”

Benedetto entered the garden through the entrance near our room. His expression shifted from neutral to harsh and forbidding when he spotted Natalina seated near me.

“Natalina,” he said flatly.

Natalina nodded in his direction, a faint amused smile curving her lips. “Benedetto, darling, it’s been too long. You look well. Marriage agrees with you.”

“What do you want?” Benedetto leaned against the pillar at the entrance, hooking his hand in his belt. His sword hand. The tension in the room spiked, the air thick with unspoken animosity.

Why was he being so rude?

This woman clearly had influence, and he was acting like a petulant child. Flies were caught with honey, and I could be sweetness itself if it gave me her motives.

“I was just telling your lovely wife how much she’s impressed me.” Natalina turned back to me, dismissing Benedetto’s hostility. “Vala didn’t exaggerate. You’re quite the accomplished young woman.”

Benedetto caught my eye and smiled. In reaction, a blush crept up my neck, but I maintained my composure. “That’s kind of you to say.”

“Tell me,” Natalina leaned forward slightly, clasping her ringed hands together, “how are you finding the social circles of Kalion? I imagine it must be overwhelming, coming from such a *quiet* background.”

I was annoyed at the cattiness. Society in Kalion never allowed me to forget that I had no money of my own and had been abandoned by first my father and then Benedetto and lived for years on by his mother’s charity. Even though I was of higher birth than most of the speakers, they enjoyed rubbing my nose in my history.

My smile turned brittle. “It’s certainly different from what I’m used to,” I said evenly. “But I’m adapting quickly.”

Benedetto scoffed under his breath, muttering, “She adapts *too* well, if you ask me.”

He was trying to provoke me. I clenched my jaw. But why? Was he irritated by Natalina’s presence, or just annoyed that I was holding my own?

The conversation turned to more mundane topics, with Natalina congratulating Benedetto on his growing influence in court.

“You’ve certainly made a name for yourself, Benedetto. I hear the emperor values your counsel highly these days,” she said with an approving smile.

Benedetto merely grunted in response, clearly still annoyed by her presence. “I do my duty to the Empire, nothing more.”

Natalina laughed lightly. “So modest! Well, I look forward to seeing more of you both. We’ll have to attend a few social functions together.”

Just then, Palma swept into the room in a rustle of expensive silks. “Ah, I see you’ve all become acquainted! Splendid. In fact, we’re all invited to Cassius de Ducio’s supper party tomorrow evening. It will be a marvelous opportunity to see and be seen. And then my husband and I are off to tour his province! So exciting!”

I plastered on a smile, dreading the prospect of being surrounded by the glittering Kalion elite once again. But I

knew refusing was not an option in this world. “That sounds lovely, Palma. I appreciate you including us.”

At least with them away, there would be no more invitations accepted for me and Benedetto.



The next evening, Benedetto and I arrived at the de Ducio townhouse. It was on the outskirts of Kalion, so we took a carriage rather than a sedan chair. Carriages and carts weren't permitted in the older sections of the city.

The scent of expensive spices, roasted lamb and chicken and sweet red wine filled the opulent dining room. Old money mingled with rising social climbers from the merchant class, all eager to gossip and make connections.

As we entered the room arm in arm, everyone turned to look at us. I didn't mind, the mirror told me I looked as well turned out as any of them. I wore a simple but elegant gown of dark blue and silver, borrowed from Palma and hastily altered with swags and flounces of lace trimming at the hem to account for my slightly greater height.

As for Benedetto, his lack of care of other's opinions was as much a part of him as his black hair.

We'd agreed that for this function, I would sit, appear attractive and naive, and see who approached me and what they said, while Benedetto remained aloof and mysterious, a known quality frowning at all.

Settled on a divan, Benedetto brought me a tiny plate with a few morsels of food on it and a glass of wine then leaned against the wall in his favorite 'I wish I was anywhere else' pose.

I smiled demurely and sipped my wine as a man about my age approached.

Slender, with an attractive face, his dark hair was streaked with white in a regular pattern. His clothing, doublet and hose,

were dyed an expensive and rich shade that came close to the imperial purple.

He wore rings on each hand and loop earrings set with amethysts that precisely matched the shade of his clothing. Small pearls lined his sleeves and collar, shimmering in the candlelight.

I'd never seen clothing like that in Legnoli, even among the very rich.

He smiled at me warmly. "Lady d'Alvarez! I've heard so much about you. Please excuse my forwardness. I am Luccio de Galli, at your service."

Ah. This man, however young and fashionable, was of the highest rank, one step down from the Imperial family, and thus immune to challenges except from those who outranked him. He was probably used to being outrageous, and possibly a good information source.

"There's nothing to excuse," I replied demurely. "It's good to meet you."

"You are originally of the family de Spoleto, correct? I believe I'm acquainted with your father. He and my father have been friendly for years."

"I was born to that family, yes." Had he brought this up to try to be friendly, or was there an insult coming about my father's scandals? Should I be slightly offended, and see if he tried to coax me into a better mood?

I could feel Benedetto's eyes on us, as well as several others.

"You know," he reached out and touched my chin, cupping it and tilting my face, "from my father's description, I see you look just like your mother must have. He mentioned she was quite the beauty in her day, before her *unfortunate* end."

A cold wave of pain and anger washed over me. Not even the rudest in Legnoli had mentioned my mother and her execution. I struggled to keep my pleasant expression, but from the interested gleam in his eye I didn't succeed. "How very kind of him."



I wanted to hit him, but he outranked me, and I'd only look like a fool.

Before I could say anything more, Benedetto appeared at my side, his expression cold and indifferent. He grabbed the young man by his pearl sewn collar, hauling him to his tiptoes. "You have insulted my wife, pig."

The room fell silent, and I heard the clicks of several peals hitting the floor from the torn seams as Benedetto twisted the other man's collar.

Everyone turned to watch the confrontation with unconcealed interest.

The young man gasped, "She doesn't have the rank to challenge me, and you can't be a proxy for her. And I was just repeating a story I heard."

Benedetto's eyes locked on his, still as cold and indifferent as professional executioner's might be. "You chose to recall my wife's mother's death and compare their appearance?" he said. "All but accuse her of being a witch? Our children will have my rank and you've insulted them while yet unborn, and I *can* make you answer for that. It's a happy coincidence you'll also answer for insulting my wife's honor. Let's take this outside where you won't stain the carpet when you die."

The young man's face had gone red as he clutched Benedetto's arm, trying to ease the pressure on his throat. He nodded, an enraged grimace distorting his face. Benedetto dropped him and turned on his heel.

I grabbed Benedetto's arm. "Husband, don't, please. It's not worth killing."

Also, it would make it incredibly difficult to get anyone to talk to me so I could gather information. A darker part of me hoped he'd proceed and beat de Galli to a pulp.

He patted my hand, a faint smile crossing his face. "You're a gracious woman. But no one speaks to you that way. If his heart's blood is needed for that lesson, so be it."

"I'll second you," said an older man.

“Accepted.” Benedetto strolled out into the garden, unsheathing his sword.

The guests whispered excitedly. Another young man, richly dressed, said, “I’ll second you, Luccio. He’s just fought in the provinces. You’ll kick his ass.”

De Galli straightened his clothing and gritted out, “Yes, I will. Only blood will satisfy me.””

The older man followed Benedetto into the garden, spoke with him a moment, and returned.

“He said, ‘with pleasure’.”

I glanced around the room, noting the speculative stares, the barely concealed eagerness for scandal. I had to stop this before it went too far.

Benedetto should not kill important people at our first official function.

I gathered my skirts and hurried into the garden, ignoring the murmurs and laughter that followed me, emerging into the cool night air where Benedetto flicked his sword, and a flower fell to the ground.

He picked it up and offered it to me, shaking his head. The symbolism was not lost on me.

Behind me, de Galli strutted into the garden, the two seconds trailing him.

He stared at Benedetto. “No quarter.”

Benedetto nodded.

My breath caught in my throat. Benedetto was really going through with this.

The guests gathered to watch, whispering avidly. Like the witnesses at my mother’s execution. How dare they treat this like entertainment?

I stood on tiptoe and breathed in Benedetto’s ear, “Please. This is madness. How many places have you had to leave after a killing duel? We need to stay here.”

Benedetto turned and gazed at me, his expression blank and hard as marble. “He insulted you. Insulted your mother. Hurt you. I won’t let it pass.”

He strode forward to meet de Galli. Both of them raised their blades in a salute, and then they engaged.

de Galli’s sword shook as he raised it, whites showing all around his iris.

De Galli lunged forward, his blade flashing in the moonlight. Benedetto beat the sword to the side and smashed his fist into de Galli’s face.

The younger man stumbled forward, and Benedetto circled left and regarded him with boredom. De Galli recovered, bringing his blade up and approached cautiously. Benedetto kept a low guard and when de Galli swung high, used a circular motion to bind the other man’s blade and then a second circle sent it flying.

A quick slash across the disarmed de Galli’s right forearm drew blood, and de Galli screamed, grabbing his arm to stop the flow of blood.

With that wound, he’d never use that hand again without magical intervention.

Blood dripped into the deep grass in the quiet, broken by de Galli’s panting. Benedetto shortened his arm, the tip of his sword at de Galli’s throat. Even the man’s hissing breath stopped, transfixed as he gazed at his death.

Benedetto wasn’t even breathing hard. A sneer curled his lips. “You’re a dead man. In the future, remember that when you’re in my presence or my wife’s. Remember this moment before you gossip about my wife.”

He gazed at the gathered crowd. “The next time any of you choose to. Her pleas are the only reason this walking dead man breathes.”

Benedetto grabbed my hand, pulling me away from the gawking crowd. I stumbled after him, my mind reeling. He did this for *me*. To defend my honor. Defying the entire aristocracy.

He hustled me into the carriage, his grip on my hand tight, almost painful. As soon as we were alone, he rounded on me.

“No one touches you but me,” he said with anger and something else, something raw and possessive.

“Remember that.”

I jerked my hand away, my own anger boiling over. “You’re the one who’s been acting like I’m a burden,” I said. “Maybe I should relieve you of the terrible duty of sex with me. A witch’s daughter.”

His expression darkened.

Without a word, he hooked his hand in my bodice and yanked down. It gave at the seams, the entire front ripping away from my shoulders, falling away front and back, leaving my breasts and stomach exposed to his gaze.

His hot dark eyes met mine as his hands slid over my skin, calluses rough against smooth flesh. “Is that what you want? To be free of me?”

I shivered, my anger warring with the sudden heat his touch ignited. No, I didn’t want to be free of him. But I didn’t want to be his possession either.

When I leaned into him, he embraced me, and his hand brushed across my back. I froze, remembering too late what he would find. His fingers stilled over the scars that crisscrossed my skin, the long, jagged lines I usually kept hidden.

He jerked back and pulled me forward so he could twist around to look behind my back. “Who did this to you?” he said, his voice raw with a mix of horror and fury.

“My father,” I whispered. “It’s the price I paid for trying to protect my sister.”

His grip on my arms tightened almost painfully. “Luna...”

I braced myself for his reaction, but instead, his anger seemed to melt away. He cupped my face, his touch impossibly gentle as he pressed his forehead to mine.

“I should have protected you,” he said.

Tears stung my eyes. He wasn't revolted by me. He wasn't turning away.

I leaned into him, letting the warmth of his body seep into mine. For a moment, we just breathed together, the silence heavy with understanding.

"I'm sorry." His lips brushed against my temple. "I didn't know."

A bitter laugh escaped me. "You didn't want to know me then."

"But I know you now." His hold tightened, as if he could shield me from the past. "And I swear, Luna, no one will ever hurt you like that again. Not as long as I live."

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to trust in this moment, in the warmth flooding me. But how could I? Could we find a way past all the anger and pain that defined us?

His hands moved down my back, tracing the lines of my scars with a reverence that made my breath catch. From there, he moved to my belly and breasts, his touch gentle and slow. There was no urgency, no rush to claim or conquer. Just a leisurely, steady exploration, as if he was memorizing every inch of my skin.

I closed my eyes, letting sensation wash over me. The rough calluses on his palms against my nipples, the heat of his breath and his tongue followed his hands, the solid weight of him pressing me into the carriage seat. It was almost too much, this sudden tenderness after so much conflict.

*Can it last?* I didn't know. But I wanted to find out.

I slid my hands up his back, feeling the shift of muscle beneath his shirt. He made a low sound in his throat, halfway between a growl and a groan, and shifted to capture my mouth in a searing kiss.

*Yes. I lost myself in the taste of him. This is different. This is real.*

The carriage stopped.

In a smooth motion, Benedetto swung his cloak to cover me. He stepped out, and when I followed, swept me off my feet and carried me to our room.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# BENEDETTO

GOLDEN SUNLIGHT FLOODED THE ROOM, BATHING THE ROOM IN warmth. I lay awake, enjoying the weight of Luna's body curled against my side. Her soft auburn hair cascaded across my chest, her fair skin glowing in the morning light.

It had been a week since the duel, and this was the first time she hadn't slipped away in the night after we fucked. The realization stirred something in me, both hopeful and terrifying. Maybe this woman could stay by me. She'd seen me at my worst, and she hadn't run. Nor did she try to manipulate me or involve me in schemes.

She said what she wanted and had kept her promises thus far. A flicker of admiration mixed with the slow burn of desire that never seemed to fade when she was near.

A flicker of motion caught my eye, and my dagger was out from under the pillow and waiting. Pip hopped onto the bed just short of the thin blade, nuzzling Luna's cheek before giving my knife hand a playful nip.

"Keep that up and I'll have dragon skin gloves," I muttered.

Pip shook its wings and crawled over the top of the pillows to snuggle into Luna's back.

I watched with mild amusement as the drake stretched its neck to rest its head on a few locks of Luna's hair.

It liked her. And we'd come to tolerate each other. An improvement.

Luna stirred, opening her cloud gray eyes with a sleepy smile, stretching languidly. “Good morning.”

I brushed a strand of fiery hair from her face. “Morning. Your Pip is making itself known again.”

“He’s just trying to win you over,” Luna said with a teasing grin. “You’re a tough nut to crack.”

She sat up, gloriously naked. We both enjoyed me ripping her clothing off, and Luna had worn the same neatly mended nightgown to bed the past few nights.

I pulled her in for a kiss. “Stay in bed.”

She raised an eyebrow but complied, the sheets pooling around her waist.

I rose and dressed. Luna’s appreciative gaze on me as she enjoyed the view made me prolong the process.

Clothed, I opened the door and said to the waiting maid, “Fetch some clothing for my wife.”

Luna smiled at me. “A dangerous quest.”

“One deserving of a reward,” I answered, and kissed her.

A sharp knock interrupted our moment. I tugged the sheet up on Luna’s exposed chest and called, “Enter,” expecting the servant with Luna’s garments and our breakfast.

Instead, a young footman nervously bowed from the open door, his entire attention fixed on his boots—and decidedly *not* on my wife—as he held out a sealed letter. “A message from the Imperial Palace, my lord. The courier said he’d await a reply.”

I broke the seal.

The emperor requested our presence for a midday meal. Of course. My good mood evaporated. Trouble was brewing. I just hoped this had nothing in specific to do with Mother’s politicking.

“Tell the courier we’ll be there.” He backed out and the maid bearing Luna’s garments passed him, flicking a glance at me.



Luna smiled at the maid and rose. “I suppose that means our lunch is rescheduled. I’ll leave Pip at home.”

Pip let out a small hiss, clearly displeased.

A wry smile tugged at my lips. “Good luck convincing him. He’s as stubborn as you are.”

I left the room to give Luna privacy as she dressed. When she left, I inspected the wardrobe, pulling out an outfit of Lorenzo’s formal attire altered to fit me.

A deep blue jacket with silver embroidery, tailored trousers, and a crisp white shirt. More color than I preferred to wear, but I wasn’t going to decline the favor. I dressed quickly, movements tense.

What was the emperor up to with this?

Catching my reflection in the mirror, I looked like a man ready for battle. That’s exactly what this was, a battle, just without swords.

I smoothed down my jacket, trying to shift my hardened expression to something closer to calm. I hated this. I’d rather duel ten men than walk into that palace and play politics with the emperor. Even if he was as decent a man as he could be, power politics made me want to kill something.

As I adjusted my sleeve laces, Pip flitted into the room, landing lightly on the desk. It watched me with sharp, intelligent eyes, head tilted as if assessing my agitation.

“What?” I gave the creature a half-hearted glare. “Don’t look at me like that. You’re simply a slightly more intelligent cat.”

Pip hissed softly, then nudged a small object toward me, a throwing knife I hadn’t even noticed I’d left unconcealed. I picked it up, staring at it for a moment before hiding it up my sleeve.

Even Pip knew when I was too distracted.

At least one of us, even if not one who thought like a human, was paying attention.

I strode through the villa toward the main doors. Servants scurried out of my path, sensing my dark mood. I barely noticed them, my mind running over strategies to deal with the impending lunch and make sure Luna and I left unharmed politically or physically.

I emerged into the sun-drenched foyer, blinking against the bright light. Luna already stood by the sedan chair and the servants ready to carry it, a vision of understated elegance. Her auburn hair was pinned up, a few loose strands framing her face. The silver filigree in her earrings caught the sun, glinting like stars against her fair skin.

I paused, drinking in the sight of her. Like sweet water on a parching day.

Luna turned. A small smile played on her lips. "Ready to face the lions?"

I snorted, shaking my head. "Not lions, vipers. Be careful."

She tilted her chin up, a defiant gleam in her eye. "I'm not afraid of lions. Or emperors, for that matter."

She should be. A rush of admiration mixed with the ever-present desire. Like me, she was a fighter, even when it wasn't the best plan.

Kalion was too crowded to use a carriage, so sedan chairs were the compromise used by the nobility. They took less space and left less manure.

Luna settled herself on the seat, her movements graceful and assured. Pip swooped down, settling on her shoulder with a contented chirp. Clearly, he had won the battle of who was staying home.

"Let's go." I joined her. "Time to see what the old man wants. We were lifted smoothly, and the four trained men began the trek to the palace.

"You took your time," Luna peeked out the curtains to watch the other travelers as we entered the bustling streets of Kalion. "Are you nervous to meet the emperor with me?"

I snorted, glancing at her with a raised eyebrow. “No, you’ll probably do a better job dealing with the talk,” I said. “I’m not exactly known for my tact.”

She laughed, a light, genuine sound that made something in my chest tighten. “Thank you for the compliment.”

Pip chirped and leaned into Luna’s side as we moved through the buzzing streets of Kalion. The scent of freshly baked bread mingled with exotic spices wafting from the markets. Vendors yelled thief! while skinny children darted away through the alleys, heading for the concealing shadows.

I put my arm around her, and Pip moved, grumbling. My gaze swept over the sea of faces. My enemies could be hiding anywhere. Glancing back at Luna, I realized she too was watching and noting faces, as wary as I. A sense of comradeship welled inside me, one I hadn’t felt in all the lonely years since my brother was driven mad.

I’d never wanted a wife. Luna took the role of wife and twisted and changed it until she became an equal. And I liked it.

“You seem lost in thought.” Luna leaned into me. “Care to share?”

I raised an eyebrow, lips twitching. “Since when do you care what’s on my mind?”

“Since you started looking like a man chewing on a lemon and about to drink vinegar,” she said. “What do you think this summons is about?”

I hesitated, then sighed heavily. “Vala. Mother. She’s building a political faction in my name, behind my back. The emperor either found out or knew from the beginning, and now I’m being dragged into a pointless game I don’t want to play.”

Luna’s face softened. She reached out, resting a hand on my arm. “We’ll handle this together, then get back to tracking down Moonshifter.”

Perhaps that was what I’d been needing all this time. A true partner, someone to stand with me through the battles to come.

“After we hear what his Imperial Majesty has to say.” I brushed my lips against her temple. “And find out what precisely my dear mother has been plotting.”

As if sensing the tension, Pip swooped down to land on Luna’s shoulder, opalescent scales glinting in the sun. She absently stroked his sleek neck, lost in thought.

The streets were packed, as usual, and the pace of our journey incredibly slow. The de Metteil home was on the outskirts of the fashionable district as well, at some distance from the hill where the palace was located.

After an hour, the palace loomed before us, a grand marble edifice glinting under the midday sun. The Volonta River sparkled in the distance, deceptively serene. With each step closer, the bustling sounds of the city softened, replaced by the whispers of leaves and plants, courtesy of spells laid down to deaden the noise.

I turned to Luna as we approached the gates, my expression grim. “Once we’re inside, mind your words carefully. The emperor excels at finding hidden meanings, even in something as simple as ‘good morning’.”

She winked at me. “Don’t fret about me; I’ve dealt with your mother for years. Just try not to look like murder.”

She had a point. I grimaced, and then settled my expression to stillness.

The palace gates swung open at our approach. A pair of guards in crisp uniforms snapped to attention.

I descended from the sedan chair, then turned to help Luna out. She slid into my arms with effortless grace, her nearness sending a jolt through me. For a fleeting instant, the world narrowed to just us two.

Then she stepped away, smoothing her skirts, and the moment shattered. I shook off the distraction, turning to face the palace doors with squared shoulders.

The guards ushering us through with practiced efficiency. The servants and chair settled into wait.

Pip shifted uneasily on Luna's shoulder, beady eyes darting.

Every visit to this place was like visiting a gorgeous and deadly museum. The place was littered with magics old and new, rooms that unveiled themselves to new visitors, and deadly courtiers awaiting their chance for promotion. And today, the stakes were higher than ever.

Luna reached up, trying to coax Pip to wait outside, but the creature just clung tightly to her hair, letting out an indignant hiss. She sighed, relenting. "Fine, you can come. But you'd better behave."

I couldn't help but snort. "Not sure which one of us you're instructing there."

She shot me a wry look. "Both. Definitely both."

A quiet servant bowed to us and gestured for us to follow. Step by step, we made our way down the cavernous main hall, our footfalls echoing softly off the gleaming marble floor. Everywhere I looked, wealth and power were on elegant or gaudy display. Intricate tapestries, gleaming statues, long halls.

I loved and hated to visit it. It was a wonder and a prison for the one who ruled, and I was smart enough to know it.

At last we reached the receiving room. Before the door opened, I knew its contents, a fountain that jetted fire in ever changing colors that shed no heat. It was a lovely creation, one of the wonders of the palace, that had been there since the first emperor, Reaver the sorcerer.

A few chairs and divans would be scattered through the room.

The old man was going to an effort to make us comfortable. I pasted a smile on my face and beside me, Luna lifted her chin, somehow looking both demure and defiant.

*Into the maw of the beast we go. Absent gods keep us, the mother's arms shield us, and may the all-seeing Sun have mercy.*

Then the doors swung open, and together we stepped across the threshold to meet with the waiting emperor.

The fountain was as gorgeous as all the stories said, an unparalleled creation of ancient times.

Above, there were soaring ceilings adorned by intricate mosaics depicting the empire's bloody history. Seated on a long divan, the emperor Bartolomeo himself, tracking our every move. Wiry and nearly bald, draped in rich silks, he looked both frail and formidable.

Perched on a stool beside him sat Alexis Cosmelis, one of his chief vipers—others called them advisors. The old schemer was studying Luna with chilly interest, like a snake sizing up a rodent. I had to suppress a surge of anger.

*She's mine, and not to be made a pawn in your games, you bastard.*

"Ah, Benedetto," the emperor said, his papery lips stretching into a thin smile. "And your lovely wife. It's good to see you. Sit, please."

I bowed stiffly, taking my seat next to Luna as Pip settled on the back of the long low couch. "We're honored by your notice, sire."

The emperor snorted, amusement in those cold hazel eyes. "And would rather not be honored in the future. You need to work on concealing your emotions if you're going to wear the wreath."

Ah, it was going to be informal. I could do informal. "What are you talking about?"

"Tell me," Emperor Bartolomeo said conversationally, steepling his ring studded bony fingers. "What is your stance on your current position within the line of succession?"

I blinked, caught off guard. "I don't want it."

The emperor let out a dry, humorless chuckle. "Fair enough. Regardless of your preference, you're either second or third in line now, depending on how you view your cousin Vivaldo's claim."

*Second or third?* The words hit me like a punch to the gut. I'd known I'd risen in the succession, but... Dead gods

reanimated, I did not want this wizened old man's wrath or throne. What game was he playing?

I schooled my features into careful neutrality, even as my mind raced. Beside me, Luna shifted almost imperceptibly, her hand brushing mine. The brief touch steadied me.

I met the emperor's piercing gaze head on. "I'm afraid I still fail to grasp your meaning, Your Majesty. My loyalty is to the empire, not any personal ambitions."

"As it should be," Emperor Bartolomeo said mildly. But I didn't miss the way his eyes narrowed fractionally. "Still, one must consider possible eventualities. And plan accordingly. Wouldn't you agree?"

*You scheming old spider, what web are you trying to trap me in?* I wanted to snap. But I simply inclined my head. "Of course, Your Majesty. Though I pray such plans remain in the far future."

The emperor's smile was more of a grimace. "As do we all. But the wise man prepares for every path. Especially wedded to a lovely woman of impeccable bloodlines." He waved a hand languidly. "Such children you and she will make, Benedetto. They'll inherit the imperial bloodline from both sides."

My thoughts whirled. Why summon me here for that cryptic warning? Was he threatening us or wanting us to produce children quickly?

I glanced at Luna. Her face betrayed nothing, but I sensed her unease.

This was a dangerous game we'd been thrust into. And something told me it was only the opening move. We had to tread carefully.

And I had to make some decisions. The emperor had all but said that our child would be a target of rivals to the throne if I didn't take his throne when he died.

"But enough of that," said Alexis Cosmelis. "I've heard that you plan to travel soon. Let me tell you about the last time I

traveled to the Jesnani lands..." he launched into a drily funny tale that had Luna laughing.

For me, there was nothing to do but smile, nod, and try to navigate a way out of the trap we were in. The battle had begun.

When the story ended, Emperor Bartolomeo smiled at Luna, the sound of her laughter still lingering in the room. "I am sad to have not seen you before. Please, come to a small supper I'm hosting tomorrow with your husband."

Luna's eyes widened, and she whispered, "You honor us, Sire."

"It's nothing." He waved a hand. "Off with you. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

The ride back to the villa passed in tense silence. As we stepped out of the chair into the courtyard, I turned to Luna. "I need to look into some things. Alone."

After a moment, she nodded. "I understand. Just..." She hesitated. "Be careful. Please."

I kissed her hand. "Always." The word tasted like a lie even as I said it.

Once I saw her inside the villa, I left and made straight for gathering places where I could find various acquaintances and allies at this time of day. They'd all heard about the summons of course. As I spoke with them, a picture emerged I didn't like.

Whispers of private dinners, carefully worded promises, a web of influence spreading through the capital. Many proxies were used, but at the end of the day, all of it traced back to one person. Vala d'Alvarez. My mother.

Damn her. Containing my worry and anger, I made my way back to the villa.

Pacing the study, I slammed my fist on the desk, making the inkwell jump. Didn't she realize what she was doing?

But even as the thought formed, I knew the answer. Of course she realized. This was no impulsive scheme. It was a



calculated play, years in the making. And I was the pawn she'd chosen to bet on.

Well, this pawn had his own agenda. I straightened, my jaw clenched. Luna found me like that, staring out into the twilight, my knuckles white against the windowsill. "Benedetto? What did you find out?"

I let out a harsh laugh. "That my mother is a serpent in silk skirts. And that I'm an idiot for not seeing what she was up to sooner."

Luna came to stand beside me, Pip swooping over to perch on my shoulder. "You're not an idiot," she said firmly. "Vala's been plotting longer than either of us has been alive. She's moved faster than we realized, is all."

I glanced at her, surprised. It was a kinder assessment than I deserved. "You give me too much credit."

"And you don't give yourself enough." She found my hand, her slim fingers interlacing with my calloused ones. "First we find Moonshifter and heal that wound for you. Then worry about the rest."

I looked down at our joined hands, a strange pang in my chest. "Mother's built a faction for me, without my knowledge. Knowing her, she's been pulling strings to see my rivals dead, too. If the other potential heirs convince the emperor this is a threat to him personally..."

"Then we die," Luna finished. Her auburn hair glowed in the candlelight. "We can't leave. Not yet, not until this is under control."

Frustration boiled inside me. "Dead gods smite her."

Luna's eyes widened at the profanity, then she laughed. "Most people wouldn't be angry at someone trying to put them on the throne."

"I'm not most people. It's a hard seat, and she plans for me to be her puppet. She needs to learn the meaning of 'no' when other people say it."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

# BENEDETTO

THE NEXT EVENING THE IMPERIAL PALACE IN THE SOFT GLOW of evening lanterns, its towering spires casting long shadows across the courtyard. I exited the sedan chair, then held my hand out for Luna. She descended gracefully, her gown flowing like liquid silver in the moonlight.

This dinner engagement was close to a battle. I'd found out Vivaldo, the other heir to the emperor's wreath would be in attendance. We'd loathed each other for years.

I wouldn't be surprised if many servants were ready to grab us if it looked like a duel was about to happen. I could beat him physically easily, but Vivaldo was smart enough to cheat.

"Shall we?" I offered Luna my arm. She took it with a brittle smile. I could sense her unease beneath the facade of poise.

"Let's get this over with," she murmured as we ascended the palace steps.

The dining room we were led to was a smaller, more intimate room, lit by chandeliers of intricate crystal. This was not a state dinner but an 'informal gathering'.

The long table was set for twenty guests, the golden plates and cutlery gleaming against the dark wood. I scanned the room, taking in the players of tonight's game.

Vivaldo sat at the far end of the room, his posture relaxed, his smile pleasant but sharp as a blade. Several other nobles were seated, each with carefully neutral expressions. Masks upon masks. In Kalion, true intentions were rarely worn on one's sleeve.

And at this function, only a fool would show their true face.

I escorted Luna to a seat near the center of the room, where her easy grace immediately drew attention. Lords and ladies alike turned to greet her, their eyes alight with curiosity and calculation. I took my place beside her, acutely aware of the whispers that followed in my wake.

“Benedetto, so glad you could join us,” Vivaldo called out, raising his glass in a mocking toast. “And the lovely Lunetta, of course. You’ve become quite the talk of the court these days. Especially after that little affaire of honor.”

I inclined my head, my smile razor thin. “We’re honored by the invitation, cousin. Though I admit, I’m surprised you managed to tear yourself away from your usual diversions long enough to attend a dinner party, even for the emperor.”

Vivaldo’s pale eyes flashed, but his expression never wavered. “Oh, I always make time for family. And for intriguing ladies.”

A few moments later we were seated at the table as the first course arrived, a delicate duck broth garnished with rose petals. I barely tasted it, my mind whirling with the undercurrents of the conversation. Vivaldo’s barbs were nothing new, but there was an edge to his words tonight, a hunger I didn’t like.

I didn’t want my wife near danger, even if she could handle herself.

Beside me, Luna engaged in polite conversation with the nobleman to her right, her laughter tinkling like wind chimes. But I caught the tension in her shoulders, the way her fingers gripped her fork a bit too tightly.

I had to tread carefully, to play the game without killing anyone in a fit of temper. Beneath the glittering chandeliers and fine silks, a deadly dance had begun.

And it would be so simple to kill Vivaldo to protect Luna’s future children, but then the rest in line to inherit would rise up at the thought I’d done it to seal my position for a throne I did not want. The irony could choke a dragon.

I took a sip of wine, the rich Dimarian red coating my tongue. As the second course was served, a succulent roast pig in a honey glaze on a bed of sliced hard-boiled eggs and greens, Vivaldo leaned forward, his elbows resting on the table. He had to lean to see us past the centerpiece.

“It’s fascinating,” he said, his tone light, but his eyes gleaming with chilly malice. “The whispers around the court about you, Benedetto. Rising so quickly in the emperor’s favor. It must be quite the burden.”

“It’s no burden to serve one’s emperor,” I replied smoothly. “Though I imagine it’s hard for some to understand when they’ve never experienced it.”

“Of course.” Vivaldo swirled his imported red wine. “But one wonders if ambition might creep in. After all, with the emperor aging and without heirs, it’s only natural for contenders to emerge. Don’t you agree?”

I tilted my head, my fingers drumming lightly on the table. “Ambition is a dangerous thing,” I said. “It often blinds men to their own weaknesses.”

He was testing me. Seeing how far he could push me. Why?

I glanced around the table, taking in the carefully neutral expressions of the other nobles. They were watching, waiting to see which of us would falter first. It was a game I knew all too well, a dance of power and manipulation that I had been bred for since birth.

And trained for until I walked away.

Tonight, the stakes were higher than ever. With the emperor’s health failing and no clear successor, the court was a powder keg waiting to explode. And Vivaldo, with his sly insinuations and knowing smirks, seemed to be toying with lighting it.

Care was called for, since I had more to lose now than I had for a long time. Luna would be a prize if I died. I didn’t envy the man who’d be assigned to break her.

I didn’t want it to happen to her.

I had to be careful, to play the game. One wrong move, one misstep, and everything I had worked for could come crashing down around me.

One of my mother's closest cronies, Giordano de Manfredi, paused by Luna as he headed for his chair. He said something I couldn't catch, and she gave him a brilliant smile.

Before I could go to her and ask what was said, Emperor Bartolomeo arrived and all rose as he made his way to the head of the table, smiling affably enough it looked like his face would crack.

As the servants brought out the dessert, a delicious honeyed fried cheese, I noticed movement from Luna. She leaned slightly toward the nobleman seated beside her, her expression polite but guarded. The man, Lord Enzo, leaned closer, speaking in hushed tones.

My ears, sharpened by years of living on the edge, caught fragments of their conversation.

"You don't have to stay with him, you know," Lord Enzo murmured, his tone oily and insinuating. "I can offer you and your sister protection, money—everything you need. All you have to do is add a little something to his drink. After that, no more coarseness and scandal. Nor will you have to deal with his hag of a mother. And your sister will be safe from the newest plans your father is hatching."

The audacity. A cold fury rose in my chest, my grip tightening on my wineglass until I thought it might shatter. He thought he could poach her right under my nose, as if she were some pretty trinket to be bought and sold. As if I wouldn't notice.

I turned my head and saw Luna raise an eyebrow, her lips curling into a sweet, almost predatory smile.

"Oh, how thoughtful of you," she purred. "But if I wanted Benedetto dead, I'd have done it myself by now."

For a moment, I sat stunned. Then, my initial anger gave way to a swell of warmth and pride. She was on my side, truly and completely. The realization hit me like a bolt of lightning, unexpected but exhilarating.

Lord Enzo sputtered, his face flushing an unflattering shade of red. But Luna merely laughed as if they'd exchanged witty remarks, the sound like silver bells.

The emperor smiled benignly down the table at her. "Luna, my dear, you have a lovely laugh. We wish to hear it more often."

"Of course, Sire," she said immediately.

I leaned back in my chair, a smirk playing at the corners of my mouth. Let them try, I thought. Let them scheme and plot and whisper.

The supper wound down, guests rising one by one to offer their farewells to the emperor, a melee of false smiles and barely veiled barbs.

Vivaldo lingered for a moment, his gaze sweeping over Luna and me, calculating and cold. His bow to the emperor was exquisite in its grace, which the old man acknowledged with only a nod.

He departed the picture of courtly grace, even though the disfavor hung around him like a cloud.

I stood, offering Luna my arm. She took it, her touch light but steady, and we made our farewells. The emperor did not show her more favor, for which the absent gods be thanked. We had a large enough target on us already.

Exiting, we walked through the grand halls of the palace, our footsteps echoing against the marble. Servants bowed as we passed, their eyes downcast, but I could feel their curiosity, the whispers that would follow us like shadows.

As we stepped out into the cool night air and stepped into the carriage, I turned to Luna, studying her profile in the soft glow of the lanterns. "You handled yourself well tonight."

She glanced at me, her smile soft but teasing. "What, did you think I'd fall for it?"

I kissed her on the lips. "No. But it's nice to be reminded why I keep you around."

Her laughter mingled with mine, a moment of shared mirth in the midst of the intrigues that swirled around us like smoke. I

felt a strange lightness in my chest, a sense of ease that I hadn't known in years.

"And de Manfredi? What did he say that made you smile?"

She gave me a quick, puzzled look. "He complimented me on my dress and suggested we dine at his home before we left. I didn't want to answer directly, so I smiled instead."

But even as we headed home, my mind raced with the implications of the evening. Vivaldo's words, the nobleman's offer—they were pieces of the game of power and ambition.

Damn my mother for pulling us into it!

The sedan chair swayed gently as it wound through the moonlit streets, the steady footsteps of the bearers a soothing rhythm. I leaned back against the seat, my gaze drifting to Luna as she gazed out the curtains, her profile illuminated by the soft glow of the moon.

Watching her, a strange sense of peace settled over me. She was more than I had ever expected—smart, sharp, loyal. If I wasn't careful, I might actually start relying on her.

As if sensing my thoughts, she turned to me, her grey eyes curious. "What's on your mind?"

I shrugged, a faint smile tugging at my lips. "Just thinking how lucky I am you haven't decided to kill me yet."

"Then don't tempt me," she said lightly, but her gaze was warm, filled with an affection that I still couldn't quite believe was directed at me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# LUNA

AS BENEDETTO'S HAND ENGULFED MINE TO HELP ME FROM THE carriage, a current of desire passed between us. I'd felt his touch countless times before, in passing or in passion, but there was a deliberateness to it now that sent a shiver through me. When I met his gaze, I found him staring at me with an intensity I'd never seen, his dark eyes twin flames that threatened to consume me whole.

We stood there, hands clasped, for a long moment that stretched like hot sugar. My pulse hammered in my throat as if my body already knew something momentous teetered on the horizon. When Benedetto finally spoke, his usually smooth voice held a slight rasp.

"I have something for you," he said, reaching into his coat with his free hand. His fingers trembled almost imperceptibly as he withdrew a small velvet pouch. "Just something I picked up. They made me think of you."

Curiosity overpowered the maelstrom of other emotions swirling inside me as I took the pouch. The velvet was buttery soft against my fingertips, clearly expensive. I loosened the gold drawstring and upended the contents into my palm.

A pair of opal earrings tumbled out, glinting in the late afternoon sun. Each opal was the size of my thumbnail, more vivid and fiery than any I'd seen before, set in intricately engraved silver. I felt my breath catch, my eyes widening as I picked one up to examine it closer. The stone came alive, flashing iridescent pinks, greens, and golds as it turned.



“Opals,” I breathed. The word felt insufficient, too small to encompass the beautiful craftsmanship. “They’re exquisite. I’ve never seen anything like them.” I dragged my gaze from the rainbows in my hand to Benedetto’s face. “I’ve never received anything like this before.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw, and something flickered through his eyes too quick to catch. Regret, perhaps. Or guilt.

He took a step closer, bringing with him the scent of bergamot and the wild herbs that grew in the fields beyond the city walls. Strange that I’d never noticed how he smelled of home before.

“You deserve them,” he said roughly. Then his eyes dropped to my hair, to the sheer red veil I often wore. “You wear that scarf often. Why is it so special to you?”

My fingers drifted up to brush the delicate fabric, as they often did when I needed comfort. The silk was light as a whisper against my skin, but it carried the weight of my history woven through its threads.

“It was my mother’s,” I said quietly. The words ached like an old wound as they left my throat. “Her bridal veil. After she died, before my father could destroy her belongings in his grief, my stepmother smuggled it out for me. It’s all I have left of her.”

Benedetto was silent for a long moment. He reached out slowly, carefully, as if gentling a wild creature, and tucked a stray curl behind my ear. His fingertips grazed my cheek, and I fought the urge to lean into his touch.

“It suits you,” he said softly, his voice a warm caress. “You look even more beautiful with it. And with these.” His hands moved to take the earrings from me. Gently, reverently, he fastened first one and then the other to my earlobes.

The air shifted, grew heavier, weighted with unsaid things that pressed on my lungs and pebbled my skin. Tears stung my eyes, though whether from his unexpected thoughtfulness or the vulnerability of sharing a piece of my closely guarded past, I couldn’t say. Perhaps both.

“Thank you,” I whispered, the words woefully insufficient.  
“This means more to me than you know.”

His thumb swept beneath my eye, collecting the single tear that escaped. “You deserve so much more than I could ever give you, Luna.”

My name on his lips kindled something deep in my belly, a spark that threatened to ignite into an inferno. Emboldened, I stepped closer, laying my palm against his chest. Even through the layers of fine cotton and brocade, I could feel the heavy hammer of his heartbeat. It matched my own.

“Benedetto,” I breathed, my voice trembling with the force of my longing. “You don’t have to pretend anymore. Not with me.”

He stared down at me, his eyes black holes threatening to swallow me whole. And then his mouth was on mine, and I was falling, falling, falling.

The kiss was a wild thing, a desperate devouring. Rough and aching with pent-up need. But then it gentled, turning into something almost worshipful. His tongue slid against mine, stoking my hunger even as he soothed the jagged edges of it.

We stumbled through the villa, leaving a trail of discarded clothes in our wake. My blood sang in my veins like a barely contained wildfire as Benedetto lowered me to the bed. This time was different. More. As if a dam had finally broken, washing away all pretense and hesitation.

His hands were everywhere, mapping my skin as if committing every hollow and curve to memory. Each brush of his fingertips, each press of his lips, was an apology and a benediction. An unspoken plea for absolution spoken into the secret spaces of my body.

Benedetto laid me down on the bed with a gentleness I’d never known, not even in my most fevered imaginings. His hands cradled me like I was something infinitely precious, breakable, and it stole the breath from my lungs. I watched, enraptured, as he began to trace the lines of my body with whisper-soft

touches, his eyes dark with want and an emotion I dared not name.

He took his time, lavishing attention on every curve and valley, caressing each new expanse of skin revealed as if memorizing me by touch. The wet heat of his mouth followed the path of his fingertips, pressing open-mouthed kisses to my collarbone, the tops of my breasts, the quivering plane of my belly.

Warm. I was so warm, my skin flushed and tingling, nerve endings sparking with each brush of his lips. When his tongue swirled around my nipple, I arched up with a gasp, my fingers tangling in his dark hair to hold him close. He suckled me tenderly, worshipfully, like he was paying homage to a goddess, and I was his altar.

“Benedetto,” I breathed, my head tipping back into the pillows as he moved lower, trailing kisses down my ribs, my navel, the sensitive crease of my hip. “Please...”

I wasn’t even sure what I was begging for, too lost in the exquisite torture of his touch. But he seemed to know, to read my body like a map only he could decipher.

His hands gripped my thighs, spreading me open before him, and then his mouth was on my center, and I saw stars. Fingers joined his tongue, stroking and delving and stoking the fire in my core to an inferno. I writhed against him, hips lifting to meet each thrust and swirl, chasing the release that hovered just out of reach.

“That’s it, my love,” he rasped against my slick flesh. “Let go. I have you.”

It was the endearment, more than anything, that sent me hurtling over the edge into oblivion. I shattered with his name on my lips, my spine bowing as ecstasy rolled through me in waves. Dimly, I was aware of his fingers gentling me through the aftershocks, bringing me down slowly until I collapsed back onto the bed, boneless and trembling.

He crawled up my body and gathered me close, his skin damp with sweat and his arousal hard against my hip. But he made

no move to seek his own pleasure, content, it seemed, to simply hold me as I floated in the warm haze of aftermath.

Overwhelmed by his selflessness, by the profound care in his every action, I tilted my head to capture his mouth in a searing kiss. I poured every ounce of my yearning, my adoration, my devotion into the press of my lips and slide of my tongue, willing him to feel the true depth of my heart.

Slowly, reverently, he shifted to settle between my thighs. One big hand gripped my knee, hitching my leg over his hip, opening me for his gentle invasion. When he finally pushed forward, sliding into my heat inch by careful inch, I thought I might die from the perfection of it.

He rocked against me in deep, rolling thrusts, stoking the embers of my desire back to a roaring blaze. There was no space between us, our limbs tangled, and our gazes locked, sharing each panting breath. I clutched at his shoulders, urging him closer, deeper, needing to feel every part of him against every part of me.

“Luna,” he groaned into the crook of my neck as his movements grew more forceful, more urgent. “My heart. I can’t...I need...”

“Yes,” I gasped, understanding him perfectly even as pleasure stripped me of coherency. “Benedetto, please. I’m yours.”

His control snapped at my breathless admission. He drove into me with near brutal intensity, hitting that secret spot inside me that made stars explode behind my eyelids. I cried out, my nails scoring his back as I spiraled higher and higher.

It only took a few more powerful thrusts before I was flying apart, my body clenching around him as rapture crashed over me in a tidal wave. He followed me over the edge with a wordless shout, his hips stuttering against mine as he spilled his heat deep inside me.

We clung to each other in the aftermath, sweat cooling on our skin as our racing hearts gradually slowed. He peppered my face with soft, sweet kisses, nuzzling into my hair with a contented sigh.

I'd never felt so cherished, so utterly safe and adored. Tears pricked my eyes once more, the intimacy of our joining leaving me raw and exposed in the very best way.

As he bent his head to capture my lips once more, sealing our declarations with a kiss, I thought my heart might burst from sheer joy and wonder. In his arms, in his heart, I'd finally found my home.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

# LUNA

AFTER THREE WEEKS OF EXHAUSTING POLITICAL MANEUVERING that went nowhere and the sudden excitement of averting a duel when Benedetto lost his temper, I waited in the afternoon sun with my stomach fluttering with pleasant anticipation.

Pip swooped and landed on my shoulder, chirping excitedly as if sensing my emotions. It'd been too long since I'd seen my sister and Sofia. My stomach twisted with nerves. I just hoped they'd been well.

And I needed to find out what my father was up to. There was no gossip about it, just veiled hints, which worried me more than outright slander. What did he have in store for Rose?

Vala was coming with them, and I sincerely hoped she didn't stir up trouble right away.

The carriage rolled to a stop, and the door swung open. Rose leaped out, blond curls bullying, her face lighting up when she spotted me.

"Luna!" She rushed to squeeze me tightly. I returned the favor.

Sofia followed at a sedate pace, her expression calm and kind as always. Rose let go of me, standing close by.

Vala stepped down last, graceful and poised, her smile serene but calculating.

"You look well." Sofia looked me over critically. "Kalion suits you."

"It's good to see you." A lump formed in my throat. I glanced at Vala, who watched us with a practiced smile. "Welcome,

Lady Vala.”

Vala stepped forward and placed a kiss on my cheek. “Of course, my dear. Now, is this the drake I’ve heard so much about? Is this him?”

Pip hissed and back winged off my shoulder. He circled Sofia and Rose, nipping at their hair. Then he landed on the wall and watched Vala, giving a wary chirp.

“Yes,” I said. “Though, technically Pip is an it. Drakes choose their sex when they’re grown. We call him he because it doesn’t seem to bother him and it’s easier in conversation.”

“Well, well,” Vala said with a laugh, meeting Pip’s gaze. “A feisty little creature, isn’t it? It suits you, Luna.”

Everything was a game to her. I thought and suppressed an eye roll. But at least she seemed genuinely interested. Why hadn’t she ever tried to find a drake for herself? She was more than powerful enough magically.

As we moved inside the villa, Benedetto stepped into the hallway, his expression pleasant. He locked eyes with Vala, and I sensed the shift in the atmosphere, a tension that was like the calm before a storm.

“Mother,” Benedetto said tersely, inclining his head in a barely respectful nod. “We need to talk. Now.”

Vala raised an eyebrow, her smile unfaltering. “Oh, Benedetto. Always so direct. A good host would give me time to wash first, but very well.”

“That’s a signal for us to go and clean up after our journey.” Sofia gave me a knowing glance.

I indicated the maid waiting in the hall. “She’ll lead you to your rooms.”

Rose laughed as they walked down the hall.

Benedetto and Vala had stepped into the study, leaving the door slightly ajar. I positioned myself to linger nearby, listening as their voices rose and fell.

“You’re building a faction in my name,” Benedetto bit out. “Without my knowledge or consent.”

Vala’s reply was calm, almost mocking. “I simply did what you would not. You may not want the throne, but the empire needs strong leadership. And if not you, then who? Vivaldo? Do you want to burn on the same pyre as the emperor? He’ll see you dead in minutes if he ascends to the throne.”

She was manipulating him, but she also had a point. I had a surge of sympathy for Benedetto. He hated this kind of game, and she knew it.

The fact she’d put him in the position where he had to dominate or die wasn’t lost on me either.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, Mother,” Benedetto said. I heard the slam of his fist on the table. “This isn’t just about power, this could get us all killed.”

I could just see Vala through the crack in the door without leaning forward and making it too obvious.

Vala’s shrug was elegant and dismissive, her tone level. “Power is always dangerous, Benedetto. But it’s a risk worth taking. If not for yourself, for your wife and any children you might have. Or would you like to see them all burn with you?”

He stormed out of the room, nearly colliding with me. His face was flushed with anger, but when he saw me, his expression softened. Slightly.

“We’re going for a walk,” he said shortly. “I need air.”

Luckily Rose and Sofia had almost finished dressing after cleaning up, and we were on our way swiftly.

The four of us walked through the streets of Kalion, Pip perched happily on Rose’s shoulder, preening and ruffling her blond hair. The city felt gentler and more welcoming when I was with them.

I glanced at Rose’s wide-eyed wonder and Sofia’s amused expression. Their presence made it feel like it could be a home.



Benedetto walked slightly ahead, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. He scanned the crowd constantly, his posture tense and alert.

Sofia noticed, giving him a tart smile. “Are we really that dangerous at your back? Or are you just worried someone might try to steal your wife away?”

Benedetto glanced back, wary as he always was around Sofia.

“I’m worried about the attacks we’ve been dealing with,” he said dryly. “But if you’d rather I leave you to fend for yourselves...”

I cut in with a smile. “We appreciate the escort. Truly.”

As we passed through a quieter part of the market, Rose spotted a small child standing alone, her face streaked with tears.

“Oh, the poor thing.” Rose hurried over before anyone could stop her. She knelt down to the child’s level. “Are you lost?”

The girl nodded, hiccupping through her sobs.

Benedetto’s expression hardened, and he grabbed my arm. “This could be a trap,” he said. “We’ve been targeted before, using a child wouldn’t be beneath them.”

I frowned, half agreeing with him but torn. He was right, but the poor thing was terrified.

Sofia stepped forward, murmuring a few words under her breath. A soft, silvery light glowed around her hands, and the air hummed with a faint magical resonance.

I stepped away as my magic reached hungrily for her spell.

“Her parents are nearby.” Sofia pointed down a side street. “That way.”

The magic Sofia displayed was always subtle but powerful. Everyone heard about the destruction sorcerers and their students could rain down on those who opposed them, and I’d heard Sofia quietly mocked for her lack of offensive magic.

Though not using something was not the same as lacking it. Sometimes I wondered why she chose the path she did.

Other moments, like now, I was simply grateful. I didn't know what Rose and I would do without her. Why had Father made a contract for her to teach Rose and stay with us so long? How could he have afforded it?

We followed Sofia's lead down the side street. A couple came into view, both of them dressed in the plain style of merchants, the cloth sturdy and the color muted.

Both their faces were etched with worry as they frantically searched the crowd. Terrible things could happen to a child alone, even in the day.

When the mother spotted her little girl in Rose's arms, she let out a sob and rushed forward, scooping the child into a tight embrace.

Rose stepped back.

"Thank you, thank you." The father bowed repeatedly. Tears glistened in his eyes. "We thought we'd lost her."

"She's a sweet child. It's good you found her and us so quickly," I said with a warm smile.

As we headed away, Benedetto slipped a small pouch of coins into the father's hand. His expression softened as he said, "For lost business."

Then he quickly turned away, as if embarrassed by his own act of kindness. He hid any gentleness as if it were a weakness.

Rose beamed at Benedetto as we walked. "You're kinder than you let on."

Benedetto scowled, but there was no real heat behind it. "Don't spread that around. I have a reputation to maintain. And gossip is a bad habit."

I laughed, slipping my hand into his. His fingers tightened around mine, and for a moment, I imagined a future where these small gestures of affection weren't a temporary arrangement. "Your secret's safe with us."

In rapid succession, Benedetto took us to four dealers of rare books, all of whom, while full of gossip, had no news on Tullio Lucardi's whereabouts.

The sun dipped low on the horizon by the time we were done, painting the sky in vivid shades of orange and pink as we approached the villa. Rose and Sofia walked ahead, their laughter carrying on the evening breeze as it carried the scent of supper cooking.

I slowed my pace, falling into step beside Benedetto. The golden light cast his angular features in a softer glow, and I studied his profile.

Benedetto glanced at me, a single eyebrow arched in that infuriatingly confident way of his.

“You know,” I said, “you’re not as heartless as you pretend to be.”

“Maybe I’m just trying to fool you,” he said, his lips curving into a smirk. “I might abandon you tomorrow, for all you know.”

I rolled my eyes, half disguising my laugh as a snort. “I doubt that. You’re too honorable to go back on your word, even if you won’t admit it.”

He scoffed, but I caught the flicker of amusement in his dark eyes. “Careful, Luna. Keep talking like that, and people might start to think you actually like me. And keep in mind that my honor can be flexible when needed.”

If only he knew how much I cared. If only I could be sure that this wasn’t all just a game to him. And there’s been an ever so slight warning tone in his last sentence.

But I wouldn’t let myself dwell on those thoughts, I’d steal joy while I had it in my hands. Instead, I bumped my shoulder against his, a carefully casual gesture. “I think I’ll take my chances.”

As we neared the villa gates, I reluctantly let go of Benedetto’s hand. Appearances needed to be maintained in front of the servants and guards. But even as we stepped back into our roles as the dutiful nobleman and high-born wife, I couldn’t shake the warmth that had blossomed in my chest.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# LUNA

THE NEXT MORNING, I LEANED BACK IN A CHAIR IN THE STUDY as Benedetto paced the floor, his face a storm cloud of frustration. He'd risen early.

My cycle had just ended, and I knew I wasn't pregnant. I'd gone to his room and then searched the villa for him.

Benedetto seemed consumed by finding the man, possibly fueled by his desire to be well away from Vala. She'd already left to visit friends in the city.

He muttered under his breath about Tulliano Lucardi, the elusive collector that always seemed just out of his reach. So he could start hunting Moonshifter again and he could get away from the politics now that Vala was here stirring things up.

There was a better way to do this, if I could get his attention.

I cleared my throat. "Instead of chasing after Lucardi like thwarted assassins, why don't we take a different approach?"

Benedetto stopped pacing and made a beckoning gesture. "What do you have in mind?"

"We visit mages," I said. "We lie and say you're finally interested in training your gift. Vala mentioned many times that you have a great gift and refused to train it after your brother's accident. They'll be curious what made you change your mind, and we might get the information we need without having to chase someone throughout the empire."

He snorted and crossed his arms over his broad chest. “You think they’ll believe that?”

I gave him a sly smile. “Probably. That’s why it will work. They’ll be curious. Especially when I’m the one asking, and your status has changed so much recently. And with your mother in town, whoever woos you to be their student can count on favors from her as well.”

Just then, Sofia entered the room carrying a tray of tea and delicacies. She set it down with a graceful flourish and gave me an approving look. “I heard part of your plan. It’s a good idea. And I know several who would be very interested in your request.”

“Who do you suggest?” I asked as I poured a cup of the fragrant tea and offered it to Benedetto.

His big hands dwarfed the delicate cup as he sipped the herbal brew.

“Calia Fokaides, Naran Olar, Witse Dagovy, and Feridun Yesil,” Sofia listed, lifting a well-manicured finger with each name. “They’re all influential in their own circles. If you can convince them, you should get clues as to your quarry’s location.”

She accepted her cup of tea from me. “However. I applaud your determination and your care for your brother, Lord d’Alvarez, but have you considered what you’ll do when you find the location of this tower?”

“Force him to cure Francesco. Or kill him.”

“Then you might want to accept the training you’ve thus far avoided.” Sofia answered mildly.

Her plan was sound. The pieces started to come together in my mind. Benedetto’s single-minded focus on revenge was clouding his judgement. But with the right approach, and Sofia’s contacts, we might finally make some real progress.

And if I were with him, my magic would eat the sorcerer’s spells, giving Benedetto a real chance.

I sipped the hot tea, letting the plan solidify. Benedetto might've been driven by vengeance, but I had other priorities. The sooner we found Moonshifter, the sooner we could focus on what really mattered. Starting a family and securing our future. One way or another, I was determined to make it happen.

Benedetto turned to Sofia, a trace of mockery in his tone. "Why didn't you suggest Soulrider?"

Sofia gave him a half smile. "The fact you ask that means you have no concept just how dangerous Sorcerers are. You've been hunting Moonshifter for how long and you're foolish enough to suggest deceiving Soulrider?"

"Why not?" Benedetto challenged.

Sofia leaned forward, an unsettling expression crossing her face. For a moment she became cold as a statue, and her quiet voice a bell tolling doom. "Benedetto. Moonshifter has allowed you to hunt him this long because he finds it funny, if you want my guess. Use that. You might kill him because he's overconfident. But don't presume others are like him. Soulrider will exact payment from you and no trickery or stealth will keep it from being collected."

I squirmed in my seat, unsettled by this cold, hard side of Sofia I'd never seen before in all our years together. Then just as suddenly, she leaned back and sipped her tea, the familiar nurturing governess once more.

Pip chose that moment to hop onto my lap with a disgruntled chirp. He nuzzled against me, clearly displeased at being left out of the plan. I stroked his smooth head soothingly. "You'll have to stay home this time, Pip. We don't want any unnecessary distractions."

It wasn't just about distractions. Pip's jealousy could complicate things if we were trying to charm people who might be suspicious of our intentions.

Pip let out a soft, pitiful whine but didn't fight my decision. He curled up on my lap, sulking but resigned.

Sofia chuckled, giving the drake a fond look. “He’ll get over it. He pouts when he’s not the center of attention. And he would be, if the other mages saw him. Rather than your questions.”

I sighed, my thoughts whirling. Between Benedetto’s obsession, the dangers Sofia warned of, and now this cryptic plan our father had for Rose, the walls were closing in. I had to protect my sister, no matter what it took. Even if it meant keeping secrets from my own husband.

I glanced at Benedetto, noting the determined set of his jaw, the fire in his eyes. He was a man on a mission, single-minded in his pursuit. Part of me admired that drive. But another part feared where it might lead us. Would my magic really prevail in the lair of a Sorcerer? Sofia had never spoken before with such grim warning.

Vivaldo would pay for threatening Rose, even by the proxy of a friend. Perhaps the threat of our father had been a lie to spur me to action. I’d do whatever I must to keep her safe, even if it meant walking into the dragon’s den itself. With my magic and Benedetto’s wit as our only armor.

I squared my shoulders, resolved. One way or another, I would find a path through this tangled web.

No matter the cost.



The scent of lemons enveloped me as we approached the mage Calia’s villa. I inhaled deeply, letting the bright citrus notes mingle with the salty sea breeze. The house was a vision of white marble and climbing ivy against the azure sky, the gardens even better kept than the Imperial palace’s.

Calia stood on the steps, her shoulder length dark hair rippling in the wind. She was sturdily built, wearing clothing better suited to gardening than to visitors. “Benedetto d’Alvarez. And his lovely wife.” Her voice was like honey, rich and smooth. “To what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from an imperial scion?”

I stepped forward, my smile practiced and perfect. “We’ve heard much about your abilities, Lady Calia. Benedetto has been considering developing his gift, and we thought we’d seek your counsel.”

Calia’s eyebrow arched, skepticism flickering across her face. Her full lips pursed. “Training your gift, Lord d’Alvarez? I never took you for the type. Self-discipline and drunken brawls don’t go hand in hand.”

Benedetto’s smile was self-deprecating. He was playing his part well. “Perhaps it’s time I stopped running from it.”

I watched Calia’s reaction. A flicker of curiosity crossed her face, mixed with sadness.

Sad didn’t fit. What had prompted it?

“Starlight magic is a fickle thing,” Calia said, leading us into a sun-drenched atrium. “Especially for an adult who’s used it in a certain way. It requires a great deal of focus and dedication to change the paths you’ve already set.”

“I’m willing to put in the work,” Benedetto said.

Calia hummed thoughtfully. “I’ve never seen evidence you’re willing to take the harder road, other than your famous quest. Training is not easy or quick.”

A young girl burst into the room, her cheeks flushed. “Mistress Calia, I—”

She stopped short, eyes widening at the sight of us and bobbed a hasty bow.

Calia sighed. “Eleni, what have I told you about interrupting?”

The girl ducked her head. “Apologies, Mistress. I didn’t realize you had guests.”

“No harm done. Now, off with you. We’ll speak later.”

The girl, Eleni, bobbed another bow and scurried away. I caught the way her gaze lingered on Calia, the adoration in her young eyes. She admired her greatly. Perhaps even more than that.



It spoke well for the woman's character. Being taught didn't necessarily inspire affection.

"Forgive the interruption." Calia turned back to us. "Apprentices can be rather enthusiastic at times."

I smiled, genuine warmth seeping into my expression. "It's quite alright. Eagerness to learn is a precious thing."

"Indeed." Calia studied me for a moment, as if seeing me in a new light. "Perhaps we could continue this conversation at a later date? Away from the distractions of home. This visit was not expected, and my day is already full."

"We would be delighted." Benedetto bowed his head.

As we made our farewells, I couldn't shake the feeling that Calia saw more than she let on. That she understood, on some level, the true nature of our visit. We needed to tread carefully. She was no fool. But then again, neither were we.

And perhaps Benedetto did need the training.

Benedetto took my arm as we left, his grip firm. "That went well," he said.

"It's a start," I said. "But we have a long way to go."



The scent of exotic spices and aged leather enveloped me as we entered Naran Olar's residence. Intricate tapestries adorned the walls, depicting scenes of nomadic life on the steppes. Several kegs lined the walls, holding his famous beer.

Naran himself stood before us, his broad shoulders draped in a fur-lined cloak, his hawk-like gaze assessing us with a piercing intensity.

"You want training?" he asked skeptically. "You, d'Alvarez? After what happened to your brother?"

Benedetto tensed beside me, his jaw clenching.

I placed a gentle hand on his arm, a silent reminder of our purpose.

“That’s true,” I said, my gaze steady on the mage. “But people change, Master Olar. And sometimes, they realize their fears have held them back for too long.”

Naran’s expression softened, just a bit. He nodded, as if understanding some unspoken burden. He drew three small glasses of ale from a keg. We sipped in silence as he considered.

“When your mother was searching for a teacher for you, she said you sourced from the starlight. That’s hard to teach for anyone who doesn’t also source from it, since it draws power from both sun and moon.”

Benedetto nodded.

“If you’re serious, you’ll need to speak with someone who knows the old ways, like Moonshifter or Soulrider. Have you asked the apprentice in your household for the location of Soulrider’s tower?”

I shook my head. “Sofia suggested we not seek him out.”

Naran shrugged. “She’d know her master best. That leaves you with Moonshifter, who taught your brother. Last I heard, he’d moved back to the tower in the Renhos Mountains, near the Ygris Pass. Turn left at the blasted oak and follow the second game trail.”

*We got it. A definite location for Moonshifter.* “Thank you, Naran. Your guidance is invaluable.”

He grunted, waving a hand dismissively. “Don’t thank me yet. The path you’re choosing is not an easy one. I think you might be better going untrained than seeking Moonshifter out, especially after hunting him all these years.”

No, it wouldn’t be. But it was the only path we had.

Our next stop took us to a room filled with fragrant smoke and little in the way of furniture. Witse Dagovy greeted us, her long brown hair cascading down her back, her presence serene and otherworldly.

Kneeling on mats of woven reeds, we drank a tiny cup of pale tea before she set it down on the table and gazed at Benedetto

directly,

“I cannot aid you in your quest. I would suggest you cherish your brother as he is and not seek out a Sorcerer. Doom lies that road, and loss.”

Benedetto tensed. “You’ve seen this?”

“Yes.”

He rose and bowed to her. “I thank you for the time you’ve given us, and the warning. Absent gods keep you.”

Benedetto walked beside me, alternating between a frown and a lighter expression. I felt the same. We had solid information, but the warning preyed on my mind.

What loss? Whose doom?

As we approached the villa, Benedetto’s demeanor changed. The brooding expression became determined. He turned to me, his brown eyes serious.

“We did it,” he said. “We finally have a real lead. I can almost taste it, this might be the end of the hunt for Moonshifter, if we can get away from the political intrigue. But I don’t know if you should go with me.”

My heart swelled at the evidence of his concern. Warmth spread through my chest. “We can discuss that later. Once we’ve both had time to consider.”

There was no way I would let him leave me, but I didn’t have to say it outright.

A servant rushed out to meet us on the street, tears streaming down her face. She collapsed to her knees before us, her body wracked with sobs. “Th-they...took them. The men, they—” Her words dissolved into incoherent wails.

My heart seized in my chest. No.

I pulled her to her feet. “Who?”

Benedetto picked her up and hustled into the villa, giving us privacy.

More servants emerged in the foyer, their faces etched with worry and fear. One stepped forward, his hands trembling. “My lady, armed men broke in. They had swords and—and some sort of magic. Mistress Sofia tried to stop them, but her magic failed. They took Lady Rose and Mistress Sofia.”

The world spun around me. This couldn’t be happening. My worst fears realized. My knees buckled, the ground rushing up to meet me.

Strong arms caught me, holding me upright. Benedetto. His grip tightened around my waist as he barked orders at the servants. “Search the villa! Look for any clues they may have left behind. Ready my armor and the guards!”

I clung to him, my face buried against his chest. Sobs tore from my throat. My sweet sister. In the hands of our enemies, be it my father or Vivaldo. And Sofia...she’d protected us for so long. Now she was gone too.

Benedetto’s hand cupped the back of my head, his fingers tangling in my hair. “We’ll find them. I swear it. No matter what it takes, we will bring them home.”

His words reached me through the haze of panic. I lifted my head, meeting his gaze. The fierce determination in his eyes steadied me. He was right. We would act.

Weeping didn’t help Rose or Sofia.

I sucked in a shuddering breath and nodded, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. “Yes. We have to figure out who did this. Why they took them.”

One of the servants ran back and slipped a note into my hand when Benedetto heard for his room to don his armor. I stuck it in my pocket. The look on the servant’s face told me clearly this was meant to be private.

Had the attackers ordered the note be given in private? Had the servant been paid and betrayed us?

“How did you get this?” I asked softly.

Equally quiet, he responded, “The attackers gave it to me and said the Lady Rose would be scarred in the face if I didn’t slip

it to you quietly.”

When I opened it in the privacy of my chambers, leaning against the shut, I snarled.

*Your sister for his life. I'm  
watching.*

—V

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# LUNA

THE TRAVEL CLOAK'S FABRIC BRUSHED MY FINGERS AS I grabbed it and quickly donned the sturdy leather boots. Pip watched me intently from his perch on the table's edge, as if sensing my intent. I twisted my hair up into the scarlet veil, concealing it. Several small blades joined my fans, tucked discreetly into my bodice and sleeves.

I could do this.

I couldn't risk telling anyone, not even Benedetto. Rose and Sofia's lives depended on my silence and swift action.

I had just finished pulling on my boots when Benedetto stepped into the room, his arms crossed, and a deep frown etched on his face. "Going somewhere?"

He was deceptively calm, but his narrowed eyes told me he was angry.

I straightened, looking at him without flinching. "Yes."

"Where?"

I paused.

Leaning back against the wall, Benedetto said conversationally, "You were passed a note. The threat's apparently great enough that you're going to run out like a little rabbit. Did all your hunting instincts drop out the back of your head?"

"If I tell you, they die."

“Then don’t tell me.” Benedetto’s frown deepened. “You think you’re going alone, my vixen? No, you’re not.” His voice hardened. “It’s too dangerous. You don’t even know where Vivaldo has hidden them.”

Frustration bubbled up inside me. “So I should just sit here and do nothing? You don’t get to decide what I do.”

Benedetto clenched his fists, his jaw tight. “Damn it, Luna. Do you have any idea how reckless you’re being? You could get yourself killed.”

He thought I was incapable. *I’ll show him just how wrong he is.* I brushed past him toward the door. Benedetto reached out to grab my arm, but I twisted away, shooting him a defiant glare.

“Don’t,” I said. “I’m going, with or without you.”

Benedetto exhaled sharply through his nose, clearly struggling to reign in his temper. After a long, tense moment, he said, “Wait. Just...wait.”

I glanced back at him warily. Benedetto ran a hand through his hair, the anger in his expression giving way to cold consideration.

“You can go with me,” he said grudgingly after a long moment. “But we’re taking guards. And I call the shots. Or I exercise my husbandly rights and tie you to the bed.”

I glared at him but gave a curt nod. “Fine. But don’t think for a second that I’ll follow orders I don’t agree with.”

Benedetto muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like “as usual”.

The door swung open, and Vala glided in, an amused smile playing about her lips.

“You two are so entertaining,” she said, smooth as silk. “I couldn’t help but overhear your little discussion.”

My spine stiffened. I didn’t trust Vala, after all I’d found out. She played her own game, and I didn’t know if our goals aligned in this case.

Though she needed to keep me alive until after an heir was born. The thought was cold comfort.

She strolled to the window, gazing out with a serene smile.

“If you’re looking for Sofia and Rose, there’s a manor house owned by Vivaldo. A secret little estate he thinks no one knows about.” She glanced back at us. “He probably has them there.”

They’d been gone for hours. “And you’re just telling us this *now*?”

Vala shrugged, a smile tugging at her lips. “I thought you might enjoy the challenge. Besides, I’m curious to see if you remember your lessons.”

Benedetto stepped forward. “What’s in it for you?”

Vala’s smile widened, showing white teeth. “Let’s just say I have the same vested interest as you do in seeing Vivaldo *displaced*. You’re welcome.”

Unease prickled along my skin at the implication behind her words.

Benedetto’s scowl deepened, but he didn’t argue further, simply jerked his head toward the door. “Let’s get moving.”

I hesitated, searching Vala’s face for any hint of her true intentions. But her expression remained an exquisite mask, betraying nothing. With a frustrated huff, I hurried after Benedetto.

He stood beside his horse, his jaw clenched, and eyes hardened with a determined focus. Several guards were already mounted as well. None of them wore their uniforms, and Benedetto wore unfamiliar armor. Instead of a disciplined troop, they appeared to be poor mercenaries or even bandits

I swung myself up into the saddle, the leather creaking beneath me. As we rode out through the gates, a small weight settled onto my shoulders. Pip perched there, his opal eyes meeting mine. His presence was a small comfort amidst the swirling worry and fear knotting my gut.



This wasn't just about saving Sofia and Rose. I took comfort in the fact Benedetto the stubborn had yielded me the point, and I wondered if that would be enough if his presence got my sister killed.

The clip-clop of hooves against cobblestones filled the air as our group split up to meet at a rendezvous point outside the gates, in the countryside. As I rode with a single companion, the neat rows of buildings gave way to rolling hills and sparse woods.

A few miles from the city we met as a group again and rode hard for our destination. As we neared Vivaldo's estate, the fears congealed in my stomach, growing heavier with each passing moment.

The manor came into view, a large stone structure partially concealed by dense trees, both grand and ominous.

Benedetto raised a gloved hand, signaling for the guards to halt. "Dismount. This is the diversion; try to draw a response out so I and the lady can slip in."

I slid from my horse, my boots hitting the ground with a soft thud, and surveyed our surroundings, one hand holding my fan.

Benedetto and I approached the wall as the troop headed for the gate.

As the troop drew near the wrought-iron gates of the manor, a group of armed men emerged from the shadows, blocking their path. Their faces were grim, their stances aggressive.

My muscles tensed, ready to move.

Benedetto cupped his hands and nodded at the wall. I put my foot in his hands, and he shoved up.

With the boost, my fingertips caught the edge of the wall and I pulled myself up, Benedetto right behind me.

We hopped down, and the plan was for us to pincer the troop. Benedetto headed in that direction.

I headed for the house. Sprinting, I reached the manor's entrance. Nothing else mattered but finding Sofia and Rose.

My heart pounded in my ears as I slipped through the heavy wooden doors, scanning the dimly lit interior for any sign of my sister and tutor.

I raced through the halls, my footsteps quiet on the rugs covering the marble floors.

Where were they? I had to find them before it was too late.

Dim candlelight outlined a curtain covering a door down the hall on the second floor. I paused and strained to hear any sounds.

Rose's voice, too low to make words out.

I ran down the hall and through the curtain, my fans at the ready.

As my foot crossed the threshold, Rose gasped, "No!"

Agonizing bands of silver magic wrapped me from head to foot, burning with cold fire. Memories of the worst of my father's beating flooded my mind, my mouth filling with the memory of blood.

My magic flexed against it, devouring, but the spell still entrapped me. There was too much power in it for my magic to dispel.

All in the space of a moment, then the spell vanished as if it had never been and I dropped to my knees, shaking.

Rose and Sofia dropped to their knees at my side, Sofia's rose perfume wrapping around me and easing the shock.

"What was that?" I murmured.

Sofia rested her hand on my forehead. That trap spell had been hers, and my magic fought her as she poured healing onto me. She'd never demonstrated that she was that strong, ever.

"Sofia set a spell to catch the man who kidnapped us. He was supposed to be the next who came through the curtain."

"My contract is to protect Rose," Sofia said softly. "I've pushed its limits for you two in the past, but this I could safely do. Slaughtering the guards wholesale when I didn't know what they intended would have been beyond the limits."

She could slaughter the guards?

“But if you’re here, it’s best we leave. A pity. Ending Vivaldo would solve a number of problems. But Rose is no longer in direct threat, so my hands are tied.” Sofia rose.

I sat up and watched as she gathered her knitting from an armchair. Rose joined her, picking up a workbasket and a swath of embroidered cloth.

“What was threatened?” I asked.

“Mutilation. Death. For both of us, but the threat to Rose was greater.” Sofia was still calm, as though I’d unexpectedly shown up for a bit of tea.

Rose’s hands were shaking, but she was mimicking Sofia. Good. She could have all the hysterics in the world once she was safe and away from here.

“Is Vivaldo here?”

Sofia chuckled, as though reading my thoughts. “He is a fool,” she said with amusement. “And yes, he is present. A pity if some accident were to befall him.”

Rose nodded in agreement. “We’ve been biding our time, waiting for the right moment to deal with him and make sure you were safe too. But we should go now.”

I stared at them in shock. I’d never heard Rose sound so cold blooded, or Sofia so... dangerous.

Rising, my muscles still quivered with the memory of pain, but Sofia had healed the injuries her spell had inflicted. Again, overcoming my magic. Something to consider for my and Benedetto’s conflict with Moonshifter.

“You two are going to be the death of me,” I said, but I couldn’t keep the fondness from my voice. “Let’s go.”

As we made our way through the manor’s winding corridors, the distant sounds of clashing swords and shouted commands echoed through the halls. I could hear Benedetto, strong and steady, as he directed our guards in the ongoing fight.

I glanced at Sofia and Rose. “We need to get you out of here. Benedetto and the others can only hold them off for so long.”

Sofia nodded, her expression darkening. “Let’s go, Rose.”

Vivaldi was in this house, though apparently ignoring the fight. Why? I needed to know for the future of all of us. If I could search here and now, I might be able to find Vivaldo and put an end to this once and for all.

I turned to Sofia and Rose, my mind made up. “You two go out the front,” I said. “I have something I need to take care of.”

Sofia’s eyes narrowed, and for a moment, I thought she might argue. But then understanding flickered across her face. “Be careful.”

I gave her a tight smile, then slipped back down the hall. This was my chance. My chance to be more than just a pawn in someone else’s political game, be it Vala or Vivaldo.

The halls of the manor were eerily quiet as I drifted forward, light footed on wooden floors, my senses on high alert. I paused at each doorway, straining to hear any signs of light, movement or conversation. The next floor up, toward the back of the manor, I heard the faint scratching of a quill on parchment and a glimmer of candlelight coming from a room at the end of the corridor.

This room was far enough away from the fighting that I couldn’t hear it anymore. And presumably neither could Vivaldo.

That was why, though it was stupid of his staff to have not informed her. Or he had given orders not to be disturbed and they were being obeyed to the letter.

There were people who flogged their servants for disobedience in Kalion.

I approached cautiously the room, fan half open and in hand. As I drew closer, I could make out a familiar voice humming, with the occasional snatches sung of a popular ballad.

A pleasant singing voice wasn't something I would have associated with Vivaldo, but life was full of surprises. He sounded calm, almost bored, as if he hadn't just orchestrated the kidnapping of my sister and tutor and tried to force me to kill my husband.

Threatened by sister with death.

I pushed open the door. Vivaldo was seated at a large oak desk, a stack of papers spread out before him. He glanced up as I entered, a momentary surprised expression replaced by a superior smirk.

"Ah, Luna. You do credit to your mother-in-law's training," He rose to his feet. "I wondered how long it would take you to get here. Be aware that your sister will die if I don't call off my dogs, and not all of them are in this house."

"Dead gods take you," I replied coldly.

Vivaldo chuckled, walking around the desk to face me. "Now, now, Luna. Is that any way for a well born woman to talk? Has Benedetto not schooled you, even if his mother failed? Perhaps I should take over your training. I'll be head of the imperial clans soon, and even a distant relative like you should be a credit to the house."

My grip tightened on my fan. "I'm not here to discuss manners or training, Vivaldo."

He sneered, his eyes flashing with malice. "You're out of your depth, little girl. You've no idea of the forces you're meddling with."

Vivaldo raised his hands, darkness twisting and looping around them. Something to blind, or an illusions. He was taking his time, too, certain he could overcome me.

Absent gods take him. I couldn't let him win. Not this time.

Sofia had overcome me, yes, but she was the trained apprentice of a sorcerer, and I was surprised. Vivaldo might have talent, but my gift was strong, too. Sofia had told me that many times.

Instinctively, I reached for my own magic, feeling the familiar embrace of the dark moon's power as it surrounded me.

I focused on Vivaldo, willing the cloud to reach out, envelope him, and consume his magic.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, my magic surged out, a cloud around both of us.

He cursed, stumbling back next to the desk, but the greedy shreds of mist clung to him, siphoning away his power.

The spell shriveled and vanished.

Vivaldo's eyes showed the whites all around the iris, his face sweaty, grimacing with the pain of backlash from an uncompleted spell.

Before he could react, I lunged forward, my leg snapping out in a swift kick to his chest. His head snapped back, his body crashing into the desk and sending papers flying.

I followed up, the edge of my fan to his throat, my other elbow pinning his chest.

Staring down at him, my chest heaving, a grim sense of satisfaction washed over me. "Let's discuss threats of death and maiming now, cousin."

Vivaldo glared up at me, his face contorted with rage. But beneath the anger, I could see a flicker of fear in his quick breathing and the way he lay very still. He knew, in that moment, that he had underestimated me. That I was more than just a pawn to be played with.

I leaned forward, my face inches from his. "You're going to leave Kalion, and never come back. Do you understand?"

Vivaldo's jaw clenched.

I let the pressure of the fan's weight draw a line of blood across his throat.

Then he nodded, defeat etched across his features.

I straightened warily, keeping the fan close to his throat.

Winning for the moment, yes. But he'd be back. I'd bought us time that Benedetto couldn't. Me, a woman, retrieving my sister had a justification and a perceived disadvantage that my husband did not. If this story got out, Vivaldo would be mocked, and that would be deadly to his chance to rule.

"You're out of your depth," I hissed. "Leave Kalion within a week, or Vala will hear all the details. You'll be a laughingstock across Dimare."

Benedetto burst into the room, his sword drawn and ready. He took in the scene. Vivaldo lying half on the floor, me threatening him with the fan's razor edge.

A flicker of surprise crossed his face before he schooled his features into a stern mask.

"My wife, what terms did you negotiate?"

"He leaves Kalion within seven days."

"She's being generous," Benedetto said coldly as he leveled his blade at Vivaldo. "If I find you here after the deadline, you'll wish you'd taken her advice."

I took a step back, removing the fan, ready to slash if he tried to grab me.

"Fine," Vivaldi snarled, scrambling to his feet. "I'll leave. You'll regret this, cousin."

Benedetto raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Not as much as you will if you don't keep your bargain."

We exited the room, leaving Vivaldo there.

As the adrenaline faded, a new worry crept in. What would Benedetto think of me now? He'd seen me fight, yes, but this was a different level of involvement in conflicts.

I chanced a glance at him, trying to gauge his reaction.

"We should go." He sheathed his sword. "Before he reconsiders and decides to come back with reinforcements."

I brushed past Benedetto and hurried down the steps. Outside, the cool night air cooled my skin, sweaty with exertion.

As soon as I left the building, Benedetto caught up with me, speaking quietly but forcefully. “What the hell were you thinking, going in alone? You could have gotten yourself killed.”

I shrugged. “I didn’t, did I? Besides, it was quicker.”

Benedetto pinched the bridge of his nose, exhaling sharply. I could see the tension in his jaw, the way his shoulders were rigid with barely contained anger. But beneath that, there was something else. Worry, perhaps? Or maybe just frustration at my stubbornness.

“We’ll stay in town for another week,” he muttered. “Make sure Vivaldo actually leaves.”

I couldn’t help but beam at him with a sudden rush of affection. “You do care.” I leaned closer.

Benedetto scowled, but I caught the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

As we walked toward the waiting horses, he muttered something under his breath about vixens and trouble.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# BENEDETTO

WITH LUNA AND ROSE SAFE AT THE VILLA WITH MORE guards, my mother a guest at the palace, and Sofia near Rose, I felt safe to leave. I needed to move, to think.

I walked to the Volonta, near the bridge, and stared over the water, in the direction it flowed toward the ocean.

Above, the sky shone a brilliant blue, the sunlight casting a golden haze over red and green tiled rooftops.

How would I handle the journey? With my mother in town, the political threat had lessened.

We had a solid lead. One day into the pass, turn left at the blasted oak, and follow the second game trail. *Moonshifter will finally be within reach.*

This could end Francesco's long torment, freeing both of us. The end of this Void blasted half-life. From my previous travels, it would take me and Luna five weeks to reach the base of the Renhos Mountains, and another six days to navigate to the Ygris Pass. The terrain would be rough. Steep trails, dense forest, and the threat of snow even in early summer.

It'd be grueling. Could Luna handle it? Even if it were best for her, I didn't want to leave her here. The realization hit me like a punch to the gut. Since when did I enjoy someone's company like this?

To distract myself, I headed for the merchant district. While the servants would provide food, I preferred to get my own medicinal herbs in case of injury.

Passed a jeweler's stall, a whim to see if any of the wares would suit my wife struck me. She's always worn the jewelry of our clan, not any she'd been given by me.

A strand of moonstones color of her eyes caught my attention. After a moment's consideration I moved on, trailing the nervous apprentice minding the counter, and pointed at a pair of delicate opal earrings.

He pulled them out. Catching the light, the stones shimmered with flecks of blue and green and veins of fiery red.

A cool exterior with a fiery inside, like her.

"How much for these?" I asked.

The jeweler bustled out and beamed at me. "A fine choice, my lord. Look at the fire in those! They come from the Yeflad islands, the only place where you can get quality like this. Very large, rare stones. For you, a fair price, twenty gold coins."

Twenty gold coins for a pair of earrings? Dead gods waking, he was overcharging me.

He eyed me nervously, but I found I didn't care about being overcharged. Luna would love them.

On the other hand, it went against the grain to not haggle at all.

I raised my brows. "It would be a fair price if I took the moonstone necklace as well and offered fifteen."

The man laughed outright. "Overly fair! But I will throw the necklace in as a gift to a man who appreciates fine things for the twenty the earrings cost."

"Done." I counted out the coin and put them wrapped in a twist of cloth into my inner vest.

Back at the villa, I signaled the servant not to announce me and found Luna in the garden, once again drinking tea and sitting on the low stone bench beneath a blooming magnolia tree with Pip.

The drake was curled in her lap, and its eyes were quite close to the stones in the earrings in both shape and color. The scene

was peaceful, almost idyllic, and I softened as I approached her.

“I have something for you.” I tried to sound casual, and the words came out clipped.

Luna looked up, curious. “Oh? What is it?”

I pulled out the small velvet pouch and handed it to her. She opened it carefully, eyes widening when she saw the earrings and the necklace.

“Benedetto!” She lifted them out to examine them in the light. The stones caught the rays of the sun, shimmering with an iridescent glow. The necklace glowed softly, grey as mist.

“They’re beautiful,” she breathed.

The look on her face was worth every moment of doubt on the way to the villa. She was happy.

As Luna admired the earrings, I noticed the red veil twisted into her braided hair, a piece of delicate silk she often wore. I’d seen it many times but never asked about it before.

“You wear that veil often,” I said. “Why is it so special to you?”

Her smile faded slightly, and she looked down, running a finger along the stones of the necklace.

“It was my mother’s,” she said after a moment. “The only thing I have left of her. She wore it on her wedding day. A few years after she died, my father decided to destroy all her remaining possessions. My stepmother hid it and gave it to me when I was old enough to understand I needed to keep it hidden.”

Her mother’s veil. She had carried that piece of her past with her all this time. Luna was a woman who didn’t forget those she loved.

I reached out, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “It suits you. You look beautiful with it, and with these.”

I took the earrings from her hand and carefully clipped them to her ears. My fingers lingered on her skin, the warmth of her

presence drawing me in. She looked up at me, a warm smile on her lips, and for a moment, the world stopped.

In that moment, my attachment to her crashed down on me like a wave in a storm. I wanted her, not just as a companion on this quest, but as someone I could protect and cherish. The thought terrified me.

She was another I could lose. Who could destroy me if I lost her, as my brother had come close to doing.

I stepped back, clearing my throat. "The journey is going to be a long one."

She looked up at me, her eyes shining with happiness. "Thank you for this," she said. "This means much to me."

"You deserve it," I said, fumbling for words. "You deserve more than I've given you."

When had this happened? When had I started caring so void blasted much?

Luna stood up slowly, stepping closer to me. She placed a hand on my chest, and I felt the rapid beat of my heart beneath her palm.

The silence stretched as she searched my face, looking for something.

I didn't respond with words. Instead, I pulled her into a fierce kiss, my hands threading through her hair as I deepened the kiss. It was rough and desperate at first, a culmination of all the tension that had been building between us. But then it softened, turning into something tender and almost reverent.

I poured every ounce of the feelings I couldn't express into that kiss, hoping she could sense the depth of my affection. Her lips parted, and she melted into me, her body molding perfectly against mine.

When we finally broke apart, both of us were breathless. I rested my forehead against hers, my eyes closed as I savored the moment. "Luna I..."

The words caught in my throat, but she seemed to understand. She placed a finger on my lips, silencing me. "I know," she

said. "I feel it, too."

I didn't need to say the words. She knew and shared the connection.

Pulling her closer, I buried my face in her silken hair. The scent of her, the feel of her in my arms, it was almost too much. But I couldn't let her go, not now, not ever.

"Let's go on this journey together," I whispered against her hair. "We'll face whatever comes our way, and we'll make it back to each other."

She sighed, moving closer still. "I think that might be the best thing that could ever happen to me."

I began to unlace her dress slowly, reverently, but when she looked up at me with her big, expressive eyes, I couldn't hold myself back.

I pulled her closer, my lips finding hers again in a hungry, passionate kiss. Sliding my knife from its sheath behind my back, I wrapped it around her back and sliced through her laces. I needed her naked, now. Damn the gardens or anyone who might walk into them. Pulling back, I grabbed the front of her dress and yanked, the laces giving way as she cried out.

The dress fell to her ankles revealing her delicate underclothes, but with a feral grin, I slid my knife, dull side against her breast, under them and sliced downward, careful that not a nick would mar her milky skin.

And then, I was lost. Her breasts bounced slightly as she shivered. "Your scent, it drives me mad," I growled into the crook of her neck. "It's like sweet honey and warm spice."

She moaned softly, arching into my touch. "Then inhale deeply," she said.

Tearing my mouth away from her skin, I stared at her breasts, one in each hand now. They were perfect, with rosy areolas and small, knotty nipples that stood straight up in the cool air. Moaning at the sight, I took one into my mouth, sucking hard as I swirled my tongue around it.

Her hands found their way into my hair, and she held onto me as I nipped at her flesh.

She pulled away suddenly, taking my head in her hands, turning it to kiss me deeply. Her tongue tangled with mine as our bodies pressed together. Luna straddled me then, moaning against my mouth as she ground herself against my growing erection. Her hand found the bulge in my pants, and she growled in approval. "Impatient," she whispered against my skin, her breath hot on my neck.

She pulled back slightly to untie my pants, and I let out a shaky breath. My cock sprang free as she grinned wickedly at me. She looked up at me and grinned before taking it into her mouth. With one smooth motion, she sat down on it, taking him all the way into her throat. It was too much, too fast.

Her lips and tongue worked together perfectly, sending tremors of pleasure through me that made me forget everything but the feel of her mouth around me.

I slid one hand along her spine to cup her neck and pulled her closer, feeling the warmth of her body against mine as we rocked together. Her moans filled the air as I began to thrust up into her mouth, hips undulating with each stroke. This woman was going to be the death of me, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

When I felt myself about to explode in her mouth, I pulled back abruptly, only to slam into her warmth once more before exploding into her throat with a growl. She swallowed every last drop greedily, stilling my hips with an iron grip when I tried to pull away.

Panting heavily, I slipped back onto the bench beneath us, pulling her down with me so that she was straddling me once more. "I missed you," I groaned against her neck. "I didn't realize how much."

With a roar, I lifted her off of my lap and plunked her feet on the ground. After unfastening it at the neck, I spread my cloak along the grass and grinned up at Luna. "Your turn."

It didn't take much to pull her slight frame down to the ground. None too gently, I pushed her knees apart and leaned forward, kissing her inner thighs and teasing her with soft bites.

"Benedetto," she moaned, clutching the grass around her, "Must you?"

Smirking against her skin, I nodded, and parted her folds, breathing in the scent of arousal that clung to her.

"Yes," I growled before plunging my tongue into her slick heat.

She cried out as I lapped at her, nibbling lightly on her clit while thrusting two fingers inside of her. The taste of her was like nothing else; sweet and tangy and intoxicating. She smelled like wildflowers and sex when I pulled away, looking up at her with hooded eyes.

"I'm going to make you come so hard you won't be able to see straight."

Her eyes were heavy-lidded and full of desire.

I grinned, pulling my fingers from inside of her and pressing them against her lips. "Suck," I commanded, watching as she obediently sucked them clean of her essence. "That's it."

Then I dove back in again, licking and sucking on her folds as I slid my fingers deeper inside of her. She moaned into my ear "More..."

As much as I wanted to give it to her, I had other plans. Standing up swiftly, I pulled her to her feet and turned us both so that she was pressed against the trunk of the tree. With one swift movement, I replaced my fingers with my aching cock as it rubbed against her entrance.

"Ready for me?" I growled down at her through gritted teeth.

She jerked her hips forward, and I slipped into her inch by sweet inch. She gasped as I filled her completely, and I moaned at the feel of her tight walls squeezing me. Her sheer passion made me shudder.

Her legs wrapped around my waist, and she began to move against me as we swayed to an unheard rhythm. The world fell away as we lost ourselves in the heat of the moment.

Soon, it was too much. My hips pistoned faster, harder as I plunged deeper into her wet warmth with each thrust. Her nails dug into my shoulders, leaving red marks that would later fade but serve as a reminder of this moment.

I couldn't hold back any longer; every muscle tensed as I came with a roar, filling her with my seed as she cried out her orgasm. We stayed like that for long moments, our bodies still joined. Then she pulled away slowly, leaving a trail of sticky fluid between us.

Luna looked up at me through her lashes, a small smile on her lips as she wiped them clean with the back of her hand. "I love you," she said quietly. "I have for a long time."

I couldn't form words to respond, so I kissed her again instead. Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes as I held her close. We had found each other in this chaos of a world, and it was perfect.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

# BENEDETTO

LUNA'S SOFT SKIN PRESSED AGAINST MINE AS WE LAY TANGLED in the sheets, our breath slowly returning to normal. Her head rested on my chest, her fine dark red hair spilling in waves over both of us. I wrapped an arm around her, rolling until she was sprawled on top of me, and pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

"Maybe there's a place, a life beyond revenge," I said.

For a moment, a future not driven by the need for vengeance unfolded before me.

Luna smiled down at me, before she pillowed her head on my chest. "I hope we find that place."

Her careful words sparked hope in the shadows of my mind.

An hour later, I sat on the edge of my bed, watching Luna as she dozed peacefully. Without the fierce spirit that drove her, she looked fragile, almost delicate. My chest tightened with an unfamiliar ache, a mix of comfort, love, and worry for her.

I didn't want to leave. My hand brushed against her cheek lightly, savoring the warmth of her skin.

But if she cared for me, she wanted the man I was. And I had been forged in duty and revenge. There was no escaping either.

Francesco needed me to save him from the darkness that consumed his mind. I needed to see him again before Luna and I left Kalion behind.

As I rose from the bed, Luna stirred, reaching for me with a sleepy murmur. I leaned down and kissed her forehead softly.

“I’ll be back soon.” I pulled the blankets over her shoulders. She smiled faintly and nestled deeper into the soft fabric, her breath evening out once more.

I returned to my room. I’d read the book from cover to cover with no ill effects, though I also didn’t understand most of it. I went to the chest, opened it, and unfolded the silk to find it gone.

There were no words foul enough to summarize my feelings.

When I spoke with the major domo, the older man mentioned one of the maidservants had gone missing yesterday. Much help that would be to me. Tracking down the book in Kalion would make finding a needle in a haystack a simple matter.

No matter. The book’s loss would not change my actions.

The memory of Francesco’s haunted eyes and frantic words awoke old pain as I stepped out into the hallway, leaving the warmth and comfort of Luna’s embrace behind.

At the door, I pulled on my gloves, the supple leather sliding over my fingers like a second skin. Settling my cloak around my shoulders, the heavy fabric against my back like a shield, I strode out.

The courtyard was quiet as I stepped outside, the crisp early-morning air nipping at my exposed skin. The cobblestones gleamed with dew, and the sound of the carts heading to the morning market echoed off the walls. I set a good pace, heading for the asylum.

As I strode through the streets of Kalion, the city came alive around me. Vendors began to set out their wares as the sun rose, their voices rising in conversation. Children darted between the stalls, their laughter rising and falling like a tide.

I kept my mind fixed ahead, the noise fading to a dull hum in my mind. How many times had I made this trip over the years? The familiar weight of dread settled in my chest as I rode, the pouch of coins at my belt a reminder to pay for better treatment for Francesco.

As I walked, the scent of the sea mingled with the aromas of spices and prepared food from the markets.

Francesco's ravings the last time we spoke echoed in my mind, his warnings of Ruin, of a wolf and a vixen, of the need to stop 'her'. I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts.

The river flowed below me as I crossed Deadbridge. There hadn't been any executions recently, so the few criminal's bodies still hanging in cages were stripped of flesh.

I slowed my pace as the gate came into sight, its dark grey walls stark against the pale morning sky. The verdigris covered bronze gate creaked as I approached.

It always looked the same. Shadowed, as if it were alive and feeding off the despair inside.

Opening at the gate, I crossed the newly mown lawn to the door and rapped with the brass knocker. A few moments later the attendant opened the door.

"My lord, the chief physician isn't here today," the youth said.

"I know my way," I replied, stepping in and heading for the stairs.

I stepped toward the heavy wooden doors, taking a deep breath to brace myself. The doors swung open with a groan, revealing the dimly lit interior of the sanitarium.

The smell of damp was stronger than the last time I visited. Another attendant ran to catch up with me, the keys on his belt jingling.

We stopped outside Francesco's door and the attendant turned to face me. "He's had some bad days this past week."

I reached into my pouch and pressed a handful of coins into his palm. The attendant's fingers closed around the money, and he slipped it into his pocket without a word. He unlocked the door and stepped aside, allowing me to enter.

The room was still clean though the walls were covered with Francesco's writings. From the color, some of it was in blood. It showed smears where they'd tried to clean it off, but Francesco had overwritten their efforts.

The scent of blood and lavender mixed in the air in a nauseating brew.

Huddled in the corner, away from the bolted down furniture, Francesco sat with his knees tucked to his chest.

My brother's gaunt frame was hunched over, his fingers nervously tugging at the hem of his tattered robe. His arms were striped with deep scratches where he'd drawn blood, and his clothing was stained by it.

He stared at me, eyes wide and wild.

"Francesco." I approached him with cautious steps. "It's me. It's Benedetto."

For a fleeting moment, a flicker of recognition danced across my brother's face, and I dared to hope that today might be better for him. But as quickly as it appeared, the spark of lucidity vanished, replaced by a manic glint that sent a chill of worry down my spine.

"Bene," Francesco said with fear and urgency. "You shouldn't have come. She'll find you. She'll find all of you."

I crouched down before him, gently laying my hand on one of his. The fingers felt so fragile, like they might shatter at the slightest touch. "Who, Francesco? Who will find us?"

My brother looked around the room, as if searching for hidden threats in the shadows. "The wolf." He rocked back and forth. "The wolf always watches. She's there, in the shadows. Waiting. Hungry."

I gripped his hand, trying to ground him in the present. "Francesco, look at me. Who is the wolf? Who is she?"

Francesco's eyes met mine, and for a moment, I saw a flicker of the old him, my brilliant, cunning brother.

"The wolf," he whispered conspiratorially. "And the vixen. They think they're safe, but she'll tear them apart. She'll devour them."

My heart raced as I tried to make sense of his cryptic words. "Who will she devour, Francesco?"

Did he mean Luna?

Suddenly, my brother's voice rose to a fevered pitch, his words spilling out in a frantic torrent. "She's coming for her, Bene. The little fox. Your little fox. She'll bleed, and you'll watch. You'll watch, and you won't be able to stop it."

Ice flooded my veins. I squeezed both Francesco's hands. "Are you talking about Luna? Is she in danger?"

Francesco's expression contorted into a grimace, and he wrenched himself away from me, cowering by his bed.

"Always in danger," he said, his words muffled by his knees. "Always too late. Too late to save anyone."

I stared at my brother, my mind reeling from his dire warnings. Luna, my bright flame, my little fox, my, what danger did he see? Was it real?

The thought of any harm coming to her made my blood run cold.

I needed answers, but I would find none here. Francesco's mind was lost to the abyss, his lucid moments fleeting and far between.

With a heavy heart, I rose to my feet, lingering on my brother's pitiful form. "I'll be back. I swear it."

Francesco didn't respond, lost in the labyrinth of his own fractured mind.

I turned away, my steps leaden as I made my way into the hall. The attendant waited outside, his face worried.

"We've tried..."

I handed him the pouch of coin. "Keep trying."

As I stepped out into the corridor, the weight of Francesco's words settled upon my shoulders like a leaden cloak. He'd had a small gift for divination, foresight, before he went mad. He'd struggled to warn me. I'd listen to him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

# LUNA

BENEDETTO WAS GONE WHEN I WOKE.

I sought out Rose and Sofia, who were already awake and in the midst of a lesson.

I waited until Sofia paused. Then I said, “If my sorceress-to-be sister is amenable, and you as well, I thought we could indulge in the purely normal activity of shopping today. I have to be leaving soon, and I want to stock up on supplies that I’ve chosen, rather than trusting someone else to pick.”

Rose and Sofia readily agreed, their laughter mingling as we set for the market district of Kalion, two guards trailing discreetly behind us.

The air was heavy with a coming storm, clouds scudding across the sky. We hurried to the market, veils and clothing tossing in the gusting winds. The cobbles were slick with rain from earlier in the day, and we dodged puddles as we walked in an intricate dance with all the other people on the street.

Rose darted into a shop to admire a display of delicate glass figurines. For just this moment, everything felt normal. Peaceful, even.

The casual set of Sofia’s shoulders made me relax a little. Maybe we were safe here. At least for the moment. As safe as we could be in this life.

“Look at these.” Rose held up a pair of painted glass birds. “Aren’t they lovely?”

I laughed, reaching out to touch one gently. “They’re beautiful. You have an eye for pretty things.”

The peaceful moment shattered as a tall, broad-shouldered figure stepped into the shop, blocking the door. A familiar chill of dread crawled up my spine as I turned to meet the cold, furious gaze of our father, Emiliano. *No. Not here. Not now.*

The relaxed atmosphere of the day vanished. Emiliano stepped closer, sneering.

“Look who’s pretending to be a lady of the court. And your little sister, too. How quaint.”

Rose instinctively moved nearer to me, trembling, her expression fearful. “Father.”

The shopkeeper had vanished, probably sensing a fight between noble families, where he and all he owned could be crushed.

The guards, as was normal, had remained outside the shop, probably hindered now by Emiliano’s men.

He’d cornered us on purpose.

Anger flared alongside my fear. “What do you want?”

I moved in front of Rose, shielding her from his gaze.

Emiliano’s lips curled into a cruel smile. “I’ve come to collect my property and deliver it to its new owner. Remember your place and hers, Luna. My daughter is mine to give to whom *I* want. And no pervert, a woman who wants to be a man, will stop me.”

He twisted around me and grabbed Rose’s arm, yanking her forward. She let out a small cry of pain, and I saw red.

“Let her go,” I snarled. He had no rights if he were dead, and I’d live with the stain of kinslaying on my reputation and soul.

Pip leaped from my shoulder with a hiss, landing on Emiliano’s arm. The drake snapped at his face, drawing blood just below his eye. Emiliano cursed, slapping Pip away as he released Rose.

“Void blast and rot you,” he said, clutching his bleeding cheek. The very air cringed from the force of his oath. “Stupid bitch! That drake has a taste for forbidden magic, does it?”

Let him bleed. Let him feel some of the pain he’d caused us. I’d make him bleed more if needed.

He focused on me, blazing with fury. “The right is mine!”

Sofia watched, silent, as Rose retreated to huddle against her.

“Might makes right,” I said. “That’s your code, isn’t it? Strength is on my side right now. And you won’t take her to feed your own twisted ambitions?”

Emiliano’s face contorted with rage as he stepped forward again. “You insolent girl! You think you can defy me and get away with it? I am her father, and I will be obeyed!”

Never again. I’d never let him control me, control us, again.

I unfurled my fan. “I am not your property. I won’t give you Rose. One more step and you bleed more.”

Could I really stand against him? Was I strong enough to protect Rose, to protect myself?

But looking at Rose’s frightened face, at the way she clung to Sofia... I had no choice.

Who had he sold her to? That enemy needed to be added to my list.

Emiliano raised his hand. The air around us chilled, magic flooded the shop. My own surged to consume it.

“You will know no restful sleep,” he whispered, pointing at Rose. “Not as long as you defy me. You will know nightmare and fear, until you honor your duty.”

The air sizzled with the tension of our magic clashing. I didn’t feel any get by me, but Rose gasped, clutching her head as if in sudden pain. “No! Luna, make it stop.”

My hands shook with fury.

“You think you’ve stopped me?” he said. “You have no idea what’s coming. I have powerful allies now. Vivaldo knows the



value of loyalty, unlike you. He's divorced his wife and agreed to take Rose."

I stared at him, stunned. "You're working with Vivaldo? You've aligned yourself with him?"

*And good thing he was out of Kalion for the foreseeable future.*

Emiliano's smile was sharp and cruel. "Why not? He's willing to help me regain the proper standing for my clan. He understands power, unlike that useless husband of yours. Do you imagine he could love an ugly skinny bitch like you? He's a fool and a madman."

This tangled the politics even more. If Father married Rose to Vivaldo's, then we needed to be even more careful to keep Rose free.

"Go away, Father," I said steadily despite the fear churning in my gut. "Know this, we will never stop fighting you. Rose will be free, no matter what you, or Vivaldo, or anyone else tries to do to us."

Emiliano bared his teeth in rage, but there was a flicker of unease on his face. He wasn't used to being challenged.

"You'll regret this," he said. "You'll regret ever defying me."

Sofia stepped forward, her expression icy. "Enough," she said. "You've made your point. But remember, part of my job is to guard Rose from threats. Up to this point, everything you have achieved has been within your rights as her father. Past this point, I will consider you a threat if you continue."

Emiliano glared at her. "You wouldn't dare."

Sofia stepped closer and smiled at him. "Try me."

I held my breath.

Emiliano clenched his jaw. For a long, tense moment, he stared at Sofia, the air thick with unspoken threats.

Then, a breeze swept through the shop, carrying with it the scent of roses and decay. It ruffled Emiliano's hair, tugging at his cloak, and he shivered.

I looked around me, trying to find its source. I would have thought Sofia, but it didn't have the texture of her magic.

Then he turned and stalked out of the shop, his guards surrounding him as he walked away.

He backed down. Relief washed over me in a dizzying wave. *Thank the absent gods.*

I let out a shaky breath, my knees suddenly weak. We did it. We stood up to him, and we won.

Rose sagged to the floor, her face pale and drawn. I joined her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, holding her close.

"It's okay." I pressed a kiss to her hair. "You're safe."

Sofia turned to us, her expression like stone, fingers flexing. "There are days that I wish that noninterference in discipline clause had not been written. Are you two all right?"

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. "We will be. Thank you. May the absent gods keep you."

She reached out to squeeze my hand. "No debts are owed between us, no thanks are needed. Let's go back to the villa."

The walk back was a blur, my mind still reeling from the confrontation with Father. Pip curled around my neck, his warm weight a comforting presence as his tail brushed against my cheek. But even his presence couldn't chase away the echoes of Father's cruel words.

*He called me a sneak, an ugly pervert with forbidden magic. He said no one loves me.* Even though I hated him, even though I knew he hated me, the words stung like salt in an open wound, and the old, familiar ache of insecurity rose in my chest.

Did Benedetto really care for me? The thought he might not made my throat tighten, and I swallowed hard, trying to push it away. But it lingered, insidious and relentless.

Since he'd visited his brother, Benedetto had been different. Distant. Quieter. He hadn't touched me the same way. Was it because he'd realized I wasn't good enough?

“Stop it.” I clenched my fists so tightly my nails bit into my palms. “You’re stronger than this. He chose you. He loves you... doesn’t he?”

*But what if he doesn’t? The thought slammed into me like a physical blow, the pain stealing the breath from my lungs. What if he’s only convinced himself to love me because I’m useful in his quest? Because I’m part of his plan?*

We reached the villa, and Rose headed straight for her room, her face still pale and drawn.

Sofia paused, her brow furrowed with concern. “Are you all right, Luna?”

I forced a smile, nodding. “I will be. I just need some time to myself.”

Sofia hesitated, looking like she wanted to say more. But she simply squeezed my shoulder before retreating down the hall after Rose.

And then I was alone, standing in the entryway as the shadows of the afternoon crept in around me. I hugged myself tightly as I sank down onto a bench. The thought wriggled in my head, intrusive. Shutting them out was impossible. *Maybe Father was right. Maybe no one really loves me, not even Benedetto.*

I hurried to my room, hanging on to my fragile control until the door closed behind me.

The sound of it shutting still hung in the air as the first tear slipped down my cheek, hot and bitter. I buried my face in my hands, my shoulders shaking with silent sobs as the old, familiar ache of loneliness and doubt clawed at my heart.

Once again, I felt truly, utterly alone.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

# LUNA

A THICK FOG ROLLED IN OVERNIGHT AFTER THE STORM, obscuring the early morning sun. Benedetto and I stood in the stable yard of the de Metteil villa, saddling Biter and Dawn with supplies already packed on a mule the stableboy said was named Grace.

Pip perched on the gatepost, shuffling from foot to foot, wings half spread, his intense gaze fixed on us. His scales blended with the fog, so sometimes it was hard to see him except for the fiery veins of color in his eyes.

Benedetto adjusted the saddle's girth. The stallion had puffed his belly and Benedetto responded by putting the bridle on then rubbing his knuckles against Biter's side.

Then he tightened the girth quickly when the stallion danced and loosened his belly.

My husband didn't look at me through the entire process. "You shouldn't come. If you're pregnant, it's too dangerous. It's a long trip."

I masked the sharp pang of hurt with a wry smile. "You've never cared about me in danger before. Why now?"

My heart sank. It wasn't just about the danger. He was questioning my worth again, doubting whether I'll be more of a burden than an asset. He hadn't sought my bed last night, either.

The insecurities from my encounter with Father bubbled below the surface. Did he really want me here, or was I just a convenient tool for his plans?

I'd been pushing the thoughts away all morning, and they kept returning the moment my concentration wavered.

Benedetto finally looked at me, expressionless. "This isn't a joke. If you're pregnant, it's not just about you anymore. I can't afford to slow down if things get rough out there."

My temper flared. "And you think I'd slow you down? Have I ever done that before? I've been by your side through any number of fights."

"Not while pregnant," he answered flatly.

Pip's head swung back and forth from me to Benedetto as we spoke.

I clenched my fists. Why did Benedetto refuse to see that I was capable? Why was it always about whether I was useful enough? Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to calm down.

"Fine," I said through gritted teeth. "If it becomes a problem, if I really am pregnant, I'll turn back. But until then, I'm coming with you."

Benedetto's jaw clenched, but he nodded curtly. "Deal."

We rode out of Kalion, the city slowly waking up behind us.

I kept my gaze forward, my expression set, but I felt the weight of Benedetto's silence beside me. Why did it feel like we were miles apart? I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. Even as we rode side by side, there was a distance between us I couldn't bridge.

Why was it there suddenly?

"You don't have to prove anything to me, you know," Benedetto said quietly.

My grip on the reins tightened. "I'm not trying to prove anything. I just want to be part of this, to help."

He didn't answer, just pressed his lips together in a thin line and spurred Biter forward, leaving me to trail behind.

Why was he refusing to talk to me? A sharp stab of pain pierced my chest. He thought I was just being stubborn. Maybe he didn't trust me, despite everything.

As we headed for the shore road, the fog thickened, shrouding the landscape in a ghostly white. The path Benedetto took us left the main road, following a ruinously old road. I took Dawn off it onto the grass to keep the beast from straining on the uneven cobbles.

No sense in courting a sprain for my horse.

After an hour the road twisted by an ancient graveyard, its crumbling monuments overgrown and half-buried in the earth. From the style of statuary, the graveyard predated the first Emperor's conquest. The people before he came had preferred idealized figures, usually seated and clothed in draped clothing, their expression a serene smile. Not the realistic poses that people used today.

These graves were so old the families didn't tend them anymore. Or had died out in the wars and centuries marching by.

Trees had grown all the way up to the low stone wall surrounding the graveyard, and one corner had crumbled into a sad pile of broken rock and mortar.

Dawn shied and dug his hooves in before the rusted iron gate.

"Are we going in there?" I asked.

"Yes."

I looped Dawn's reins on a sturdy tree branch further back and walked forward. Pip stayed on my shoulder, growling softly, his head swiveling.

Biter sweated and danced from hoof to hoof but passed the gate.

Within the walls, ferns and dirt covered the half-toppled markers, the writing on them so eroded by time I couldn't make out any words or numbers. Statues smiled at me, both upright and on the ground.

The fog thickened as I followed Benedetto further in and I shivered as a chill seeped into my bones, deeper than the damp cold. Why were we stopping here? My gaze skipped over the markers and statuary, an uneasy feeling settling in my gut.

This place felt wrong, like it'd been forgotten by the living but not by the dead.

Benedetto dismounted, moving with predatory grace toward a cluster of graves mostly shrouded in dense fog. Unlike the others, the earth around the markers had nothing growing on it, looked dense, crumbly and dry, as if it could sustain no life.

He reached into one of the saddlebags on Biter, who huffed and tried to sidle back, pulling out a small pouch of dried herbs and several vials filled with shimmering liquid.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Making a delivery," he said curtly. "I made an agreement with the ghouls here. They trade information for supplies they can't get in town."

Ghouls?

There were curses, cast by people like me who sourced from the dark moon, that forbade rest after death. Accusations of casting such curses was why my mother was executed.

Some places became infused with necromantic energy when the ancient wars were fought, and that energy seeped into bodies later buried there and drove them from their graves. And sometimes, the dead refused to stay in their graves—there were those who refused to die and leave their business untended.

Others rose to kill their enemies, or protect their families, or clawed their way out of the grave because the very earth imbued them with unnatural energy.

What all of them had in common was that they consumed life, be it in the form of blood or flesh from the living.

And that no sane person encountered them willingly.

So of course Benedetto made a deal with them. A spike of fear shot through me. Dying under teeth and claws was not how I wanted to end.

It also showed Benedetto still trusted me. Dealing with ghouls carried the death penalty throughout Dimare.

Mist stirred between the graves in front of us, and my breath caught as several figures emerged.

Flaking dry skin covered in grave dirt stretched over ropy muscle on emaciated bodies. They wore scraps of clothing, the remnants of what they'd been buried in or had stolen from the living.

The eyes...pits of darkness, like black stones set in their heads. They glowed faintly, almost with a negative light. Their lips peeled back from their teeth, that frightening gauntness turning their faces into flesh covered skulls.

Their movements were smooth and fast, and my muscles clenched in fear.

"You've brought the supplies?" one of the ghouls hissed, its voice like dried leaves rustling in the wind.

Benedetto tossed the pouch and vials onto the ground. "As promised. Now, what do you have for me?"

The ghoul sniffed at the pouch, a disturbing smile stretching its cracked lips. "A storm is coming. Moonshifter expects you. He's laid traps near his tower, of magic and men. Some invoke ritual to find or replace the absent gods. Be careful, d'Alvarez. I'd hate for you to die far away from here."

A wave of nausea rolled over me as a breeze eddied through the mist, carrying with it the scent of rot and age. The ghouls retreated back into the heavy gray fog, their eerie shadows vanishing among the graves.

I turned to Benedetto, my face pale. "Are you mad? How can you make deals with creatures like them?"

He stared at me, unflinching. "I've told you many times. I'll do anything to cure or avenge Francesco. *Anything.*"

Anything. My stomach twisted. Was this a warning of the lines he would cross?

We rode in silence for a long while after leaving the graveyard, the only sound the clapping of the horses' hooves on the dirt path as we headed for the road that would take us north, to the mountains and Ygris pass.



My thoughts whirled.

He had so much loyalty in him. But he gave it rarely. Had he given it to me?

I remembered the way he had gently placed the opal earrings in my ears, the rare softness in his touch. He was capable of so much kindness.

But he was also capable of terrible things.

How could I reconcile the two?

I forced myself to speak. "Would you sacrifice me, too, if it meant getting what you wanted?"

"You shouldn't ask me that question," Benedetto said without expression. "You won't like the answer."

The silence stretched between us again as we continued on, the sun sinking lower in the sky. I pulled my cloak tighter around me, as if it could shield me from the chill settling in my bones.

What had I gotten myself into? My hand drifted to my stomach. And what kind of life would a child have with a father like him?

Once again, the doubts settled on me in a cloud I couldn't disperse, fueled by Benedetto's own words.

Benedetto rode beside me, his profile stern and unreadable. I thought I knew him, thought I understood the depths of his love and loyalty.

I'd just underestimated that depth, and assumed it applied to me. My heart clenched at the thought.

The road ahead seemed to stretch on forever, leading us into an uncertain future. I only hoped I had the strength to face whatever lay at the end of it - for myself, and for any child I might bear.

If we survived this quest.

Heavy silence remained between us as the shadows lengthened. I stole another glance at Benedetto, but his face remained fixed straight ahead, his jaw set.

My mind churned with questions I was afraid to ask. What lines had he crossed? The Benedetto I'd travelled with earlier seemed to be slipping away with each passing mile.

I pressed my lips together, swallowing back the lump in my throat. "Bene..."

"Don't." His voice was sharp, cutting through the evening air. "I told you. You won't like the answers."

My fingers tightened on the reins. "You assume that I was going to repeat the question. Have you considered—"

"No. You think you can change me? Save me from myself?" He laughed, a harsh, mirthless sound. "This is what I am, Luna. This is what I do."

Tears stung my eyes, and I blinked them back fiercely. "And what about us? What about..."

I couldn't bring myself to say it, to voice the tiny hope and terror growing inside me.

Benedetto was silent for a long moment. Then, so quietly I almost missed it, "I don't know."

The words hit me like a physical blow. *I don't know*. The man who always had a plan, always knew his next move, said he was just as lost as I was.

As a true son of his mother and her plans within plans, that would have hurt him to admit.

I turned my face away, letting my hair fall forward to hide my expression. I could find hope in that. He hadn't decided to cut me out of his life for my own good.

But with each step, the remembered chill of the graveyard seemed to sink deeper into my bones, a grim reminder of the fact Benedetto knew no boundaries.

Shadows of the past threatened to swallow any chance of happiness we might have had.

I wasn't sure if the man beside me was my salvation...or my downfall.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

# BENEDETTO

WE'D HAD THREE WEEKS OF TRAVEL WITHOUT ANY REAL incidents, and I was feeling more and more nervous. The ghouls had said there would be opposition. I'd hoped it would be scattered rather than concentrated near the pass.

We'd made good time and only had a few days left of hard travel to get to the pass. Which meant these next few days were going to be very dangerous.

The flickering light of the dying campfire cast dancing shadows over Luna's hair and face as she kept watch.

Pip had vanished into the branches above us. He'd proved a decent hunter over the past weeks, and willing enough to share his catch so we often had fresh meat for the pot.

Biter and Dawn chewed, their occasional snorts a comfortable background.

I closed my eyes, willing sleep to come, and found myself standing outside Francesco's door in the d'Alvarez manor in Legnali, a room I hadn't seen in years. My chest tightened with a sense of dread.

Francesco's muffled words drifted through the wooden door. I pushed it open and stepped inside. My brother sat on the floor, knees pulled to his chest, eyes wide and haunted. Blood stained his fingertips and streaked his arms and face where he'd clawed at himself.

"Bene," he said urgently. "You're being used."

"Francesco, it's me. What are you talking about?"

“Her.” He rocked back and forth. “She only wants your ruin. She’ll destroy everything, she already has.”

“Who?” I tried to keep my voice soothing, though blood drummed in my ears.

His dark eyes suddenly locked onto mine with terrifying lucidity. “She’ll bind you with a child. That’s her plan.”

A jolt of pain lanced through my chest. He was talking about Luna. But it couldn’t be true, could it?

“You think she loves you. But it’s all a lie. She’s doing this for her own gain. For power.”

I shook my head and backed away. “No, you’re wrong. She was ordered to share my bed, yes, but she’s been honest about that. She seems to care about me.”

Harsh, mocking laughter burst from Francesco’s throat. “Care for you? She’ll be the end of you. Mark my words.”

I jerked awake with a gasp. The ghostly echoes of Francesco’s laughter still rang in my ears. Cold sweat coated my skin as the first pale light of dawn filtered through the trees.

Luna turned to the sudden movement, then away as I nodded at her to signal I was fine.

Running a hand over my face, I tried to calm my racing thoughts. It was just a dream. But it felt so real. What if it wasn’t just a dream? What if it was a prophecy?

But I had none of my brother’s gifts. He was a true son of the moon, where I sourced from starlight and could only predict night following day accurately.



The sun crept higher as Luna and I sat by the campfire, the morning chill still clinging. She hummed softly while pouring steaming tea into our tin cups. But I couldn’t shake the unease that had settled like a stone in my chest or the headache that drummed in my temples.

“You’re quiet this morning.” Luna glanced at me curiously. “Bad dreams?”

I grunted and took a sip of the scalding liquid. “Something like that.”

“If you’re going to sulk all morning, maybe I should take the lead today.” She tried to sound as though she were teasing me, but there was an undercurrent of truth to it.

“And maybe you shouldn’t assume you know what’s on my mind.” Why was I like this? A pang of guilt twisted in my gut. She hadn’t done anything wrong.

But what if she had? She stirred the glowing embers of the fire, the sun catching on the red veil twisted in her auburn braid.

Memories of our intimate moments flashed through my mind. The softness of her touch, the vulnerability in her striking eyes. But Francesco’s warning was louder, drowning them out. Was she playing me? Did she feel trapped in this arranged marriage?

Why did these thoughts come to me every morning? Was it some outside influence, like Moonshifter?

I summoned my magic, and reached out, sensing and searching for the feel of any other’s magic on myself or Luna. A few long moments later, I admitted defeat. There was no magic on us that I could sense, which meant that these thoughts were mine.

We packed up camp in tense silence and continued our journey through the dense forest covering the hills leading to the pass. The woods here weren’t harvested, were said to be haunted by the northern tribes.

The governor of the province focused on the lucrative amber mines further to the south rather than ordering lumber harvested from these woods. I’d met him.

Not a foolish man, he was well aware ordering woodsmen to cut down these trees would lead to disobedience and him looking like a fool.

The ancient trees surrounded us, some bowed by their own weight, and creaked and groaned in the wind, their leaves whispering secrets. As we rode along the dirt path, an eerie quiet descended, broken only by the occasional rustle of unseen creatures in the undergrowth.

Like the Drakewood, magical animals made their home here.

Mid-afternoon, the trees thinned as we skirted a small lake. Grass and bushes rolled to its edge and the water appeared to be pure and clear.

“Do you want to refresh the water bags?” I asked.

Luna nodded, and we turned and rode closer to the lake. The open sky above us and the warmth of the sun felt welcome on my face after the gloom of the forest.

The lake reflected the sky like a mirror, shining blue.

Suddenly, a bone-chilling wail cut the quiet like a razor, raw and unearthly. It slashed at my ears, a sound of grief, of betrayal, the cry of a swan whose mate abandoned it in death, the scream of a widow bereaved.

Biter stopped in his tracks and reared.

A figure stepped from the thick green reeds by the water’s edge, trailing mist that hadn’t been there a moment ago.

She was very young, and beautiful in an eerie way that made my chest clench—long, dripping black hair clinging to her pale face, her thin peasant dress floating around her like it had a life of its own. As if it were underwater.

Those eyes...

Her eyes were blank and blue, empty as the lake behind her.

A Rusalka. A woman abandoned, or a maid who died by drowning, or maybe a spirit. No one knew exactly what they were, only that they were deadly.

I tried to move, spur Biter away but my body wouldn’t listen. Instead, I dismounted and walked forward.

Her voice wrapped around me, a whisper of sorrow and promises, a chain soft as silk and unyielding as iron. The chill

of it seeped into my bones, pulling me forward, step by step, toward the dark water lapping hungrily at the shore.

Somewhere behind me, Pip shrieked. Distantly, I heard Luna's voice, but it was like listening through thick ice. Nothing mattered except the woman calling me home.

The water swirled at my ankles.

Then her hands were on my wrists. Cold. Bony. Her fingers curled tightened, her nails like splintered glass digging into my skin. I barely felt the pain. I barely felt anything except the need for the weight of the water, the need to sink, to let go—

A sharp pain burned through my chest. My breath hitched. My vision flickered.

Deep in my mind, Luna's name burned.

Something slammed into me, knocking me sideways, breaking the Rusalka's hold. I hit the grassy shore hard, my breath rushing back in a painful gasp.

The Rusalka let out a shriek of fury, the water surging toward us. Luna didn't hesitate—she lunged, her dagger shrouded in black ribbons of her magic. The blade sank deep into the Rusalka's shoulder, eroding the substance that gave her life.

The creature didn't fall. She turned on Luna with impossible speed, her wide eyes unblinking.

"Mine," the creature hissed. The words were thick and hard to understand, as if spoken underwater.

She raked her nails across Luna's arm, tearing her shirt. Frost bloomed instantly, ice crackling along her skin and the fabric, then vanishing as Luna's magic reacted. Luna gritted her teeth, twisting away, but the Rusalka lunged again, relentless as a spring flood.

Pip coughed, spitting a tiny flame at the woman.

I forced myself up, legs still sluggish, head still reeling.  
"Luna!"

The Rusalka's face twisted, her pretty face warping into something monstrous. She grabbed Luna by the throat and

dragged her back toward the water, her grip tightening.

Wisps of those fingers drifted off and the creature screamed but didn't loosen her grip.

Luna gagged, struggling, her dagger slipping from her fingers, clawing at the hands, trying to loosen them.

Panic surged through me, cutting through the last of the fog. My hand found my sword, but I knew—steel wouldn't stop this thing.

Fire. I needed fire. Pip coughed again, a larger flame this time, and the rusalka flinched from the heat.

I reached deep, deeper than before, past the cold that still clung to my veins. Heat sparked in my palm. Starlight could call fire, but I'd never bothered; the darkness suited me better.

Desperation added itself and flame flickered, then roared to life along the blade. I didn't think. I moved.

I slashed at the Rusalka's back. The fire met wet, rotting silk and stagnant lake water.

She screamed, the sound spiraling to the sky. Steam rose where the flames touched her, eating through the mist that had clung to her form.

She let go of Luna, turning on me with an expression of pure hatred. Her nails lashed out.

I dodged, the nail making frost bloom on my armor. My sword slashed her arm, cutting deep. She howled, but still, she didn't fall.

Luna coughed, stumbling back—but then she found her fallen dagger. With a growl, she drove it straight into the Rusalka's back.

The creature froze. Her blue eyes widened in something almost like shock. Then, with a final, wretched sob, she crumbled—turning to water, then mist, which rolled away from us, vanishing in the sunlight.

Silence fell, broken only by the ragged sound of our breathing.



Luna wiped a shaking hand across her mouth, wincing. "That," she gasped, "wasn't easy."

I sat heavily on the damp ground, rubbing at the bruises already forming on my wrists. The phantom touch of the rusalka still clung to me, like I'd never be warm again. I looked at Luna, at the raw, red mark on her throat where the creature had grabbed her.

My gut twisted.

"Are you hurt?" My voice came out too sharp. Too uncertain.

She pressed a hand to her arm where the ice had touched her. "Yeah... Just give me a second."

Pip leaned against her, crooning. I wanted to join it, hold her.

I watched her, my mind racing. She'd been off this entire fight. And I wasn't sure if it was the Rusalka's magic, pregnancy, or something far more dangerous.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to know the answer.

Luna gazed over and sighed. "For all Biter is a pain, at least he doesn't run off like Dawn."

Once again, her horse had bolted once she no longer held the reins. On the other hand, it was a sensible reaction, really.

Even considering the hour to catch him, we didn't make good distance for the rest of the day and camped early. I didn't like how strained Luna looked.

The sun hung low on the horizon as we finished eating, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink. I tended to the fire, trying to ignore the persistent ache in my muscles from the day's journey and especially from our encounter with the Rusalka.

Movement in the underbrush set me on edge. I reached for my sword, not relaxing when a familiar figure stepped out of the shadows. Giordano de Manfredi, last seen when we dined with the emperor.

No point in attacking him; I could see the plans through him. Someone had paid a lot of money for a gate for him to pass

through to be partially here.

If they'd actually sent him through completely, I would have skewered him without compunction.

His presence proved we'd been monitored at a distance magically. He would only have a short time to talk before the gate whisked him back to his original location.

"Good to see you, d'Alvarez," he said with a placid smile that made my skin crawl.

"What do you want?" I asked warily.

He rubbed a small silver disk between his fingers like a worry bead as he spoke, glancing in Luna's direction. "Just a word of warning. Your wife, Luna. You do realize her father is part of Vivaldo's faction, yes? And she's been approached to kill you."

I scoffed, shaking my head. "And yet I'm still standing. She's had plenty of chances at my naked back already."

Giordano chuckled, a sound devoid of mirth. "Maybe. But you should be careful. It would be a shame if your trust in her was misplaced."

The silver disc in his hand had gained a copper sheen. He'd been stalling.

"What is that?" I snapped.

He laughed, and faded as the gate retrieved him, frustrating my grab for his hand. It had been some kind of detection device, but I had no idea what he'd been looking for. He was trying to manipulate me, I knew that much. But to what actions? And what if he was right?

The doubts that had been festering since my dream rolled over me like a tide.

This was a hell of a lot of money paid just to mess with me. With so much riding on who inherited, how far was my mother willing to go?

"Well, that was interesting," Luna said drily, surprising a snort from me.

“Yes. What do you make of it?”

“Your mother hates to lose, or even have it look like something she planned didn’t work. Or she likes to manipulate people just for the entertainment value. And she has a lot of money at her disposal. So, no idea.”

There were days I wished my mother would just vanish like morning mist. What was she up to?

Was she plotting to saddle me with a new wife for me if I ended up on the throne? The thought made my stomach turn.

“I’ll take first watch.” I wasn’t going to sleep quickly anyway.

Luna nodded and rolled up in her bed roll, her breathing evening quickly.

Just in case, I set up a basic ward around the camp, using the starlight energy to avert the eyes of any who might approach. It tired me, but the extra security would keep us both safer.

After moonrise, a low growl rumbled through the trees, deep and guttural, like the forest itself was breathing. It yanked me from my spiraling thoughts, my heart slamming against my ribs.

The underbrush exploded. A massive shape hurtled toward me—black fur, gleaming fangs, and eyes that burned like embers in the night. A hellhound.

Void rot me, of all beasts, why was there one that ate magic in our camp?

It radiated heat like a fire, scorching the ground. Hotter now, since it had consumed my ward.

Crashing and screaming from the horses created cacophony as Biter and Dawn tried to get loose.

I barely had time to react as it hit my chest. Claws scraped against my chest as the beast lunged, knocking me off balance. I twisted, just managing to dodge its snapping jaws, but pain flared sharp and hot as its fangs raked my leg.

“Ben!” Luna’s voice cut through the chaos. I barely heard her over the beast’s snarling.

The hellhound reared back, preparing to strike again, but Luna was already moving. She swung her fan in a silver arc and boiling blood flew, hissing as it hit the dirt.

Pip attacked with claws and teeth from the other side, harrying it. It jumped backward and she planted herself between me and the beast.

“Get back!” she shouted.

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself up despite the fire spreading through my veins. Hellhound venom. This wasn’t good.

The hound feinted left before lunging at her, jaws snapping inches from her throat. She spun away just in time, her fan scoring a long wound down its side. It howled in rage but didn’t retreat.

Pip bit one of its ears and the hound swiped at it, leaving Pip leaking blood from a long scratch.

The hound was toying with us. Waiting for an opening.

I readied two daggers. I wouldn’t go down without a fight. I reached for the starlight and used it to guide my aim and then waited my moment.

She dodged out of the way, and I threw the blades. They flew true, one into each eye making it yelp and recoil, shaking its head as those flaming eyes dimmed. It ran off into the trees, hopefully not to return this night.

“Let me see,” Luna demanded, suddenly at my side. She yanked up my pant leg, sucking in a sharp breath. Her face was pale, eyes dark with worry.

I watched her work, my mind a maelstrom of conflicting emotions. She was helping me, there was no denying that. But why? Because she cared, or because she needed me alive for her own purposes?

Those damned thoughts!

The pain in my leg intensified, and I gritted my teeth against a wave of nausea. I had to focus on survival, on getting through this. But even as Luna tended to my injury, paranoia whispered to me.

The hound must have been sent by Moonshifter. It should be blinded permanently, so I doubted it could seek us out again, even if compelled.

Luna's fingers traced dark ribbons around my leg, her brow furrowed in concentration. "There's magic in hellhound venom. I need to disrupt it before it spreads."

I watched as she worked, the pain in my leg slowly ebbing. But the doubts in my mind only grew louder. Giordano's words echoed in my thoughts, taunting me with the possibility that Luna's loyalty was nothing more than a carefully crafted lie.

The venom was clouding my thoughts, but I couldn't stop them.

She stood abruptly, her hands shaking slightly as she moved to the makeshift fire pit. "I'll brew some willow tea. It'll help with the pain."

I wanted to believe in her, to trust that the connection we'd forged was real. Heat ran through my veins.

As she busied herself with the tea, I studied her movements, searching for any sign of deceit. But all I saw was a woman who seemed genuinely frightened, her hands trembling as she measured out the powdered bark. Who gently dabbed at the scratch on the drake's flank.

She was scared. The thought hit me like a physical blow. She did care, didn't she?

But even as the thought formed, the doubts crept back in, insidious and unrelenting. I'd been betrayed too many times, seen too much deceit to trust blindly. And yet, the idea of Luna as my enemy felt wrong on a fundamental level.

She returned to my side, pressing a steaming cup into my hands. "Drink this."

I took a sip, the relief spreading through my body. But it did little to ease the heat blurring my thoughts. I was caught between two impossible choices. To trust Luna and risk everything, or to push her away and lose the one person who'd made me feel truly alive.

As I looked into her eyes, I knew I had to decide. But for the first time in my life, I had no idea which path to choose.

The night settled around us, the crackling fire casting dancing shadows across Luna's face. My leg still throbbed, but the pain had dulled to a manageable ache.

I reached out, my hand covering hers. Her skin was soft, warm against my calloused palm. "Thank you."

Luna looked up, her eyes soft.

"Of course," she said, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

I'd been betrayed so many times before. The memories of past hurt threatened to overwhelm me. Was trusting her the biggest mistake of my life?

"Bene," Luna said. "What's on your mind? You're upset."

I hesitated, the words caught in my throat. How could I tell her of the doubts that plagued me, the fear that she might be just another betrayal waiting to happen?

"I'm just tired, and in a small bit of pain." I looked at the flickering flames. "It's been a long day."

Luna squeezed my hand, her touch gentle yet firm. "You don't have to carry this burden alone, you know. I'm here for you, no matter what."

I looked at her then, really looked at her. In the dancing firelight, her auburn hair seemed to glow, a halo of warmth around her face. Her eyes held a depth of understanding, a promise of unwavering support.

I had to make a choice - to let Luna in, or to push her away. As I sat there, her hand in mine, I realized that while I wanted to choose her.

Even though wariness of those I loved had preserved my life so many times.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

# LUNA

I STIRRED THE EMBERS OF OUR CAMPFIRE AS THE PALE PURPLE of earliest dawn touched the sky.

Benedetto limped to his horse, favoring his bitten leg. I watched as he put the pad on, then heaved the saddle up, wincing as he had to put weight on the bad leg.

Beads of sweat stood out on his temples as he continued putting the tack on his stallion, who danced from food to foot nervously.

“We need to get moving,” he said curtly. “We’ve already lost too much time.”

Rising to my feet, I glanced at his swollen leg. “You shouldn’t be riding yet. You can barely stand.”

He tightened the girth, his jaw clenched in determination.

Why had he been pushing himself like this? A surge of worry rose in me. He had been acting like he was running out of time. But why?

It should have taken us four weeks to get here, rather than three. At this pace, he’d told me it would be four days before we arrived at the pass.

Benedetto swung himself up onto his horse with a grimace, pain etched on his face.

“I’m fine,” he said. “We need to reach the pass before nightfall. Saddle your horse.”

I stood and crossed my arms. “No, you’re not fine. You’re being reckless.”

He had never listened to me before. Why would he start now? He’d been determined to do everything on his own, no matter the cost.

My gelding cooperated for once and I was in the saddle in a few moments, watching as Benedetto winced with every stride of his mount. We rode for an hour before he slumped in the saddle, his face pale and covered in a sheen of sweat. I quickly dismounted, looped the reins on a branch and rushed to his side as he swayed.

“Bene, stop.” I grabbed his arm to steady him. “Let me look at your leg.”

He groaned and slid off the horse with a painful grunt. “Damn it. We can’t afford to stop now.”

This wasn’t just stubbornness then. He had been genuinely afraid of losing time. But why? What had he not told me? Why wasn’t he trusting me on this trek?

Hobbling, Benedetto took the few steps to a large oak tree nearby and sat down with a wince. After making sure the horses were tied, I pulled out the bandages and medicinal herbs, my hands moved quickly as I assessed the wound.

Swollen enough to make rolling his trouser leg up difficult, the skin around the bandage felt hot to the touch.

“You need to rest.” I dribbled water on the old bandage to loosen it before changing it. “If we don’t treat this properly, it will get worse.”

Benedetto glared at me, his temper flaring. “I wouldn’t have gotten the injury in the first place if you hadn’t needed protecting,” he said.

His words stung like a slap.

I fought back the urge to recoil.

Instead, I pulled out lavender oil and applied it to the wound and the area surrounding, then a thin layer of honey.



The scent of lavender soothed me a little, and it was known to help with infections, as was honey. As I wrapped the bandage, I said quietly, "I never asked you to try to protect me. I can take care of myself."

"Clearly," he said sarcastically.

"And the fever must be affecting your brain, since I remember saving you." Anger and hurt warred within me, but I'd had my share of wounds too. I wasn't sweet when they hurt either.

He looked away, his jaw clenched. Exhaustion etched into the lines of his face, but there was something else there too. Something haunted and desperate.

"You're not invincible." I stood and wiped the oil and honey from my hands. "No matter how much you pretend to be."

I turned away, busying myself with packing up the medical supplies. The silence stretched between us, heavy with unspoken words.

"We should get moving," Benedetto said finally. He pushed himself to his feet, wincing as he put weight on his injured leg.

"No," I said firmly, poking him in the chest. "You need to rest. Pushing yourself will only make it worse."

He glared at me, his expression flashing with a mix of anger and something else I couldn't quite decipher. "We don't have time to rest. We need to finish this."

"And what good will you be if you collapse from exhaustion?" I said, my temper flaring. "You act like a hot-headed fool when you need to think. I thought you were cold and calculating, not a green boy rushing to a fight."

Benedetto scoffed, shaking his head. "Says the woman riding with me to a fight that's not hers. Who doesn't think before she acts."

I stared at him, struggling with the urge to kick his leg enough to make a sharp point. "We'll rest for today. Then we'll continue on to the pass. The horses could use some rest too."

Benedetto looked like he wanted to argue, but something in my expression must have stopped him. He lowered himself

back down to the ground with a grimace.

I made camp, staking Dawn and Biter to graze and kindling a small fire, where I brewed willow tea and steeped marigolds for another wash for his wound.

The silence stretched and Benedetto watched me go about the camp shores until he fell into an uneasy sleep.

I made stew for lunch, using dried meat and vegetables, adding some wild onion from nearby. A hot meal wouldn't hurt him. The scent filled the camp, and for a moment, I could almost pretend the situation wasn't dire.

Clouds rolled in, dark and pregnant with rain and I set up our small shelter. When he woke, I planned to point out that riding in the rain would have made everything worse for him and he should just admit I was right, and he was wrong.

And then I'd check to see if the mood was suddenly made of cheese.

I carried over a bowl and nudged Benedetto awake. He blinked, stretched, and winced. He moved to a sitting position with a hiss of pain, frustration tightening his expression.

When I handed Benedetto a bowl, he sniffed hopefully. We took turns cooking, and sometimes what I made was good, and sometimes...not so good. I tried to duplicate the good versions, and this one had turned out well a couple times as we traveled.

But he took a bite, his expression carefully neutral. His face lightened as he just chewed slowly and gave me a small smile.

It was a small gesture, but it was enough to make my chest ache. Maybe there was hope for us.

I ate my share, setting some aside for the evening and banking the fire.

When he finished the soup, Benedetto gritted his teeth as he tried to push himself up, his injured leg buckling beneath him. "Damn it," he huffed a breath out. "Help me up."

"Not unless it's to move to the tent," I said flatly. "You need to rest. I won't help you get back on that horse until you've both

had a proper break.”

“You’re being impossible,” he said, irritation flashing across his face.

“And you’re being foolish,” I said. “Rest. You couldn’t fight in this condition anyway.”

He grumbled. Before I helped him into the shelter, I changed the bandage and used the marigold wash in addition to all the other treatments. It looked a little better, but still swollen and red. I’d never seen him really hurt before. I watched him struggle to find a comfortable position. Pushing himself to the brink, never willing to admit when he needed help.

But even through the frustration, I couldn’t ignore the worry gnawing at my gut. A wound like that could turn deadly.

I ducked into the shelter at dusk as the rain began to fall, a steady drumming against the tent shielding us. I shivered in a draft of the damp then stretched out beside Benedetto. His warmth was a comfort, and I hoped mine was to him.

We lay together as the storm raged above us. Bright lightning etched the canvas in light, followed by a roar of thunder.

Finally, Benedetto rolled onto his good side to face me and put an arm around me. “I’m...worried, Luna. That I might lose you, fail Francesco. I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to either of you.”

I cupped his cheek. “I’m scared too. But we can’t let that fear control us. We have to trust in each other, work together. That’s the only way we’ll make it through this.”

He leaned into my touch, his eyes fluttering closed. “I trust you as much as I can. More than I trusted anyone else. But I’m not used to relying on others.”

I leaned in, pressing my forehead against his. “I know. Sleep, Bene. It’ll help.”

He let out a shuddering breath, his arm pulling me closer. I melted into his embrace, feeling the tension drain from my body. This was where I wanted to be. Right here, in his arms.

The storm raged on, and I watched him sleep. Even as lightning lit the sky, a sense of calm settled over me. I pressed a gentle kiss to Benedetto's jaw.

Tomorrow would be better for us.

I woke at dawn with a wave of nausea rolling over me. I staggered out of the tent, slipping on the muddy ground and wet plants and vomited into the bushes.

Benedetto sat up more easily than he had yesterday. "What's wrong? Are you sick?"

I wiped my mouth, taking a shaky breath. "Just the stew I made last night. I shouldn't have had a second helping."

Straightening up, I moved to the fire. No coal would have survived that storm, so I set about kindling a new one. While I had enough marigold wash to cleanse his wound this morning, I wanted to make some to carry with us. Also, I wanted hot tea to soothe my stomach.

"Come out and I'll change the dressing. Then breakfast. Then if your wound looks better, we can try to reach the pass before nightfall," I said lightly.

Moving slowly, he emerged from the tent and regarded me with his brow furrowed with concern. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine." I put the iron pot on to heat water. "Let's take a look at that wound."

From nowhere, a bitter thought intruded. I was useful now. Once he achieved his goal, he would cast me aside like everyone else had.

But even as the thought crossed my mind, I couldn't ignore the other part of me that said I was wrong. That the connection we had forged was real, that it meant something more than just a temporary alliance.

*Scald the moon*, I cursed silently, shaking my head as I finished bandaging. I should stop thinking like that. Not now, not ever.

So many thoughts, all of them forcing themselves in my mind.  
And perhaps the same was happening to Benedetto.

Moonshifter influenced minds. Could a Sorcerer create a magic so subtle we couldn't easily detect it? I'd perceived no spell on us. But that didn't mean it wasn't there.

I wished with all my heart Sofia was here so I could ask.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

# LUNA

WE DIDN'T MAKE GOOD TIME, EVEN THOUGH BENEDETTO WAS better able to ride. Both the horses were skittish, needing to be coaxed as we travelled closer to the pass. We were still a few miles from the mountain when the time came to set up camp.

Even with the fire crackling between us, a chill stayed in the air. Benedetto had been brooding all day, grunting the few times I'd tried to talk. He'd made the evening meal, but with no time to gather or hunt it was barely edible.

Still, hunger made me eat all of it.

We sat in silence, neither of us willing to break it.

I stared into the flames, thoughts running in circles. What did Benedetto's moodiness mean now? Every time I thought we were getting closer, he pulled away again. There were moments when I wasn't sure how much I trusted him, or if he trusted me.

Footsteps squishing in mud brought both of us to our feet, my fan and his sword at the ready.

Sofia emerged into the firelight, her expression unusually serious. She'd braided her hair but left it down and wore a subdued leather tunic and trousers. It was the first time I'd seen her dressed in anything but what a nanny in a conservative household would wear.

There was even a blade in a worn sheath at her belt. What would she use it for? Sofia was terrible in a fight.

A jolt of unease passed through me. Why was she here?

“Hail the camp,” Sofia said. “May I join you?”

Benedetto raised an eyebrow but lowered his blade. Surprise and annoyance mingled in his voice. “Sofia. To what do we owe the dubious honor?”

“You.” Sofia regarded the damp logs we’d been using for seating with misgiving, then settled herself on one. “It seems the charade of seeking a master caught unintended attention.”

A chill ran down my spine as Sofia continued. “Soulrider came to Kalion for unrelated reasons. While he was there, he heard that you were interested in training. He’s currently keeping visiting with Rose while I came here to find out if it was true.”

My breath caught. “Soulrider? He’s here? I mean, in Kalion? With Rose? Is she safe? You know Bene’s not interested in training, why didn’t you tell your master?”

Sofia smiled faintly. “Rose is safe. But I *also* knew you probably needed me soon, since you’d be close to Ygris pass. Soulrider didn’t ask me what I knew, he *told* me to come here and ask. So I did. I do need an answer from you.”

Benedetto laughed bitterly. “Of course he did. Give him this answer. No, it wasn’t true. I was lying. I’m good at that, you know. People believe lies they want to hear.”

He shot me a pointed, icy look.

I sneered back at him, a sharp stab of anger piercing through me. “I didn’t believe it. But it made bedding you easier if you thought I was a fool.”

Let him think I was as cold as he was. I ignored the hurt spreading through me. It was better this way. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing how much he had hurt me.

Sofia sighed and rubbed her temples as if dealing with squabbling children. “Wonderful. Are you two sure you want to storm the tower of a dangerous sorcerer when you’re fighting like this? It seems like a recipe for disaster.”

Benedetto’s jaw clenched, but he didn’t respond, just glared at Sofia.

Wait. “Sofia, is there a spell on us, influencing our minds? One to cause discord?”

She paused, staring from me to Benedetto. A long time passed, enough for me to shift from foot to foot and Benedetto to wince and settle back down on a log, stretching his leg out.

Sofia’s mouth tightened. “Yes. It’s subtle, and it digs up insecurities that are already there. And unfortunately, there’s little I can do to dislodge it. I don’t have the strength. They’re sunk deep, as if they were put on you both some time ago. And I missed it.”

“Good to know you can make mistakes,” Benedetto murmured.

Sofia settled on one of the other logs, her expression grim. “With that in mind, let me tell you more about your opponent. Since we’re now in a position where helping you is in line with my contract. Luna dying would cause permanent damage to Rose emotionally.”

Her contract. Always about contracts and obligations with Sofia. Did she ever do anything simply out of care or loyalty? Or did she mask loyalty by claiming it was her contract?

Benedetto waved a hand dismissively. “Do you do everything to comply with your contract? Are you a slave? Or is it just a talent you have for ruining every good thing in your life?”

Sofia regarded him as she had me and Rose when we were young and misbehaving. “Do you try to ruin everything good in your life, or is it just a gift you were born with? This information might keep you from dying, so be silent and listen.”

I jumped slightly at the acid note in Sofia’s usually calm and collected voice. I had never heard her speak like that. What weren’t we seeing here?

Benedetto opened his mouth to retort, and I kicked him in his bad leg. He gasped but closed his mouth.

Flickers of red and orange glowed in Sofia’s eyes as she leaned forward intently. I hoped those lights were from the campfire. “Moonshifter’s greatest power allows him to alter



his form, becoming any creature he desires. He could be a wolf stalking you in the shadows, or a bird watching from above.”

I swallowed hard, a chill dancing down my spine at the thought. I’d thought he only changed to a wolf, as the stories said.

Benedetto remained still as a statue, but I caught the muscle ticking in his clenched jaw.

“What is not as commonly known is that Moonshifter can also influence minds,” Sofia said, her attention on Benedetto. “Drive a sane man to madness or restore clarity to a broken psyche. This mental manipulation is perhaps his greatest weapon. As has been demonstrated on you, I think. Now that you’re aware of it, the influence will be less effective.”

My husband let out a long slow breath as his hands clenched. The pain in his face made my stomach churn. In that moment, I saw past Benedetto’s icy facade to the anguish beneath it. The heavy weight of it settled inside me.

Maybe his coldness was a shield. A way to protect the fragile, wounded parts of himself. Parts that hoped and hurt, that loved so fiercely it broke him.

I looked at the man beside me, shadows and firelight playing across the planes of his face. Benedetto met my gaze, the flames reflecting in his dark eyes. In them, I glimpsed a reflection of my own longing and uncertainty.

“Last,” Sofia continued, “like all sorcerers, he has a sigil, which he’ll manifest when he uses his greater magics. That sigil can be used to manipulate him or harm him, *if* you can control it. Or if I can. That’s why I’m here, now.”

Could this change everything? We were two broken, untrusting people on a nearly impossible quest. But this information could transform it to a chance at redemption and hope amidst the darkness.

As if sensing the shift in the air between us, Sofia glanced from Benedetto to me and back again.

Benedetto's grip tightened on his sword hilt, knuckles pale against the dark leather. "How will he manifest his sigil?"

"When he tries to break your minds."

His voice was low and intense, each word precisely measured. "You can contain something so powerful while I beat him physically?"

Sofia held his gaze, unblinking. "Yes. It won't be easy...or painless."

I suppressed a shiver, wrapping my arms around myself. When she was like this, she was scary.

"Moonshifter is arrogant, like all Sorcerers," Sofia said. "He underestimates those he views as beneath him. That will be your window, your single chance to fight him as I turn his magic against him. And I'll have to be disguised; he won't manifest if he's aware of me."

"A chance that could kill us if we fail," I said quietly, voicing the fear pulsing through me.

Sofia inclined her head, her expression somber. Her outline flickered, and an elderly female sellsword sat with us, clad in shabby but well-maintained armor. "Yes. The risk is great. But so is the reward if you succeed. And no plan survives contact with the enemy. It's likely that we'll have to change how we attack, and you both need to be ready for that, too."

Her gaze flickered to Benedetto. "If we beat him, make him swear by his Name he'll undertake the restoration of your brother's mind... and whatever else is needed."

In the dancing firelight, I recognized the calculation in Benedetto's expression. He was thinking again, rather than brooding.

Slowly, hesitantly, I reached out and placed my hand over Benedetto's on the hilt of his sword. His skin was warm, the contact sending a jolt through me. He stiffened but didn't pull away.

"We're in this together," I held his gaze. "Whatever happens, we face it side by side. No more lies. No more walls between

us.”

For a long moment, Benedetto was still, his expression still. Then, almost imperceptibly, he nodded. His hand turned beneath mine, fingers interlacing with my own.

A silent promise.

Sofia’s attention lingered on me, a flicker of something unreadable in the dark eyes of the illusion she wore.

Benedetto’s hand tightened around mine as he narrowed his eyes at Sofia. “You’re very eager to help all of a sudden. Why?”

The wrinkled scarred face of her illusion looked odd with sad, almost pitying smile. “Because I’ve seen too many people die. I’d rather not add Luna’s name to that list. And since Soulrider fancies you as an apprentice, protecting you fulfills my obligations to him.”

I studied Sofia, trying to decipher the emotions that played across the unfamiliar features. Regret, sorrow, a hint of weariness, the burdens of a life spent navigating the treacherous currents of magic and politics. How much had she lost? How many ghosts haunted her steps?

As Sofia stood up, her glance flicked to my abdomen, a quizzical look that sent a chill down my spine. What did she sense?

The thought crashed through my mind like a tidal wave, panic rising. Instinctively, I pressed a hand to my stomach, as if I could shield the tiny life that might have been growing there. My cycle was a week late. I’d forgotten about it in the chaos of the past days. The realization hit me like a physical blow, stealing the breath from my lungs. What if it was true? What if I was pregnant, and we were about to face a sorcerer who could destroy us both?

I swallowed hard.

But as Sofia met my gaze, I caught a flicker of understanding, a silent acknowledgment of the truth we both suspected.

I forced a smile, hoping it didn't look as brittle as it felt. "I'm glad you're here. We appreciate your help, more than I can say."

Sofia inclined her head, a faint smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Just try not to get yourselves killed. I'd hate to have to explain that to Soulrider. I'll set up my shelter over here. I'll accompany you from here on."

With those words, she picked up her pack and moved to the other side of the small camp, beginning the process of setting up a small tent.

The crackling of the fire filled the silence between me and Benedetto, the flames casting flickering shadows across our faces. I stared into the dancing light, my mind racing with a thousand fears and doubts. What kind of mother would I be, dark as my world had always been?

The thought was a knife twisting with every breath. But beneath the fear, a tiny spark of something else kindled to life. A fierce, protective love, a determination to fight for the future I wanted. For the family I might one day have.

Benedetto's hand tightened around mine, his calloused fingers interlacing with my own. I glanced up at him, searching for any hint of the turmoil churning inside me. But his expression remained unreadable, his jaw set in a hard line as he stared into the fire.

"Benedetto," I said. "About earlier... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

He shook his head, cutting me off.

"Don't." He met my gaze, the intensity in his expression stealing my breath. "We both said things we didn't mean. But none of that matters now."

I swallowed hard, nodding. He was right. Our petty arguments seemed so insignificant in the face of what lay ahead. "Do you think we're ready for this? For Moonshifter?"

Benedetto was silent for a long moment, the muscles in his jaw working. "We have to be," he said at last. "For Francesco. For everyone he's hurt."

I squeezed his hand tighter, my chest aching for him. For the pain and guilt he carried, the weight of his brother's fate resting squarely on his shoulders.

And what of the weight I carried? The thought whispered through my mind, my free hand drifting to my stomach. The secret that could change everything? But I couldn't bring myself to speak it. Not yet. Not when the future was so uncertain, the path ahead shrouded in danger and darkness.

"We'll face him together," I said instead.

Benedetto's lips curved into a small smile, the sight of it warming me from the inside out.

And there, in the flickering light of the campfire, I caught a flicker of hope. A hope that somehow, someday, we would find a way through the darkness.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

# BENEDETTO

NIGHTMARES WOKE ME. LUNA, DEAD, OR WORSE, A DEFILED puppet of a faceless sorcerer stalked through my dreams.

Before dawn, the nameless forest was cloaked in shadows, the thick twisted trees looming like sentinels in the darkness. I sat by the banked campfire, methodically sharpening my blade. My gaze drifted to Luna, visible through the tent flap.

For a moment, I watched her sleep. The hurried breath, a faint smile on her lips. Even dozing, she was still beautiful.

She shouldn't be here. This was too dangerous.

Sofia had given me a very pointed look earlier. That combined with Luna throwing up after the evening meal, led me to the obvious conclusion.

Though Luna hadn't said anything to me yet.

We were about to head for Moonshifter's tower. Even with her power from the dark moon, she was at risk. Even weighing in the benefit of her magic, the risk to her was too great. And if I failed, she'd be safe under my family's care.

Steeling myself, I took a deep breath and set my sword aside. I put on porridge, and Sofia walked to the campfire and spread her hands.

"Sofia," I said quietly. "You need to leave with Luna. Take her back to Legnali. This isn't a place for her."

"Take Luna to Legnali so you can die here alone?" Sofia responded in a normal volume as she poked the fire and added some twigs to it.

Luna's head snapped up, her gray eyes wide with shock. "What?"

She stood up. "You want to send me away? Now?"

In that moment, I wanted to strike Sofia harder than any person before in my life.

I met Luna's gaze steadily, forcing my voice to remain firm despite the ache in my chest. "Yes."

She was strong, but this was different. I couldn't risk her life—or the life of our unborn child. The thought of losing them to Moonshifter was unbearable.

"Why do you do this, Benedetto?" Luna protested, hurt and defiance warring in her expression. She stood, her fists clenched. "No. We made an agreement and I'm holding you to it."

Scald the moon, she wasn't making this easy. I rose to face her, my voice low and insistent. "This isn't up for debate. I am your husband, and I am telling you. You're going back, for your own protection. Don't fight me on this. Please."

Luna's gray eyes flashed like steel. "You don't get to dictate what I do," she snapped. "I've fought beside you every step of the way. You don't get to send me away because we're close to Moonshifter's tower."

Anger surged through me, hot and irrational. "By law, I can do whatever I want with you," I retorted, my voice rising. "And I'm telling you you're going back to Dimare—"

"Telling?" Luna interrupted, her fair skin flushing crimson. "Whatever you want? Make me. Try, husband!"

She unfurled her fan.

If I hadn't already loved her, I would have at that point. She was magnificent. And because I loved her, I was not going to yield.

I took a menacing step closer, lowering my voice to a dangerous whisper. "As your husband, in the eyes of imperial law, I do get to dictate this. I'm within my rights to send you

back to Kalion. It's for your own safety. Sun's mercy, don't make me beat you for your own good."

She flinched as if I'd struck her, wounded and defiant all at once. "You once said, don't ask me. So I'm asking, would you strike me?"

Void eat me, I was doing this because I loved her...

"In a heartbeat."

Sofia's wry voice cut through the charged air. "Well now, isn't this just wonderful."

She stood by the now cheerfully burning fire. "Are either of you going to commence thinking with your brains rather than your raging emotions?"

I shot her a withering glare.

"Shut up and do as you're told, you stupid bitch," I snapped. "This is between me and my wife, and no business of yours."

"Is that so?" Her tone could've chilled a drake's scales. "Except for the entire 'transport my wife' request, which I can deny if I choose. Benedetto d'Alvarez, I'm supposed to make sure you survive. Despite your idiocy. Why are you trying to sabotage the one good, true thing you have in this world? And kill your odds of surviving your mad quest? I can't root out Moonshifter's spell, but you can certainly stop letting it influence you!"

The words hit me like a bucket of snowmelt.

*Is that what I'm doing?* A flicker of doubt crept through me, as insidious as void-rot. Was I pushing Luna away because I was terrified of what we could become together? Or because I wanted her to survive me?

I opened my mouth, a retort poised on my tongue, but before I could utter a word, an enormous shadow fell across our camp. The air filled with the thunderous sound of beating wings and harsh, inhuman screeches.

"Get down!" I roared, all thoughts of our argument vanishing as I drew my sword in one fluid motion. A troop of winged



men descended upon us, their bronze weapons glinting savagely in the fading firelight.

I swung my blade at the nearest attacker as he swooped down, his wicked curved sword slashing toward my throat. I dodged, but barely, the edge of his weapon hissing past my face close enough to trim my beard.

Luna crouched and rolled, narrowly evading a vicious strike. Her fan slashed a feathered calf, exposing bone.

“What in the forgotten gods’ names are these things?” she yelled over the din, her eyes wide and wild.

Damn it all to the void. My sword sang as I parried another attack, muscles jumping in my sword arm. My leg throbbed, hampering my ability to dodge.

We were outnumbered and caught unawares. How had they found us?

The largest of the creatures landed before me, out of the reach of my sword, with an earth-shaking thud, his tawny wings spread wide. His beaked face bobbed forward, almost like a peck. “Greetings, Benedetto of House Alvarez. Our master has need of you. Surrender, and your companions may yet be spared.”

The voice was a raven’s croak, but magic rolled in it, wrapping me up, hindering my movement.

One of the beast-men slammed into my back like a battering ram. I crashed to the ground, my sword flying from my grasp. Clawed hands gripped my arms like iron vices, pinning me face-first into the dirt.

“Ben!” Luna screamed. I caught a glimpse of her lunging forward, fan flashing, but another winged warrior blocked her path, driving her back with a flurry of blows.

I bucked and twisted, trying to throw off my attackers, but their hold was unbreakable. Pain lanced through my shoulders as I was hoisted up in a rush of air, my feet leaving the ground.

Powerful wings beat around me as my captors took to the sky. This couldn’t be happening. Panic flooded my veins, my heart

a war drum in my chest. I was supposed to protect Luna, to keep her safe. I couldn't abandon her like this.

I craned my neck, desperate for a final glimpse of her. She and Sofia were a swirl of flashing steel and red hair far below, a bolt of lightning singing the feathers of the things carrying me.

Luna's furious screams echoed in my ears as I was borne away, each one a barbed arrow to my heart. They would be overwhelmed. I struggled to free myself, even though we were already high above the trees.

Then a pinprick of brightness danced between the trees, small as a firefly. Even at this distance it felt like starlight magic, powerful, and that could only be Sofia.

Hope surged through me, dizzying in its intensity. She must have used her magic to get them to safety.

The lights winked out, swallowed by the darkness. They were gone. Safe.

Fierce triumph blazed in my chest, momentarily eclipsing the fear.

By the time the tower loomed closer, blotting out the stars my shoulders were cramping hard enough I couldn't move my arms and I shivered despite my cloak. The upper air was bitterly cold.

As we flew in, I could make out grotesque shapes carved into the stonework, dragon maws and leering gargoyles. The stuff of nightmares.

I closed my eyes, steeling myself for what lay ahead. So be it. Luna's face danced behind my eyelids, fierce and beautiful and alive. *My love, be well. Raise our child to be strong. My last thoughts are of you.*

The winged men alighted on a balcony jutting from the tower's flank. I was dragged forward, my boots scraping across the flagstones. A dark archway yawned before me, a portal to the unknown.

*Dead gods eat you, Moonshifter.* I gritted my teeth and rolled my shoulders, despite the pain it caused me. *Let's finish this.*

A blast of darkness and suffocation wrapped around me, choking, and the world went black.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

# LUNA

THE WORLD SPUN AROUND ME AS WE MATERIALIZED IN A FIELD.

Sofia had teleported us without any safeguards, the ones she'd taught Rose warning that not to use them courted immediate messy death. My stomach kept spinning and then, once again, I vomited.

When I stopped retching, I looked up in the direction Sofia gazed. The winged men, mere speck in the sky, vanished into the distance.

Sofia turned to me, her expression grave. "They're taking him to Moonshifter's tower."

I wiped the tears off my face, my jaw clenched with determination. "Then that's where we're going. We're getting him back."

"You don't understand." Sofia regarded me, her face expressionless. "You've lost any element of surprise you could have salvaged, even if he knew you were coming. He must know I'm here from the spell I just did. Moonshifter's tower isn't just a stronghold. It's a death trap. If you went in unprepared—"

"I don't care," I said. "I'm not leaving him. I don't care how dangerous it is."

Sun's mercy, what was I getting myself into? I questioned as we made camp. But I couldn't abandon Benedetto. Sorcerer or not, I had to try. I needed some kind of plan.

What was a stick big enough to threaten a Sorcerer?

Another Sorcerer.

I turned to Sofia. “Soulrider. Will he help us deal with Moonshifter? We need help, especially because he’s been warned somehow.”

Sofia closed her eyes. “Soulrider’s power could tip the scales, yes. But bargaining with him wasn’t easy. He’s a hard but fair dealer. Think how much you’re willing to pay. If you tried to cheat him, the consequences would be severe.”

Severe? Sofia wasn’t one to exaggerate. If she said it was dangerous, it was more than just a precaution. It was a promise of the potential price I might pay.

But I couldn’t back down now. Not with Benedetto’s life hanging in the balance. I took Sofia’s hand, squeezing it, letting all my feelings flood my face. “What do I need to know about bargaining with Soulrider?”

“You have a rare talent,” Sofia said. “Soulrider will want that. Your magic is unique, something he can’t easily find elsewhere. It would help him in some of the experiments he runs. Or he could want something different. I don’t speak for him, Luna.”

I frowned, a spark of anger flaring in my chest. My magic wasn’t a commodity to be bartered. But I bit my tongue, waiting for Sofia to finish.

“He’ll be interested,” she said, “but you need to be careful not to overpay. Don’t offer your firstborn, or a favor to be named later. Nothing that isn’t spelled out in precise terms.”

I considered her words, my thoughts racing. “Does he bargain personally? Or does he send a representative?”

“He bargains in person,” Sofia said. “The deals he makes are binding, so he prefers to oversee them himself. It’s part of his code.”

A code. The idea settled like a weight in my chest. Hard but fair. That was something I can work with. But it also meant I couldn’t afford any mistakes. One wrong move, one poorly chosen word, and I could lose everything.

I leaned forward, possibilities running through my mind. “What’s the relationship between Soulrider and Moonshifter? How do they feel about each other?”

Sofia laughed, a sharp and almost mocking bark. “They tolerate each other at best. Moonshifter annoys Soulrider, and they thwart each other’s plans. They’ve crossed paths before in person, and it didn’t end well.”

“Good,” I said, smiling slightly. “If there’s tension between them, that might work in our favor. I can use that.”

This could be the key. The realization pulsed through me like a heartbeat. If I could pit them against each other, it might give me the distraction I need to free Benedetto.

A strange sound filled the air, a faint, fluttering noise like the beating of wings. I looked up to see a creature swooping down toward me, its body glistening in the moonlight. It was a bat, but not an ordinary one, its skin resembling raw, shimmering blood.

“Summoning from the Void is forbidden,” Sofia said coldly, watching as the bat landed on a nearby branch.

The bat opened its mouth, and a raspy message emerged. “Bring yourself to Moonshifter’s tower by dawn, alone, or your husband dies. There will be no second warning. Send the failed apprentice far away, or your husband dies.”

My lips curled into a cold smile. “Is that so? Tell your master I’m on my way.”

The bat dribbled blood as if it were relieving itself, then flew away.

I turned to Sofia, willing her to understand. “Wait a bit before you go back. Tell Rose what I want and where I am, but not until I’ve had a chance to confront Moonshifter first.”

Sofia raised an eyebrow, looking both amused and impressed. “You’re playing a dangerous game. Remember, you can’t get anything for free in the world.”

*Yes, tell Soulrider I want to make a deal, to come see me. I know I’ll have to pay if he fights Moonshifter. And you said he*

*was with Rose, so I don't need to mention his name.*

“Pip should go with you as a sign of good faith. Rose will want to see him again.”

Pip's long angry hiss made his opinion of that clear.

Sofia touched my cheek, her fingers warm against my skin. “I'll speak for you as well. I'll leave at sunrise. And I'll take the horses with me, once I find where they ran.”

I leaned into her touch, drawing strength from her presence. “Thank you. I don't know what I would do without you.”

She smiled, a glint of mischief in her expression. “Probably get yourself killed, or worse.”

I laughed. “And you're doing a fantastic job so far.”

Sofia grinned, then grew serious. “Luna, be careful. Moonshifter is cunning and ruthless. Don't underestimate him.”

I held her stare, resolve hardening within me. “I won't.”

The wind chilled me to the bone as I trudged up the rocky path, leaving Sofia behind. Moonshifter's tower loomed ahead, a tall narrow black spire piercing the night sky. Twisted bones of the mountain cast shadows in the eerie moonlight. My hair whipped across my face, stinging my cheeks, even though I'd wrapped myself tight in the cloak.

He wanted me to come alone. The scheming void-eater thought he had me trapped. But I had a hole card, one last desperate gambit. I just needed to buy enough time for Sofia to bring Soulrider. Absent gods willing, we might still have a chance.

As I approached the tower entrance, a pack of grotesque guards emerged from the shadows — half-human, half-beast abominations with snarling jaws and claws. One seized my arm in its vise-like grip, puncturing my skin.

“Let go,” I snapped, trying to wrench myself free. “I'm here to see Moonshifter. He's expecting me.”

The creature shoved me forward with a growl. “We know who you are. You don’t give the orders here.”

I lifted my chin and glared back at it defiantly, even as my heart pounded. There was no turning back now. I could only pray Sofia came through in time.

The guards dragged me into a vast chamber, dimly lit by guttering torches. Shadows danced on the walls like specters. At the far end, a tall silhouette stood. Moonshifter himself.

He moved with a predator’s fluid grace as he approached, his intense black gaze boring into mine. In the flickering light, I could see he was skinny and wiry beneath his billowing crimson robes. A fringe of long brown hair, streaked with grey, framed his balding head. Elaborate runes embroidered his hem and cuffs in a darker shade of red.

“Ah, the brave little wife,” Moonshifter said, his voice a mocking purr. “I wasn’t sure you’d come. But I suppose love makes fools of us all.”

I lifted my chin, meeting his eyes with defiance even as my insides quaked. “Where is Benedetto? I came for him, not for your games.”

A hollow, mirthless laugh echoed through the chamber. “You think you’re in a position to make demands? How amusing.”

He circled me slowly, eyes tracking over every inch of my body. It was repellant and in no way sexual. It was like the stare of a creature considering whether you were worth the effort of eating.

“He’s safe—for now. But his fate depends entirely on your behavior.”

My fists clenched at my sides. The Sorcerer was toying with me, trying to intimidate me into submission. To be honest, near him in his place of power, I was intimidated. Just not willing to give up.

Schooling my expression, I forced my voice to remain level. “What do you want, Moonshifter? Why did you take him?”



His thin lips curled in a cruel smile, revealing the points of his teeth. “So many questions. Patience, dear Luna. All will be revealed in due time.”

He snapped his spindly fingers, and the guards grabbed my arms again, their claws pricking my flesh through the fabric. I struggled against them futilely as Moonshifter turned his back.

“Take her to the cells. Perhaps a night spent contemplating her predicament will help her with that stiff neck.” His dark eyes glittered with malice and something else, something hungry and unsettling.

As they hauled me away, I struggled to regain my balance. Pain exploded across my cheek as a heavy blow struck me, snapping my head to the side. I tasted blood, the coppery tang filling my mouth. Rough hands seized me again, dragging me down a dank, narrow passageway.

I thrashed against my captors, my boots scrabbling uselessly against the damp stone floor. Their grip only tightened, claws piercing my skin. I cried out, more in frustration than pain.

Abruptly, they hurled me forward. I stumbled, falling hard on my hands and knees. The impact jarred through me, my palms stinging from the grit on the floor. Behind me, a heavy door composed of silver bars set perhaps an inch apart clanged shut with a sense of finality that made my stomach drop.

Forcing myself up, I took in my new surroundings. A small, filthy cell, bare but for a thin pallet of straw. High in the wall, a tiny, barred window let in a single shaft of weak, watery moonlight. The air was thick with the stench of mold, urine, and despair.

I slumped against the wall, burying my face in my hands. Hot tears pricked at my lids, but I blinked them back savagely. Crying wouldn't help Benedetto. I had to be strong, to have faith in Sofia and our plan.

Though appearing broken wouldn't hurt.

Clasping my trembling fingers together, I squeezed my eyes shut and took a deep breath.

In the oppressive gloom of the cell, with walls so close I could stretch out my hands and touch either side, it was hard to hold onto hope. All I could do was wait, and hope, and count the hours. I would endure this. I had to.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

# LUNA

WHILE THE AIR IN THE DUNGEON CELL WAS THICK WITH THE scent of mildew, I was warm enough I didn't need anything more than my cloak to be comfortable. I paced back and forth in a small circle, trying to keep from going mad with tension.

I'd already tried using my magic, but something about the stones of the walls or the bars made it impossible for me to manifest it.

The single window cast a thin shaft of light into the cell. It was well past dawn. Speculating about what might happen had kept my thoughts swirling with fear and anger.

The sound of footsteps echoed through the corridor. A whiff of myrrh and jasmine perfume before she rounded the corner told me who was coming.

Vala stepped into view. She carried a goblet and wore a flowing dark gown. The velvety material seemed to move on its own, making her look as if she wore living shadows.

The torchlight flickered, casting eerie shadows across her sharp features.

"Oh, Luna," Vala said mildly. "You look dreadful. Life on the road doesn't suit you, does it? Believe me, if there'd been any other way I would have suggested it."

"Believe you?" I choked. "What are you doing here? With the man who drove your eldest son insane?"

I clenched my fists, forcing myself to stand tall.

She sighed. "Sacrifices must be made when the prize is rich enough, and Francesco was always the lesser brother, even if he was older. I appreciate that my lessons in punctuality and faithfulness bore such fruit. You've arrived right on time. Had it been Benedetto alone, he would probably have arrived much too early or late. Or gone to a completely different location."

What was she up to? Whatever it was, it couldn't be good. Her lust for power must've overcome her sense. But she was loyal to family, so it couldn't involve harming Benedetto. I could try to persuade her to turn on Moonshifter.

I approached the bars and curled my fingers around them. "What are you planning?"

Vala set the goblet on the floor, her expression almost regretful. "Oh, it's a simple thing, really. And for the betterment of the world. We need a conduit, to touch a greater power with the disruption and absorption of the dark moon's magic. And now we have what we need to do so."

A conduit? My stomach dropped as realization dawned. No... she can't mean...

Vala nodded. "Yes. I'm talking about the child."

I took a step back from the bars, both hands moving to my belly, as if to protect it.

"I had my suspicions, but seeing you up close, it's obvious you're pregnant. The flux of magic around you is greater, and your aura more disruptive. Moonshifter noticed it as well. If the baby carries the dark moon's gift, like you, then it's perfect for the ritual. It won't resist being used in the magic, unlike an adult. And it will have a blood link to me, so that I can use its magic, since I can't tap yours. If it carries the dark moon, of course, there's always a chance it takes after its father." She frowned.

I recoiled another step, wishing I had a weapon. "You planned this from the start?"

"Of course. I've trained from the start that planning is important, have I not." Vala stepped closer to the bars separating us, her eyes on mine, her tone gentle. "Why do you

think I pushed so hard for you to get pregnant? I needed a vessel, one that carried the right kind of magic, that was of my blood. And you, my daughter, were the perfect candidate to create it.”

I stared at Vala, my heart pounding as the familiar cold, calculating gaze met mine.

“You see, the beauty of this plan is that Moonshifter believes we’re working together. He thinks the ritual will benefit us both equally.” Her lips quirked with genuine amusement.

I stared at her in even more shock. Every word that came out of her mouth stunned me anew. “You’re planning to betray him. A sorcerer. You’re planning to try to betray him and take all the power for yourself *while you’re in his void blasted tower?*”

She was insane.

Vala shrugged, a delicate gesture. “Well, it would be a shame to share, wouldn’t it? He’s served his purpose. But after tomorrow, he’ll be nothing more than a pawn—a steppingstone to my goal.”

My mind raced. She hadn’t threatened me, yet. What did she plan for him?

Before I could ponder it further, Vala gazed down at my belly, her eyes gleaming with the light of a spell. I stiffened, unable to block it.

“Let’s make sure, shall we?” she murmured. “Ah, yes, it’s there—the dark moon’s gift. How fortunate. If it hadn’t been, we’d have had to try again, which would have delayed the ritual by a year.”

I jerked back, tears welling up. “You’re a monster. You’d use an innocent child for your twisted magic? Will she be harmed?”

Weary sorrow flitted across her face. “It will die; being so unformed, it won’t survive the magic channeled through it. You and Benedetto will have plenty of time to make others though. Think of this as a necessary sacrifice on your way to the throne.”

“We don’t want it!” I screamed at her.

“Too bad. Dimare needs an emperor and a god. Benedetto and you will rule, and I’ll take the mantle of godhood and raise the empire to even greater heights.

Become a god?

The fact of her madness chilled me to the bone. “Scald the moon.”

Vala laughed. “Perhaps I will. I’ll see you later, Luna.”

Moving with care, she set the goblet in a clever contraption on the cell door that allowed her to pass it into the cell without opening the door. Then she walked away.

I didn’t want to drink it, but I was very thirsty. Sniffing, it held notes of hibiscus and honey. I tasted it with my tongue. No aftertaste; it seemed to be a simple tea.

I took a sip and settled to wait for the effects before I took another.

The air around me felt suffocating, but before I could fight it, sleep yanked me under. The chill of the stone against my back faded away, replaced by the familiar barren plain of my dreams.

“Luna,” a gentle yet urgent voice called out.

I turned to see Olivia, her ghostly form shimmering like moonlight on water.

“Grandmother, I don’t know what to do,” I said, tears spilling down my cheeks. “They’re going to use my baby in a ritual. I can’t stop them.”

Olivia’s face softened with sympathy. “You *can* stop them. But you need to learn. There’s still a few things more I can teach you.”

She stepped closer, reaching out to touch my forehead. A warmth spread through me at her touch, easing some of my despair.

“Your magic is powerful. The dark moon’s power is subtle—it can disrupt, yes, but it can also conceal. It can bend the very

fabric of reality if you know how to wield it.”

I met her gaze, a flicker of hope igniting within me. “What do I need to know to save my child?”

“Listen closely, then. We haven’t much time...”

Olivia guided me through a series of exercises, her ghostly hands correcting my form and her gentle instructions echoing in my mind. I focused intently, feeling the dark moon’s magic thrumming through my veins, sharper and more controlled than ever before.

“Visualize your power as a cloak,” Olivia murmured, her fingertips brushing my temples. “Wrap it around yourself, let it conceal you from sight and sense.”

I closed my eyes, picturing the magic as a shimmering, translucent veil. It rippled over my skin, cool and smooth as silk. It settled around me, hugging my form like a second skin.

“Good,” Olivia praised, a note of pride in her voice. “Now, extend that cloak outward. Imagine it stretching, expanding, until it encompasses your surroundings.”

I obeyed, mentally pushing the boundaries of my power. The veil stretched and grew, enveloping the barren dreamscape around us. A faint hum filled the air as the magic took hold, bending the very fabric of reality to my will. The flickering of my child’s magic joined me, forging a delicate link between us.

“Remember,” Olivia said, her voice beginning to fade as the dream dissolved at the edges. “The magic is yours to command. Use it wisely, and you can free yourself—and your child. Feel your son’s magic, and link with it. Together, you’re more powerful than apart.”

I opened my eyes, meeting her gaze with a fierce determination. “I will, Grandmother. I swear it.”

She smiled, a bittersweet curve of her lips as her form shimmered and grew indistinct. “I believe in you. Always have, always will.”

With those final words, Olivia vanished, the dream shattering into a thousand glittering shards. I felt myself falling, tumbling through the void between sleep and waking. But even as consciousness beckoned, I clung to the newfound knowledge Olivia had bestowed upon me.

I gasped awake, my body chilled to the bone from the unyielding stone beneath me. But even as the cold seeped into my flesh, my mind burned with a newfound clarity—sharp, focused, and utterly determined.

The fear still lurked within me, an icy shadow that threatened to overwhelm. But it was no match for the fierce resolve that now coursed through my veins.

Pushing myself up from the floor, I brushed off the dust and grime clinging to my skin. My mind raced as I began to piece together a plan, each thought slotting into place like the intricate workings of a timepiece.

I needed to use everything Olivia had taught me in the dreamscape in her visits. Every scrap of knowledge, every whispered secret—it all had to count now. And I couldn't afford to hesitate; the ritual loomed on the horizon, my child's doom.

Pressing a hand to my belly I whispered fiercely, "I promise you I won't let them hurt you. I'll fight for you until my last breath."

The words hung in the air, a solemn vow. This child—my child—would not be a sacrificial lamb for their dark ambitions. They would know a life beyond these cold walls and cruel machinations.

I would make sure of it. When Vala and Moonshifter came for me—and they would come—I'd be ready.

Ready to fight. Ready to win.

I settled back against the wall, letting my body relax even the dark moon's power thrummed through my veins, a constant reminder of the strength I now possessed.

There would be a way out of this nightmare.



But first, I needed information. I needed to know exactly what Vala and Moonshifter were planning, and when the ritual was set to take place.

I closed my eyes again, reaching out with my senses, trying to feel for any hint of their presence nearby. The dark moon's magic rippled outwards like invisible tendrils, probing the corridors beyond my cell.

At first, there was nothing—just the heavy silence of the stone walls and the distant drip of water somewhere in the depths. But then, faintly, I caught a flicker of something else.

A pulse of energy, hot and wild, like a roaring wind that changed the landscape as it blew.

Moonshifter.

My eyes snapped open, my heart pounding against my ribs. He was close—too close for comfort.

But even as fear coiled in my gut, a new determination rose to meet it.

This was my chance. My chance to listen, to learn, and to use that knowledge against them. Perhaps even to find where they'd imprisoned Benedetto.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for whatever lay ahead.

Now was the time to wait.

To watch.

And to plan my next move in this deadly game of shadows and secrets.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

# BENEDETTO

PAIN THROBBED THROUGH MY SKULL AS I STIRRED ON THE soft mattress, a luxury my battered body welcomed. My hand brushed sheets that felt like fine linen. Rising on my elbow, I surveyed the room. Polished wood paneling covered the walls, two cushioned chairs sat bolted securely to the floor. A table, also bolted in place. Nothing I could grab and use as a weapon, though I might be able to shatter the table.

A gilded cage. I swung my legs over the side of the bed. Why?

One of the chairs had a tunic and trousers laid on it. While I didn't care that I was naked, clothed was preferable. I put them on. Fine cloth, again, and cut for a man of my height and build.

The solid wood door withstood my testing. No windows. Where was Luna? Was she safe? Could I trust Sofia to get her away?

A spike of dread pierced my gut. If they'd caught her...

The door opened.

I bit back a surprised oath. *Mother?*

She glided in, poised and confident in an elegant dark gown, not a hair out of place. "Good morning. I trust you're finding your accommodations comfortable?"

Several clues clicked into a pattern I liked not at all. Her political machinations, my brother's condition, my father's illness... My marriage.

I'd worried about the wrong person betraying me.

“Where is Luna?” Despite my best effort, my hands balled into fists.

Mother waved a dismissive hand. “She’s fine. For now. It’s good to know I didn’t underestimate your intelligence.”

I gritted my teeth. “Why, mother?”

A tiny smile played on Mother’s lips as she stepped closer. Her magic coursed around her, forming a shield around her. Intelligent move. I was angry enough to wring her neck. “When we return to Kalion, you’ll take up the emperor’s wreath. The throne. Imagine it, you as the ruler of the Dimare Empire.”

I snorted, not bothering to hide my disdain. “And what would that make me? Your puppet on the throne?”

Her smile widened, eyes glinting with dark amusement. “Oh. You wound me. I’m offering you power, true power. Mine will be greater, but at that point ruling the empire won’t be my concern.”

Fury mixed with fear surged through my veins. What was she grasping for? “You’re working with Moonshifter after what he did to Francesco? How could you betray your own family like this? What are you doing, Mother?”

She sighed, weary patience infusing the sound. “Who says I won’t use Moonshifter to cure Francesco when this is done? Sadly, Francesco is weak and unfit to rule. He’s always been a fragile, approval-seeking creature, lacking the strength the empire needs to thrive. The strength you have.”

Rage boiled inside me, so intense it nearly choked the breath from my lungs. “He’s our blood, the rightful heir to both clan and empire. And you *let* Moonshifter drive him insane?”

“Francesco was unlikely to produce an heir,” she said coolly. “He preferred the company of men, and the empire can’t afford a barren line. We need strength, someone who can revitalize the kingdom. Someone like you.”

She continued, settling in one of the chairs, “His lack of discipline drove him mad when he read Ruin’s book. I’ve worked to fix this situation in my own way. My more effective

way. Shortly after the ritual is done, you'll be emperor, Francesco will be sane, and I will be a goddess to replace the dead patron of Dimare."

She'd lost her mind. That was the only explanation.

I paced the room, trying to contain my temper. The polished floorboards gleamed mockingly beneath my feet. I whirled to face her. "Where did you find this ritual? It's madness, Mother. The gods are absent, and humans aren't meant to replace them. Otherwise they would have, centuries ago."

Mother folded her hands. "Don't be naive. Power is never given, it's taken. And I'm reaching for the ultimate power. The ritual is one of Ruin's, altered and improved by me."

I shook my head in wonder. "You'll succeed where Sorcerers fear to tread? Power isn't worth anything if you get it like this."

Her expression hardened, any pretense of maternal warmth vanishing. "Really? If you had power, you wouldn't be here, would you? Power gives the ability to protect what you care for, be it a cause or a person. Wearing the empire's wreath Benedetto, you have the strength to lead the Dimare into a glorious future."

She was insane. I swallowed against the bile rising in my throat. Completely mad with lust for power. And she wanted to drag me along with her.

"You're insane," I whispered. "And I won't be a tool."

Her thin lips curved into a sharp smile. "Tool? No, my dear. You're the key to the future of the empire."

She rose, approaching me. "After the ritual tonight, I will take my place as a living god, and you'll be set on the throne. The empire will be unstoppable."

The room spun around me. I couldn't fathom the depth of her ruthlessness, the cold calculation behind her elegant mask.

Mother moved closer, her perfume enveloping me. No notes of jasmine in it, only myrrh, the scent of death and funerals. "Think of it. Luna and Francesco at your side, and me as the

protector of the empire above all of you. The conquests and glory you'll find. Just cooperate."

I bent my lips in a smile I hoped looked sincere. "And what of Luna? If you have her here, is she to be a part of the ritual?"

The expression must have fooled her. Mother smiled at me, happiness in her face. "I'm glad you've accepted your part. Yes, she will. She's agreed to do it."

Mother was always an excellent liar. Luna would never agree. "And the babe?"

"That might be a problem, but even if she miscarries from being the power focus, you're both young. And there's no guarantee that she wouldn't lose the child in the normal course of things."

I drew in a long breath, tainted by her perfume. The walls of the chamber closed in, the air thick and suffocating. As I met my mother's unwavering gaze, I realized with sinking dread that I might be out of options.

"You're talking about using an unborn child in this magic ritual," I said with deliberation. "My child. Luna's child. Your grandchild."

Mother spread her hands. "You're going to rule. Sometimes a sacrifice must be made for the greater good. How many more infants will be safe because of the sacrifice of this one? Imagine what we will accomplish once it's done."

"You're insane," I said wonderingly. "There's nothing you won't do, no line you won't cross, is there?"

Her smile sharpened, a predator scenting blood. "I prefer to think of it as being willing to do whatever it takes. Much like you, my son. How many ghouls did you help over the years? The empire needs a strong hand to guide it. With the power to make my vision real, we'll be unstoppable."

Mother reached up and patted my cheek, her touch like ice against my skin.

"You'll come to see the wisdom of my plan," she said, her tone comforting. "Once the ritual is over, you'll be more

*amenable* to what's best. But if you cooperate willingly, you can have your wife back before then. You can support her as she is prepared for the ritual."

I jerked away from her. "You want to strip me of my free will."

"Only if necessary," Mother said, her gaze never wavering. "But if you make the right choices on your own, there won't be any need for that."

I took a deep, shuddering breath, forcing myself to speak calmly. "And Moonshifter will cure Francesco?" I asked quietly. "Reverse what was done to him?"

Mother walked to the door and rested her hand on the knob. "It should be feasible. Francesco was a necessary sacrifice, but one I regret. He's still my son."

She glided from the room.

The truth hit me like a physical blow, driving the air from my lungs. My brother, my lost, beloved brother, had spent more than a decade insane and in pain because he was a pawn. A disposable piece.

Just like me. Just like Luna and our unborn child. We were all just tools to her, means to an end.

I wanted to scream, to rage, to tear this room apart with my bare hands. But it would do no good. Mother held all the cards, and she knew it.

Mother had been meticulous, weaving her web with a spider's patience and cunning. She'd left nothing to chance. I sank back into the chair, my fists clenched so tightly my knuckles turned white. Try as I might, I couldn't see anything to do to circumvent her plan.

Except me, I realized suddenly. She thought she could control me, bend me to her will before the ritual. But she was wrong.

I might've been trapped, but I wasn't helpless. I had my wits, my training, and my magic. And I had something else, something far more powerful: my love for Luna and our unborn child.

That was my strength. That was what would keep me fighting,  
no matter what they did to me.

*Forgive me, Luna. I hope you'll understand, if it comes to it.*

I'd die first.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

# LUNA

THE STONE WAS COLD AND ROUGH AGAINST MY SKIN AS THE mongrel creatures dragged me through the dark halls. I struggled against their hold, but there were many of them and only one of me. The air thickened, heavy with a sense of malevolent power as they carried me toward massive iron doors engraved with glowing runes I didn't recognize.

With an ominous groan, the doors swung open, revealing a chamber that made my heart seize with dread. An enormous arcane circle dominated the center of the room, its lines pulsing with eerie light. The hybrids hauled me forward, their claws digging into my arms. I writhed and fought them, but it was useless. They were too strong.

They dragged me to the center, clamping iron chains on me hand and foot, tearing off my clothing with their claws. Then they ran from the room, squealing and hooting as if they were in pain.

The magic gathered in the room was old and twisted, making the air hum like a plucked instrument string. It pressed down on me, squeezing out my breath. My vision blurred with the force of it.

The runes etched into the stone seemed to writhe before my eyes, ancient symbols of binding and dark invocation. I recognized a few from Rose's lessons. Conduits to channel vast amounts of power, fueled by blood and suffering. The realization turned my stomach. I had to find a way to disrupt this foul magic, but how? The working was far beyond my meager skills.



Even if I linked with the babe.

A flash of movement caught my eye. At the edge of the circle, a huge grey wolf prowled the perimeter, its green eyes gleaming with uncanny intelligence. As I watched, transfixed, the beast's form rippled and changed. Bones cracked and reformed, fur receded, until the wolf became a tall man in a white robe covered with dizzying embroidery in couched silver and gold wire.

Moonshifter. The architect of all this horror.

I sagged against the chains, despair rising in my throat. I couldn't let Moonshifter and Vala succeed. Too much was at stake. My child...

Living in a world where Vala was a god didn't sit well with me either.

There had to be an opening, a way to fight back. The alternative, that Benedetto and I would become puppets of her, and our child would die to fuel her ascension - was too terrible to contemplate.

Disruption was my power, but I couldn't use it too soon. I had to wait for my moment.

Vala swept into the room like a poisoned wind, her emerald gown trailing behind her in ripples like the ocean. A small, content smile played about her lips as she crossed the chamber to where I stood. She moved with her usual languid grace, as if this were a day like any other.

"Poor Luna," she murmured, stopping before me. She reached out one pale hand to stroke my cheek. Her touch was cool and gentle. "You look so frightened. Don't fret, my dear. It will all be over soon. And the world will be a better place."

I jerked my face away from her caress, my lips curling in disgust. "You're insane," I spat. "This ritual, using an unborn child, it's monstrous beyond words!"

Vala sighed, a weary sound entirely at odds with the determination in her eyes. "Foolish girl. You understand nothing. We aren't destroying anything. I'm taking back what should have been the fate of the empire. The old gods are

dead, and something needs to fill that void. What happens to a single child doesn't outweigh the needs of the many."

"It matters to me!" The words tore from my throat, ragged and fierce. I strained against the chains, knowing it was useless but needing to do something, anything. The rough metal scraped my wrists, but I welcomed the pain. It helped me focus. "I won't let you sacrifice my child to your ambition. I'll fight you to my last breath!"

Vala shook her head, her expression compassionate. "It's hard, I know."

Her gaze dropped to my belly. "You'll have more. Mothers lose children. Accept it and cherish the ones you have in the future. They'll be the happier for this one's sacrifice."

I glared at her, pouring all my hatred into my eyes. I wouldn't dignify her idiocy with a response. She was wrong. My child wasn't a thing, a mere sacrifice, but a tiny, precious life.

I dragged my gaze away from Vala's face.

Shouting and struggles announced Benedetto's arrival, carried as I'd been, but successful in hurting some of the creatures, even pinned arms and legs. A gesture from Moonshifter left him rigid and silent as they chained him to the far wall.

My heart lurched against my ribs. His shirt was torn and stained with blood, his black hair disheveled, his face and body bruised. But his eyes... When they met mine, they blazed with such love and fury that it stole my breath.

A circle of magic surrounded Benedetto, tracing runes that arced in a half circle to join the wall where he was chained. Both the circle and Benedetto's shackles glowed with a sick purple light. Pure magic, strong enough to hold even the strongest. I could feel the thrum of the spell from across the room, a wall of force caging my husband's power. They'd left his sword belt and blade on him, as if to mock his helplessness.

"Luna!" Benedetto's shout cracked with desperation. He lunged against the chains, muscles straining. The magic flickered but held.

Vala turned to him, a disapproving frown on her lips. “Still you struggle? How foolish. You must know you’ve lost. All the pieces are in place.”

Her voice went to pure frost. “And if you plan to die, well... I’m sure with the proper persuasion, your Francesco could put a child in her for us. The bloodline must continue, after all. So put that thought out of your head.”

I gagged, gorge rising in my throat. The image Vala’s words conjured was so horrific, so cruel, that I couldn’t breathe. Using Francesco like that, after all he’d suffered... And Benedetto, forced to imagine it... It was a nightmare made manifest.

It was a cruel threat made by a woman who knew her son.

Benedetto roared his rage, but I heard the edge of despair beneath the fury. Vala had trapped us utterly. If I fought, they’d hurt him until I shattered. And if he died... I couldn’t even contemplate it. The violation, the brutality, the grief, it would destroy me as surely as any magic.

Vala knew it too. It was written in every line of her determined face. She had me. Had us. There was no escape, no clever gambit that could win free. Unless...

A thought stirred in the back of my mind, fragile as a soap bubble, the remnants of a dream hidden until this moment. The spell. I could disrupt it, with the child... It would be almost impossible, with the magical restraints on me. And so, so dangerous, with the amount of power Vala and Moonshifter were pulling through me and the child. But what choice did I have? Cooperating doomed everything and everyone I loved.

Our eyes met across the room. I tried to put everything I felt into that look. All my love, my fear, my regret. And my determination. One way or another, I would not let Vala win this. Even if it cost my life.

Benedetto’s gaze held mine, and I knew he understood. His chin dipped, just slightly, and I saw the same resolve settle over him. Live or die, we would face this together. No matter what.

If nothing else, we'd have the afterlife. In true Dimare fashion.

The chamber fell suddenly, utterly silent, save for the thump of my own pulse in my ears. For a moment, everything stood still. Then Moonshifter stepped forward to the edge of the circle, his embroidered robes rustling. He raised his hands, and the runes around me flared to burning life.

The sorcerer's voice rose, echoing from the stone walls, a guttural chant in a language that conjured its meaning to your mind, even if the words heard meant nothing.

The syllables twisted and writhed, as if fighting the very air. Moonshifter's hands moved in patterns that seared themselves into my vision, impossibly intricate and dizzyingly wrong.

With a chill, I recognized the spell. The gestures, the cadence of the chant... Sofia had taught them to Rose.

Though she refused to let Rose attempt it. A ritual to transport us to the godplane.

The air pressure dropped until my ears popped and I gasped for breath. Above the circle, reality shimmered and bent, like water about to boil. Distortion spiraled out from the heart of the spell, and a warp opened in the center of the vortex, a hole that was not a hole, leading everywhere and nowhere at all. The temperature plummeted until I could see my breath. Power crackled along my limbs, dancing over my skin in razor-edged sparks.

"Yes," Vala murmured. Her face shone with stern purpose in the eldritch light. "This will be done soon. The power of the dark moon enhanced by the ritual will fracture the wards on the Lord of Nightmare's power and tap into the energy of the godplane."

She raised her arms as if in welcome. "We will ascend beyond mortality. Become the new gods this world so desperately needs."

The words battered me like fists. Blood roared in my ears, and I sagged in the chains, shaking uncontrollably.

The spell rose in me, and I twisted my magic, creating it subtly, as my grandmother had taught me.

Connection. I linked my magic with the wisp that was my babe's.

Deep in my abdomen, a sharp, rending pain lanced through me, doubling me over. But it wasn't the child trying to tear free, as I'd first feared. No, this was a psychic pain, a burst of distress and fury pouring from the life cradled in my womb.

Through the pain, I felt a fierce swell of protectiveness, of determination. This precious mote of life, my son or daughter, was crying out to me, begging me to save us both from the horrors to come.

It was a bond deep as blood, strong as life, forged in our magic. I closed my eyes, trying desperately to send soothing thoughts to the little one inside me, even as another bolt of shared agony made me gasp.

Now was the time. I had to turn my link to my baby into a weapon and wait to strike. To channel the dark moon's magic through both of us and use it to shatter Moonshifter's spell from within.

If I failed, if I let Vala become a god at the cost of my child's life... I would never forgive myself. The guilt would eat me alive as surely as any godly wrath.

I bit my lip until I tasted blood, fighting to master the pain. Straightening in my chains, spine stiff with defiance. I had to wait for my moment, fending away the damage to the babe, taking it into myself.

One way or another, I would teach these twisted fools the cost of threatening my family.

Between one blink and the next, the world shattered and reformed. Coarse sand and white dust scraped my feet and the sun beat down like a hammer, scouring away all thought. I squinted against the sudden glare, my chains digging into raw skin as I twisted.

This was where my dreams happened? I'd been to the Godplane unknowing? Would the dark shrouded figure, whatever he was, manifest here too?

The barren desert stretched out to the horizon in all directions, broken only by wind-scoured boulders. Heat shimmers danced in the distance, mocking my thirst. But Moonshifter's ritual circle had come with us, every rune and sigil intact.

The magic pulsed under the merciless sun, trails of silver and gold and dark purple burning in the very air.

Vala stood beside the circle, her arms raised in raw exultation, murmuring a chant very different from Moonshifter's eldritch invocation. "Void, hear your daughter. I summon the dead god's power contained in your depths, through the dark moon's power. The wards are broken, and I stand ready."

The surge of magic jolted me, twisting as if in the connection I'd forged with my babe.

Shock jolted through me, driving out even the pain in my belly. "You follow the Void?"

"I follow what will achieve my ends," whispered Vala. "I will see Dimare, and my family covered in the glory we deserve."

A clatter of chains and a strangled roar snapped Vala's attention away from me. Benedetto. He thrashed against his bonds, his muscles bunching, his face a mask of rage and frustration. My heart twisted at the sight. He was killing himself trying to reach me, uncaring of the damage to his own body.

"Still he persists. Admirable, in its way." Vala watched Benedetto sadly. "I wish he could understand why this is for the best."

Her words scoured my soul like the desert wind. She was utterly, completely mad. And worse, her madness made a terrible sense. I could see the shape of her plan now, and it filled me with despair.

The gods really were dead and their power in the Void, and my child would grant the ascension she craved. She had thought of everything.

And yet, Benedetto still fought. Seeing him, the wild defiance in his eyes, the set of his jaw, kindled an ember of hope in my

breast. As he could rage against this fate, distracting them, I'd wait and strike.

A shadow fell over the sun, and the sky darkened to a bruised violet. The wind picked up, scouring the desert with flying grit. On its heels came a sound that made every hair on my body stand erect - a keening wail, an eagle's shriek, the hunting scream of some unnatural beast.

Fear rolled before it. I'd heard that cry in my dreams.

In the center of the circle, a vortex of starless black ripped open above our heads, devouring light, thought, sanity. Ribbons of silver nothingness swirled out from its maw, enveloping Vala and Moonshifter.

They shone so bright I turned my eyes away rather than be blinded.

I collapsed to my knees, gagging on the waves of crushing force emanating from the ritual. It felt like being buried alive, like drowning in power. My pulse roared in my ears and cold sweat drenched my skin. I could barely breathe, barely think. I held the bond with the babe.

But through the haze of pain and fear, I saw it - Vala and Moonshifter's utter distraction. Their absorption in the power pouring into them.

Their iron control had slipped.

Now!

While the ritual continued, their bodies would be vulnerable to a physical force. If I could shatter the bonds restraining Benedetto.

I gathered the magic, mine and the babe's. A cold, clear energy, pure and piercing as moonlight on snow. It sang through my blood and nerves.

The dark moon's magic, our birthright. A legacy of power, devouring madness and secret wisdom.

I had only barely touched this force before, even when Grandmother trained me. So much magic could master me, erasing all that I was. But now, here, it was my only hope. My

sole weapon against the horror that threatened everything I held dear.

I closed my eyes, shutting out the nightmare vortex, the terrifying light, even Benedetto's desperate struggle. I focused inward, diving deep into the icy ocean that swelled beneath my heart. I visualized the gossamer thread that bound me to my child, pulsing with argent fire. With infinite care, I gathered up blazing droplets of that power.

It burned like a coal in my mind's grasp, searing away thought, doubt, even self. But I refused to let it consume me. This was my child's strength, but it was mine to direct. Slowly, agonizingly, I shaped the droplet into a shard of pure moonlight, sharp as thought and cold as death.

The working fought me, bucking wildly in my hold. It had been too long denied and desired to run rampant. But I held fast, pouring all my iron will into the effort. Then, with whispered words of power that flayed my throat, I hurled my spell-blade across the shimmering air, straight at the chains that bound my beloved Benedetto.

The shackles were woven of magics far beyond my ken, and I was all but exhausted in mind and body. I could so easily miss, or fail to cut deep enough, or gods forbid, slice into Benedetto himself with this wild, unfettered magic.

But I had no other choice. No recourse but this desperate gamble. So I poured all that I had, all that I was, into this single strike. My love, my defiance, my raging, unquenchable need to protect my own.

For a heartbeat that lasted an eternity, my spell-blade flew through the turbulent air. Then, with a discordant chime that set my teeth on edge, it struck the chains binding Benedetto. Sickly purple light flared, and the manacles flashed incandescent. Hairline cracks raced along the magic-forged metal and Benedetto vanished in a flare of blinding silver.

"Bene, now!" I screamed, my voice cracking with strain.  
"Strike hard!"



And strike he did. Between one blink and the next, Benedetto appeared behind Moonshifter. The mage began to turn, too late. Benedetto's sword hissed from its sheath in a whisper of steel, and he lunged forward, his eyes blazing with fury.

Moonshifter threw himself aside with preternatural speed, and the blade meant for his black heart scored deep along his ribs instead, spraying blood. Liquid crimson splattered the sand as the two men crashed together, grappling furiously.

"Foolish boy," Moonshifter hissed, his voice edged in pain and mockery. "You cannot win. And when you fall, I will shatter your mind as I shattered your brother's. The mad king and madder pauper. What a pair you'll make!"

Benedetto snarled, redoubling his efforts. His blade flashed in the eldritch light as he hammered at Moonshifter's defenses, raining down blows. The mage slipped and swayed like an eel, impossibly nimble, but even he couldn't evade that storm of steel forever.

In the heart of the ritual circle, the vortex pulsed erratically, reacting to the disruption. Streamers of black and silver fire ripped free, scorching sigils into the sand. The earth beneath my knees buckled like a wild horse, and the sky split open with thunder. The air tasted of blood, ashes, and the terrible sweetness of putrefaction.

Magic, raw and untamed, rioted within the circle. It battered at my senses, threatening to sweep me away in sheer chaos. At the same time, I felt the dark moon's power flare again in my core - stronger, wilder, an ocean of ice and fire begging to be unleashed.

The baby... our magics resonated in a mounting crescendo. I could taste the copper of our shared blood on my tongue. We were one in that endless moment, bound by a link that transcended flesh.

With an effort that nearly broke me, I forced down my instinctive panic, my urge to lock down my mind and body against this howling invasion. Instead, I threw open every door and window of my soul, inviting in the child's rising tide of magic.

It crashed into me with the force of a glacier calving, and for a terrifying instant, I thought it would rip me apart, scouring away all that I was. But I held fast, pouring every ounce of my love and desperate will into the mental embrace. I would not shatter. I could not. Too much depended on me.

Slowly, agonizingly, I wrestled the surging tide of magic into submission. It fought me every step of the way, yearning to break free. But I persisted, weaving my own fledgling power around it like bands of spider-silk, delicate but strong.

Shaking and drenched in icy sweat, I unleashed our dark moon-magic and aimed it at the draining spell that still blazed above us.

“Let us end this nightmare. Together,” I whispered to my unborn little one.

The combined magics, mine and my baby’s, roared out of us. It was the most exquisite agony I had ever known, an ecstasy annihilating thought and self. I was a river of light, a sunbeam in flesh, a falling star given breath.

And that torrent smashed into the ritual’s manifestation with the force of a thousand storms. The portal shattered like glass, and the backlash exploded through the ritual circle in a wave of coruscating force.

Dimly, distantly, I heard Vala’s scream and Moonshifter’s curse. The earth bucked and heaved beneath me, spasms of agony coiling in me as all my limbs cramped. But all sensation was washed out and faded, happening to some other soul in some other world.

I could feel myself ebbing, my mind and spirit eroded to feed that blast of magic. The spell that connected me to my child guttered and vanished.

We had given our all and more. Both of us were done.

My grandmother stood above me, shaking her head and weeping. Another woman knelt by her, a woman of my own age, with hair bright as flame.

She embraced me tenderly. “Little one, baby girl, fight to stay.”

“Luna!” Benedetto’s desperate cry cut through the haze, banishing the vision. “Love, no. Hold on! I love you!”

I clung to his voice like a lifeline, letting it draw me back. With the dregs of my strength, I let go of the other world, with my battered flesh, feeling every scrape and bruise as if for the first time. My eyes fluttered open.

The world went mad.

The desert, the ritual circle, the eldritch storm, all of it shattered into glimmering shards, leaving only the blood-soaked stone of the castle chamber. The magic backlash smashed into the far wall with a deafening boom, shaking dust and rubble from the ceiling.

Benedetto lay beside me, wounded, a scorch mark in his back. Moonshifter, fists burning, surveyed the two of us with an unholy rage in his eyes. He raised one hand, and in his palm bloomed a sphere of oily darkness.

Across the room, Vala staggered to her feet, her emerald gown reduced to scorched and tattered rags. Her face was a mask of disbelief, twisted almost beyond recognition.

“Blast you,” Moonshifter spoke, his voice raw and ragged. “You haven’t won. Die, both of you!”

He aimed that swirling unlight at both of us.

With a strength I didn’t know I possessed, I lurched upright, throwing myself between the bolt and Benedetto’s crumpled form. He was still breathing, but a crimson stain was spreading beneath him with terrifying speed. My love. My heart. I would not let this monster take him from me.

I gathered the tattered remnants of my power, mine and the baby’s, weaving them into a gossamer shield. It was barely more than a soap bubble, fragile and flickering, but it was all I had left. All that stood between those I loved and oblivion.

“No,” I said. “This ends here. You will not touch my child. You will not hurt my husband. You will touch nothing I love.”

He sneered at me, a hellish light burning in his obsidian eyes. “You can’t stop me, little girl. You’re spent. Broken. You have

nothing left. And I have the power I took, even yet.”

Behind him, the air flickered, the shifting colors of an unfamiliar magic forming. If that were Sofia and Soulrider, we had a chance. I just needed to buy a little more time...

I met his gaze with my own.

Oddly, I felt no fear. Only a calm, crystalline certainty. “You’re wrong. I have something you can never understand...”

“And that would be?” he raised a brow, his voice mocking.

As I hoped, he’d hold his hand to toy with me before he blasted us.

“Love.”

He stared at me a moment, then laughed raucously. “Do you think you’re in a play, little girl? Love is the least powerful force in this world. It bends, it breaks, and you can buy it in the market for cheap, ten loves for a penny. I’d hoped you had something of interest, but I’ll give you a fast death for making me laugh.”

Vala screamed, a sound of rage and despair, and hurled a bolt of magic at him from behind.

It scattered, and the remaining force struck my shield and drove me to my knees, nearly shattering my hasty defenses. Nearly, but not quite.

Moonshifter turned and blasted her.

I held fast, pouring all that I was into that luminous barrier as they fought. I thought of Benedetto, of our stolen moments of tenderness, our dreams of a future. I thought of the tiny spark of life nestled beneath my heart, defenseless and precious beyond words. I thought of the world I wanted to make for them, for all of us.

And with that vision burning in my mind’s eye, I pushed back against the darkness. I refused to yield. I would never yield, not even to despair.

A brilliant flash of light split the air, so intense that it seared my eyes even through closed lids. The ground shook with the force of a Name being invoked, the syllables reverberating through my bones like the tolling of a great bell.

They'd come at last.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

# BENEDETTO

THE METALLIC TASTE OF BLOOD FILLED MY MOUTH AS I struggled to draw breath, each inhale sending shards of agony lancing through my chest. The strange place pulsed with energy, the very air seeming to warp and twist. Dust coated my throat, turning tacky where it mixed with the blood that seeped from my many wounds. It felt as if the ground itself was feeding on my life force, hungrily drinking in the crimson offering.

I blinked, my vision blurring at the edges as I fought to stay conscious. Pain radiated from every inch of my battered body, a searing testament to the dark magic Moonshifter had unleashed upon me. Gashes marred my skin, weeping crimson tears that stained the strange, shifting ground beneath me. Each breath was a battle, my lungs straining against the oppressive atmosphere that pressed down like a smothering weight.

Through the haze of agony, I saw Mother, her face contorted with rage as she charged another blast of energy at Moonshifter. Time seemed to slow, the seconds stretching into an eternity. Dread turned my blood to ice as I realized who stood next to me—Luna, my beloved Luna, standing defiantly with a rapidly eroding shield.

Moonshifter fell and Luna staggered as the blast of magic cracked her shield.

I couldn't let her die. The thought sliced through the fog of pain, sharp and desperate. Panic clawed at my heart, a wild, feral thing that threatened to consume me. I couldn't lose her

now. Images flashed through my mind—Luna’s rare smile, the warmth of her hand in mine, the stubborn set of her jaw when she faced a challenge. A lifetime of moments, precious and fleeting, all hanging in the balance.

When I tried to move, pain slammed into my chest with the force of a thousand hammers, stealing the breath from my lungs and sending me sprawling backward. White-hot agony seared through my veins, setting every nerve alight with searing torment. I tasted copper on my tongue as blood bubbled past my lips, the metallic tang mingling with the acrid smell of ozone.

A brilliant flash of light split the air, so intense that it seared my eyes. The ground shook with the force of a portal being punched through the defensive magic of the circle.

Through the haze of pain, I sought Luna’s face, my vision narrowing until she was all I could see. Her gray eyes were wide with shock and fear, a shimmering veil of unshed tears making them glisten like stars in the night sky. I tried to speak, but the words caught in my throat, choked by the blood that filled my mouth.

“I love you,” I managed to whisper, my voice a broken rasp that barely carried over the crackling energy that surrounded us. It was a truth I had kept hidden, buried beneath layers of guilt and self-loathing. But in that moment, faced with the very real possibility of losing her forever, I could no longer hold it back.

My lips curved into a soft, broken smile, pouring every ounce of emotion into that simple gesture. Love, regret, longing—all the things I had never dared to voice aloud. My vision blurred, Luna’s face swimming in and out of focus as the darkness crept in at the edges. I clung to the image of her, desperate to memorize every detail, to etch her into my very soul.

In the distance, I heard Luna cry out, her voice raw with anguish and fury.

Then the darkness claimed me, and I knew no more.

Consciousness returned to me in hazy fragments, the world filtered through a veil of pain. I heard the crackle of magic, felt a breeze of cool air. Blinking, I tried to focus, my mind sluggishly trying to make sense of the scene before me. Sofia and an unfamiliar man stood amidst the chaos, their arrival as sudden and jarring as a lightning strike.

A shimmering portal pulsed behind them, the edges crackling with residual energy. Sofia stepped forward, her movements precise and controlled. She carried Pip under one arm as a farm wife would a chicken, despite his squirms.

Her cool gaze swept over the room, assessing the situation with a detached efficiency that spoke of years of experience.

“It seems we arrived just in time,” Sofia remarked. She moved toward Luna, a protective aura shimmering around her like a translucent shield. I watched through half-lidded eyes as the man followed, his expression an inscrutable mask of serenity.

Magic thundered around him, almost tangible in its weight.

As a man, he was perhaps my height and moved well. Probably competent with a blade, but I’d beat him sword to sword. A narrow face, brown hair, and the coldest hazel eyes I’d ever seen.

My instincts screamed danger.

“My master, this is Luna and Benedetto d’Alvarez.” Sofia released Pip and knelt by me, tracing a whiff of healing to dull the pain. He flew to Luna, who sat back on her heels, gray eyes intent on Soulrider, watching him as if ready to spring at his throat.

He met her gaze, and a genuine smile crossed his face. “Peace, lady. I mean you and your husband no harm.”

His gaze sharpened with a predatory intensity as he surveyed the area.

“Moonshifter,” he murmured, the name falling from his lips like a dark invocation. “How fortuitous.”

There was a weight to his words, a hidden depth that hinted at a complex history between the two men. And not a pleasant



one.

I struggled to stay conscious, to make sense of the shifting dynamics in the room. I hadn't expected this. What bargain had Sofia made to bring him here? Had she made it in Luna's name or mine? The implications hung heavy in the air, a looming shadow of consequences yet to be revealed.

If it saved my love, I'd pay with my soul or whatever else the sorcerer required.

With a deliberate care, Soulrider walked to the intricate runes outlining the magic circle that bound us and dragged his foot through. The action was as casual as it was profound.

The hum of power dissipated, and the familiar contours of the room reasserted themselves. The air shimmered, reality reshaping itself like a mirage solidifying into tangible form.

Motion caught my eye. Mother met my eyes with a final, defiant glare, disappeared through a side door into the shadows beyond.

She was running. The thought drifted through my pain-addled mind, accompanied by a flicker of grim satisfaction. Good. It meant she knew she'd lost control of the situation.

And Luna and I were not yet kinslayers.

I let my head fall back, my battered body screaming for rest. The arrival of Sofia and Soulrider had tipped the scales in our favor, but I knew their presence came with strings attached. As I drifted on the edge of consciousness, I couldn't help but wonder if Sofia had bargained well.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

# LUNA

THE PLUSH SOFA CRADLED ME AS I LEANED BACK, A contented smile on my lips as I rested a hand on my swollen belly. The scent of lilacs and apple blossoms wafted in from the garden, mingling with the sound of laughter echoing through the halls of our new home. I gently stroked my belly, marveling at the life growing within me.

I never imagined peace infusing my life. After everything we'd been through, it was like a dream to have this quiet moment. To have a home of my own.

This house was grand yet comfortable, spacious enough to accommodate our growing family and any visiting friends, but still intimate. Benedetto had found it through his web of connections, a summer house with polished wood floors, high ceilings, and decorations I'd chosen.

It was a complete opposite of the mansions I'd lived in all my life.

Best of all, it was far enough from Kalion that it was difficult for people to reach us with political schemes. Even though the emperor had officially declared Benedetto his heir.

"What are you thinking about, my love?" Benedetto asked, sitting down beside me and placing a gentle hand on my belly.

"Just how surreal and wonderful this all is." I leaned into his touch. "To finally have a true home together, after everything."

He smiled, that brilliant smile that made my heart flutter the more because it was so rare. "You're my home. Wherever you are."

I reached up to stroke his cheek, the stubble rough under my fingers. “And you’re mine. Beloved.”

“My vixen,” he said as he pulled me close and pressed a tender kiss to my forehead.

I nestled into his embrace. This man who had once seemed an untouchable enigma was now my partner, my equal, my love.

This is what happiness felt like, I realized, a lump forming in my throat. True happiness, after a lifetime of fear and secrets and sorrow. With all the power in me, I would do anything to protect this. To protect our future.

My hand drifted down to rest on my belly once more. Please, let our child know only love and laughter within these walls. Shield them from the pain and persecution that has haunted our pasts.

In that perfect, sunlit moment, it was as if anything were possible.

Pip let out a contented chirp, drawing my attention back to the present. The little drake had grown plump and glossy in recent months.

“He’s not the only one who’s been indulging,” Benedetto said with a playful gleam in his eye, his fingers grazing my rounded belly. “I think our little one inherited a sweet tooth from someone.”

Sofia glanced over from her perch by the window, one eyebrow arched. “Bold of you to assume the craving for sweets comes from your wife, Lord d’Alvarez.”

The smile in her voice gladdened my heart. Benedetto’s agreement to undertake training with Soulriders once our children were grown had satisfied the Sorcerer, who’d taken Moonshifter as a credit on our account. I suspected Sofia had made a separate agreement to speed their arrival, but she wouldn’t talk about it.

She’d always been quiet, but her silences had a pained quality now.

Rose giggled, her face alight with mischief. “Maybe we should start hiding the sweets from both of them,” she stage-whispered to Lorenzo and Palma, who’d come to visit.

“I heard that,” I said, throwing a cushion at my sister. She caught it deftly, putting her nose in the air.

I marveled, my heart swelling with pride. Now look at her. Teasing and laughing like any other young woman. Like the carefree child she always should have been.

Lorenzo chuckled, shaking his head at our antics. “Careful now. We wouldn’t want to accidentally summon any rogue desserts. I’ve heard tales of Sorcerers conjuring entire cakes out of thin air.”

“Wouldn’t that be a sight,” Palma said. “An army of pastries marching through the halls, demanding to be eaten.”

The image was so absurd, so utterly ridiculous, that I couldn’t help but dissolve into laughter. Benedetto joined in, his rich baritone mingling with my giggles.

This is what I fought for. These precious moments of levity and love. The chance to build a life brimming with laughter, even after all the pain we’d endured.

I leaned my head against Benedetto’s shoulder, savoring the solid warmth of him. “Never leave.”

He turned, cupping my face with one gentle hand. The depths of his brown eyes held a tenderness that still made my heart flutter, even after all this time. “You saved me. In more ways than I can count. Everything I am, everything I have, it’s all because of you.”

Tears prickled, but for once, they were tears of joy, not sorrow. I closed the remaining distance between us, capturing his lips in a soft, sweet kiss.

Let the world turn outside our doors, I prayed. Let the schemers scheme and the politicians plot. In here, in this perfect pocket of sunlight and laughter, we were untouchable.

And for one blissful, shining afternoon, it almost felt true.

The conversation shifted as Lorenzo leaned forward, his expression growing somber. “I wanted to tell you that while Vivaldo’s withdrawal was unexpected, his supporters haven’t given up yet,” he said, sipping his wine thoughtfully. “For now, it’s quiet. But it won’t last forever. We’re here to help you prepare for whatever comes next.”

He was right. We couldn’t afford to let our guard down completely, even now. The power vacuum left by Vivaldo’s retreat had caused a ripple of uncertainty among the aristocracy, and I knew all too well how quickly the tides could turn in the treacherous waters of Dimare’s politics.

But before the shadow of worry could fully take hold, Benedetto’s face brightened.

“Father’s doing better,” he said with a note of relief. “He’s started taking short walks in the garden. I think being here, surrounded by family, has done him good.”

I smiled, picturing Marco’s frail form ambling among the rose bushes. Out of Vala’s shadow and the reach of her spells, I had grown fond of the old man, appreciating his quiet wisdom and gentle humor.

“It’s wonderful to see him recovering,” I said. “He deserves this peace.”

Sofia glanced up from her seat by the window, her green eyes thoughtful.

“It’s amazing what a change of environment can do,” she said. “And the lingering effects of the curse that was making Marco die slowly of a wasting disease have been lifted, thanks to your disruption magic.”

I couldn’t help a bit of pride at her words, remembering the moment I had unraveled the remnants of the dark spell that had been slowly draining the life from Benedetto’s father. It was a small thing, really. But it made a difference. Maybe I was stronger than I realized.

I smiled at Sofia, grateful for her support. “I’m just glad I could help,” I said. “Marco deserves a chance to enjoy his life, free from the shadow of that curse.”

“Speaking of family,” Palma said, “have you two started thinking about names for the little one?”

I laughed, resting my free hand on the swell of my belly. “We’ve tossed around a few ideas, but nothing’s stuck yet.”

“I still think ‘Lucky’ has a nice ring to it.” Benedetto ducked as I swatted playfully at his arm.

“Speaking of fortune,” he said, “Francesco has become more lucid in the past few months.”

Sofia continued knitting. “When Soulrider examined your brother, he determined that some of the damage appears permanent. He’s done what he could, and curbed the violence Francesco does to himself, but he’s uncertain if further tampering might worsen his condition.”

A heavy silence settled over the room, each of us grappling with the weight of Francesco’s fate.

“It’s heartbreaking,” I said quietly. “There are moments when he seems almost calm. But then the madness takes hold once more.”

Benedetto’s expression darkened, a fierce determination burning in his eyes. “I won’t give up on him,” he said firmly. “We’ll keep looking for a way to help him. I won’t rest until we find a solution.”

I reached out, placing a comforting hand on his arm. “We’ll find a way,” I said. “We’ll keep searching until we find the key to unlocking Francesco’s mind.”

Sofia interrupted the heavy moment. “Perhaps you’ll find a way with training,” she said gently. “If not you, perhaps Rose. She’ll raise a sigil one day. I’ve rarely seen someone with such innate talent.”

I turned and beamed at my sister. Rose ducked her head, a shy blush coloring her cheeks. “It’s all thanks to your teaching,” she said as she fidgeted with the hem of her tunic.

I was so proud of her. She was thriving. It was more than I ever hoped for.

Rose's magic danced around her, a shimmering aura that grew brighter with each passing day. The lightness in her step, the joy that radiated from her, it was a far cry from the timid, uncertain girl she had been.

"You've come so far," I said. "I always knew you had greatness within you. And now, the world is starting to see it too."

Rose's blush deepened, but a tentative smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Thank you."

A sudden movement within me pulled me from my thoughts. I gasped, my hand flying to my swollen belly as the baby gave a strong, insistent nudge against my palm. A bright smile spread across my face.

"There it is again." I laughed, pressing my hand more firmly against the spot. "The baby's kicking."

Benedetto's face lit up, his expression softening as he placed his hand over mine. He leaned in, his lips brushing against my temple in a gentle kiss. "It's amazing."

The sun dipped lower on the horizon, painting the room in a warm, golden glow. I leaned into Benedetto's embrace, savoring the peaceful moment as Pip nestled closer, his scaly form draped along my lap like a living blanket.

We'd fought hard for this happiness, and no one would take it away from us.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

# BENEDETTO

I STOOD IN THE DOORWAY OF THE SITTING ROOM, WATCHING Rose as she carefully embroidered the final touches on the presentation gown for Julio, my newborn son.

The gentle sound of Rose humming a lullaby blended with the fire's song in the hearth.

Luna napped in the main bedroom, within earshot. Immediately after the birth Sofia had braved the rain to gather fresh herbs to ensure the baby would be protected from evil magics targeting infants.

My wife had dozed off, our son next to her, and I'd moved to the next room to keep Rose company as she worked.

The gown was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, made from the finest silk. Rose's delicate stitches wove intricate patterns of protection and blessings for Julio.

Suddenly, as Rose worked, her fingers faltered. She'd pricked her thumb with the needle and gasped, the gown dropping onto her lap. My smile faded as her face paled, a look of shock and pain crossing her delicate features.

I took a step forward. "Rose? Are you all right?"

Her lips parted, but no sound came out. Her eyes rolled back, and she slumped forward, her body limp and lifeless against the back of the chair.

I rushed to Rose's side, lifting her head gently and feeling for a pulse. It was faint and erratic. I pulled her into my arms,



shaking her lightly. Then I picked her up and strode into the bedroom.

Luna had already woken from her nap, reaching for her sister, her eyes wide with alarm. “What happened?”

“She pricked her finger,” I said. “The needle, it must have been tampered with somehow.”

I turned Rose’s hand up so Luna and I could inspect it. A faint, dark mark spread from the prick on her thumb.

Luna laid her hands on the mark, called her magic to disrupt it, to no avail.

“Please stop, vixen. You’ve just given birth, you don’t have the strength.” My blood ran cold, and a wave of fury surged through me.

Who had done this?

Luna’s hands trembled as she brushed a strand of hair from Rose’s face. “Your mother. She couldn’t strike at us directly, so she went after Rose. She might have manipulated the curse our father put on her and made it strong enough to manifest, rather than hanging on as a weak threat.”

I focused my magic, using the starlight as I’d been taught to attract Sofia’s attention.

Then I went to Julio’s cradle and carried him back to the bed and gave him into Luna’s waiting arms.

Moments ticked past us,

I glanced down at Rose, her face pale and still, the dark mark on her thumb a glaring reminder of the curse’s power. I tightened my grip on Luna and my son, as she trembled against me.

“Sofia will come,” I said. “And if she can’t break the curse, I’ll find another way. Your sister will be fine. I swear it.”

Sofia strode into the room, her hair and dress dripping, carrying a basket of wet plants.

Her face set in lines of grim determination as she dropped to her knees beside Rose, her hands already glowing with healing

magic.

“Move aside,” she said. “Julio would be better in another room, just in case.”

Luna and I stepped back to the doorway, watching Sofia weave her magic over Rose’s still form. The air crackled with energy, the scent of ozone filling the room.

“Can you help her?” Luna asked.

Sofia didn’t look up, her focus entirely on Rose. “I don’t know yet. The curse is strong, stronger than anything I’ve seen before. But I’ll do everything I can.”

As Sofia worked, I stood by, watching the flicker of her magic. A cold weight settled in my chest, the realization dawning on me that I may have to make a difficult choice. But I would do anything for Luna, who was also watching, her expression shattered.

I didn’t want to owe Soulrider anything more, but if it meant saving Rose for Luna, I’d do it.

“If you can’t break it,” I said quietly, meeting Sofia’s eyes for a brief moment, “I’ll go to Soulrider. I’ll make him help us.”

Sofia’s hands faltered for a moment, and she looked up at me, her green eyes narrowed. “Soulrider is dangerous. You both know that.”

Sofia sighed, her shoulders slumping. “Let me try a little longer. I’m not giving up yet. Rose is fighting, and so am I. We have to give her a chance.”

Luna and I waited, pacing the room, taking turns carrying Julio. He woke and nursed, and Luna fell asleep with him on the couch.

The sun had set, the last rays of light fading from the sky, and the shadows in the room deepened with every passing moment.

Time was running out.

Sofia’s magic flared, a brilliant burst of light that filled the room. I shielded my eyes, blinking against the glare, and when

I looked again, the dark tendrils of the curse had retreated, if only slightly.

Luna moved to the door with me.

“It’s working,” Sofia said, sitting back on her heels. “I’ve pushed it back for the moment. But I don’t know how long it will last.”

“Send for your master,” I said, my hands clenching into fists.

Luna looked up at me, cradling our son against her shoulder, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “Bene,” she said. “Whatever he asks, I’ll pay.”

“We’ll pay,” I answered.

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